

Controversial issues: To teach or not to teach? That is the question!

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The purpose of this qualitative study was to uncover the perceptions, beliefs, and practices of six teachers related to the teaching of controversial issues in the social studies classroom. Interviews focused on such topics as appropriate teacher roles in discussion, how teachers define controversial issues, if and when teachers engage students in discussions about controversial issues, and types of activities teachers use related to controversial topics. Analysis of the interviews revealed seven themes: (a) the nature of controversial issues as being sensitive subjects, (b) the need of students to discuss controversial issues (c) how controversial issues come up in the classroom, (d) the positions teachers take on controversial issues, (e) students' sensitivity about controversial issues, (f) teachers discomfort in teaching controversial issues, and (g) the lack of preparation and support for teaching controversial issues.

Introduction

Controversy is dangerous. It is intimidating and divisive. It makes teachers and students ill at ease (Byford, Lennon, & Russell, 2009). Controversial issues divide society (Hess, 2001; Malikow, 2006; Stradling, 1984). Dealing with these issues in the classroom can disturb the peace and stability of the scholastic environment. It can set students against each other. Yet in a democratic society, controversy is what defines the social studies. Dealing with controversial issues involves dissent, diversity, and decision-making. There are few topics related to history, geography, or government that are not steeped in controversy and conflict. Economics focuses on scarcity and competition for resources, goods, and services. Sociology and anthropology deal with conflict and survival of groups and cultures. History includes human conflicts such as genocide and racism. Controversy and conflict are, in fact, the essence of the social studies.

In 2001 a NCSS position paper on citizenship (NCSS, 2001) defined an effective citizen as one who "embraces core democratic values and strives to live by them," "has knowledge of our nation's founding documents, civic institutions, and political processes," "is aware of issues and events that have an impact on people at local, state, national, and global levels," and "seeks information from varied sources and perspectives to develop informed opinions and creative solutions." Given these defining qualities for citizens, then it follows that students need to learn to listen to and consider opposing viewpoints, see how their own views hold up in the face of opposing reason, and even to change their opinion in the face of convincing arguments.

The social studies curriculum is robust with many controversial historic and current issues. Events such as the Vietnam War, the Civil Rights Movement, and the historic treatment of Native Americans are seeped with underlying issues of a controversial nature such as government involvement, racism, genocide, and civil rights of individuals. Many teachers do not feel

comfortable dealing with controversy and almost instinctively want to avoid the conflict and the risk involved with exposing students to controversial issues in the classroom (Haynes & Karin, 2008; Hess, 2009). The ways that teachers and schools deal with controversy range from purposeful avoidance of them to one-sided advocacy of particular points of view. Teachers accept at one level that they must be neutral, and should disguise and hide biases, but at another level admit that this is difficult (Lockwood, 1996). Some teachers try to avoid discussions of controversy (Hess, 2005). Avoidance happens because controversial issues concern disagreements of values (Hess, 2001). In a paper concerning how teachers' political views influence the teaching of controversial issues, Hess (2005) outlined four different approaches teachers take when including or not including controversial issues in the classroom. They are:

1. Denial: Teachers deny that an issue is controversial. When disclosing views the teacher is not taking "sides" but speaking the truth.
2. Privilege: Teachers teach toward a particular perspective.
3. Avoidance: Teachers avoid talking or discussing the topic.
4. Balance: Teachers make sure to include different perspectives about the topic and make sure not to favor one perspective. This is the preferred approach to take according to Hess (2005).

Many controversial issues, including those that are "high risk", have curricular relevance as well as importance to students' lives, their character development, and their sense of safety and security. Malikow (2006) says evaluating controversial issues is "an important life skill". Even though educators prefer to avoid risks associated with teaching controversial issues, (Haynes & Karin, 2008) teachers have to deal with controversy in direct and non-prejudicial ways, focusing students on age appropriate controversies, teaching students to respect various viewpoints, raising probing and insightful questions, structuring activities to help students understand the issue, the stakes, and the stake-holders, as well as relevant and important viewpoints. Hess (2009) says that students need to participate in discussions where people have different points of view. She says that doing this will help students not only learn content knowledge, but also gain tolerance. In addition, the examination and discussion of various viewpoints helps students engage in higher-order thinking (Camicia & Dobson, 2010) and provides students the opportunity to examine and reflect upon their own values (Soley, 1996).

The National Council for the Social Studies has long advocated teaching controversial issues in order to help students form opinions and make decisions most directly. In the NCSS Position Statement on Effective Citizenship (2001), the Council expressed the belief that:

Citizens in the twenty-first century must be prepared to deal with rapid change, complex local, national, and global issues, cultural and religious conflicts, and the increasing interdependence of nations in a global economy.

Later in this position statement the Council asserted that:

Our students should leave school with a clear sense of their rights and responsibilities as citizens. They should also be prepared to challenge injustice and to promote the common good.

This seems an enjoinder to challenge students to confront and challenge the establishment when they believe that it is guilty of injustice. Such teaching is dangerous, even frightening to us. Yet it is something that citizens have expected and lauded from our lawmakers and leaders from Jefferson and Adams until the present day.

In a later position statement NCSS (2007) referred to controversial issues as they related to academic freedom, asserting that:

Controversial issues must be studied in the classroom without the assumption that they are settled in advance or there is only one right answer in matters of dispute. The social studies teacher must approach such issues in a spirit of critical inquiry exposing the students to a variety of ideas, even if they are different from their own.

While one might laud the National Council for making such position statements clearly asserting that teachers do difficult things, the Council falls short of delineating the nature of controversial issues, listing or describing them, or even suggesting how teachers can carry out the challenge .

A growing research effort relating to controversial issues began in the 1960's. McAulay(1965) surveyed 648 social studies teachers and found that over half (52%) felt they would be reprimanded if they discussed controversial issues. In 1983, Guyton and Hoffman did a mail survey of a smaller population of teachers about teaching controversial issues. Their sample consisted only of students and former students in their classes at Georgia State University and the response rate was modest (49%). Most of their sample agreed that teaching controversial issues was important and 93% indicated that they were comfortable teaching about controversial issues. The caveat was that the large majority of the survey group also said that they had to protect themselves from administrators and parents. Lack of school support for teaching about controversial issues and a fear of retribution remained a major concern. However, the positive trend towards the importance of teaching controversial issues was encouraging.

Byford, Lennon and Russell (2009) completed a much more recent study related to the views of high school teachers in two states about teaching controversial issues. Their focus was identifying controversial topics that teachers perceived as important and if teachers valued teaching controversial issues. Survey responses from 67 high school social studies teachers indicated that teachers believed in developing "informed and enlightened" citizens but were "less assured" about teaching controversial issues. The teachers involved in the study did indicate that it was important to discuss controversial issues but noted student disruptions and conflict.

Purpose of the Study

As Waterson (2009) reports, there is a lack of research concerning how practicing teachers use controversial issues in the classroom and their pedagogical methods. The purpose of this study was to describe teachers' perceptions related to the definition and nature of controversial issues, to delineate the issues perceived to be controversial, and to describe participants' approaches to teaching controversial issues. A secondary purpose was to describe how the interviewees understood and felt about school policy regarding the teaching of controversial issues. The researchers designed the interview schedule (Appendix A) using three related research questions adapted from Malikow's (2006) article about engaging students in controversial issues:

1. What is the nature of controversy?
2. How do teachers determine when to engage students in a controversial issue?
3. How should teachers conduct themselves when teaching a controversial issue?

The researchers recognized that the interviewees are providing their perceptions on the nature of controversy and their perceptions on how they, as teachers, should conduct themselves when topics of controversy are encountered in the classroom.

Method

Participants

Utilizing purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002) based on convenience, the researchers interviewed six social studies teachers, two females and four males, in order to discover and describe the participants' views on the teaching of controversial issues. Characteristic of qualitative studies the researchers choose to keep the sample size of participants low so that focus would dwell on in-depth interviews and transcript analysis. The interviewed teachers taught in five different schools, in three different school systems in East Tennessee. The grade levels taught by the teachers ranged from intermediate school to high school. Three of the teachers had at least five

years of experience ranging up to fourteen years for the most experienced teacher. The other three had only one or two years of experience. For this article, those interviewed were given pseudonyms to insure anonymity. The pseudonyms used in this article are Bruce, Chad, Greg, Lisa, Leslie, and Steve.

Materials and Procedures

The researchers developed an open-ended interview schedule (Appendix A) of questions based on the literature of Malikow (2006) that was used in all six interviews. An open-ended questioning format was chosen so that participants could freely construct their responses and the researchers could ask follow-up questions. Three of the four researchers each conducted individual interviews with two different participants. Each hour-long interview took place in a setting chosen by the participant and was digitally recorded. Except for the two participants who taught in the same school, the interviewees did not know one another and none of them discussed the interview with other participants either before or after the interview.

The researcher who conducted the interview personally transcribed each interview. These transcripts were individually and then collectively examined by the researchers using the qualitative methodology of Bogdan and Biklen (2007), by searching for themes and looking at individual perceptions. Each researcher individually read and reread each transcribed interview and found initial coding categories and qualitative data to support the codes. The researchers then shared the codes with each other. After re-reading the transcripts and further data analysis, the researchers were collectively able to collapse the codes into seven main themes.

Results

Nature of Controversial Issues

The teachers interviewed defined controversial issues in a similar way. They referred to them as “sensitive subjects” that forced students to choose a side. Greg, a ten-year veteran history teacher, described controversial issues as “any subject that has more than one clearly defined viewpoint that encourages people with different viewpoints to openly debate.” Leslie’s characterization was only slightly different saying that a controversial issue had “two different viewpoints.” She elaborated her definition by saying that controversial topics were “anything that is a sensitive subject for people.” In fact, all the teachers interviewed felt that the nature of controversy was essentially embodied in opposing viewpoint and conflict.

One common issue, defined as controversial in all six interviews, was the subject of religion. Steve, a history teacher, stated that during content discussions “people get pretty heated about religions.” Lisa expressed similar views pointing out that if religion is involved in the discussion “then they (students) can be more outspoken” and that students frequently speak out in support of their own religion. In Leslie’s fifth grade classroom a reading of the book *Tuck Everlasting* has elicited religious questions regarding creationism.

In addition to religion, participants mentioned topics concerning politics as being controversial. Chad specifically mentioned the current debate over the United States healthcare situation as being a topic of controversy in his classroom. He said one student’s statement that “healthcare is going to destroy the country” caused much discussion in his sixth-grade classroom. One participant said during presidential elections students often ask who he would like to see elected. Asserting that he does not like to share his opinion, he answers something humorous like he is going to vote for Eisenhower.

The teachers interviewed also cited issues concerning United States racial relations as being controversial. For example, Leslie said that teaching the Civil War and Civil Rights Movement is

difficult because you have to address ways in which “the African-American groups were treated.” In present United States society the events of the Civil War and the Civil Rights Movement are not particularly polarizing, as there seems to be the definitive answer that slavery and unequal rights based on race are wrong, but the underlying controversial issue of racism continues to be present and is a sensitive topic to discuss. Leslie described a situation where one African-American student was disturbed to the level of anger after viewing a picture of an African-American being beaten during the Civil Rights Movement. Leslie said to her ‘we all understand that it was wrong what happened. It is one of those things in history that we are not proud of the way we acted but it happened and we have to learn about it and go on from there.’ Even after this conversation Leslie “could tell that deep down she was still angry”. This particular incident illustrates how some historic events discussed in the social studies classroom are not controversial as events themselves, but what is controversial is that the crux of the event, such as the issue of racism, is an issue that society has struggled with for ages.

One participant noted that he would like to do a unit (outside of his prescribed curriculum) about World War II at the end of the year but that he would not want to include the Holocaust without first talking to his principal. Much like the Civil War and the Civil Rights Movement, this particular event itself does not divide society on the basis of whether it should have or should not have occurred, but the essence of the event- genocide and extreme brutality are issues that continue to permeate society. Furthermore, whether or not America, as a government entity, should be involved in stopping dictators and other political leaders from practicing genocide (as is the case in the Middle East and Africa) is a current controversial issue. The issue of whether the Jewish population has a right to existence is an on-going struggle in the Middle East and whether the Holocaust occurred or not is still debated in some sub-cultures. Controversy can be found in both present and historic events, as it seems that humankind has struggled with principal issues concerning core value throughout the ages.

The Need of Students to Discuss Controversial Issues

The teachers interviewed emphasized that controversial issues need to be discussed in the social studies classrooms. Greg said, “any teacher who is going to be an effective teacher is going to have to get students emotionally involved” by “encouraging them to debate issues that they are emotionally attached to.” He asserted that emotional involvement in discussions makes students more interested in content. “It actually helps the class all the way around.”

Chad expressed the view that students should discuss controversial topics because “they (students) need to be challenged in their beliefs.” Although he had personally never been in trouble with a parent or the school administration over using controversial issues in the classroom Chad (as did other teachers interviewed), seemed fearful that turmoil was possible. He cautioned that the challenging of students’ beliefs had to be done carefully to keep the teacher from getting in trouble. Chad observed that, “I have to find the fine line between challenging them and not getting yelled at.” Teacher neutrality and not veering outside the curriculum were his personal parameters for having safe discussions about controversial issues.

Steve had similar views about the necessity of including controversial issues in the classroom. His observation was that “these kids are heavily influenced by their parents beliefs... they have not developed their own ideas yet.” He thought that students needed exposure to perspectives they might not hear at home. Much akin to Steve’s view, Lisa felt that her goal in using controversial issues “would be to ... open them up to people from different perspectives more.” She also thought that controversial issues would help foster “a higher-order level of thinking” in students.

One participant noted that a state senator, who was a parent of one of his students, “thanked me for bringing issues that are not just from the past but tying them into with the present

and even made the comment that, I quote 'I am glad you are being a defender of liberty by initiating the marketplace of ideas.' This idea of exposing students to the "market place" of perspectives was the overarching theme that prevailed from the interviewed teachers and supports Hess's (2009) assertion that students need to be engaged in conversations comprised of various viewpoints.

How Controversial Issues Come Up in the Classroom

One theme that emerged in four of the interviews related to the spontaneous and even unpredictable introduction of controversial issues by students themselves. Bruce, a high school teacher, referred to this a total of six different times in his interview. Bruce claimed that controversial issues arise when students want to discuss issues they see as related to an in-class topic. He claimed that "some of the kids will want to wander off to another topic that is somewhat related but not the focal point of discussion. For example, with the health care plan you may get someone who wants to begin trashing Obama for something that has nothing to do with healthcare." Bruce further explained his explanation of why controversial issues come up unexpectedly in the social studies. "In social studies, because we are talking about how laws are made and what decisions have been made in the past, they [controversial issues] are going to come up in the classroom." These classroom controversies arise because the core of the issues concern individual personal values. So even though the discussion Bruce described, about how laws are created, centered on a historical events, the underlying value struggle about government intervention is one that continues today.

Controversial issues can be exposed as controversial in the classroom without the teacher realizing that the topic will be controversial for students in the classroom. Chad described this happening to him. He said he did not even think about any aspect of his lecture as being controversial until he heard his students gasp when they saw a picture of the Statue of David on the Power Point slide. He said, "I just put it in there... I just didn't even think about it... because it's art, we were talking about the Renaissance so it was in context. So I didn't even think about it until I heard the gasps and I thought, oh-no!"

Both Lisa and Bruce stated that they do not set out intentionally to teach controversial issues but they often just arise in classroom discussions. Bruce believed that teachers should not be wary of discussing controversial issues, but that teachers should not allow them to be the primary curricular focus. He said, "I think that we need to embrace the idea of controversial issues but do not let it dominate one's lesson or curriculum." Lisa expressed the idea of not necessarily engaging in pre-planning for dealing with controversial issues by saying "I do not think I have went (sic) about it in the thought of (sic) here is something that is controversial and I am going to build it in." Rather, she just attends to the controversial issues if they surface in the classroom discussion.

The interviews with the teachers elicited perceptions that the make-up of the classroom can cause some events to be more or less controversial depending on who is a member of the classroom population. Leslie said that the closer the issue is to a person the more controversial it can become. She noted that even though the historic treatment of Native Americans contain instances of violence and racism her students do not view events like the Trail of Tears as a sensitive topic to discuss because none of her students are Native American. Therefore, whether or not an issue is seen as controversial in the classroom can depend on whether the issue or event relates to students' personal values or experiences.

The Positions Teachers Take on Controversial Issues

All of the six teachers interviewed made comments related to the stance teachers should take when discussing controversial issues. In some form, they all expressed the view that teachers need to remain neutral and not take sides on issues. The teachers interviewed most often used

“umpire” and “referee” to describe the roles that they took themselves and that they felt any teacher should take. Such terms seem to indicate that these teachers saw themselves as controlling the tempo and temperature of the discussions, serving as peacekeepers. By taking such roles, they appeared to think that teachers could present the facts about an issue without supporting any particular position themselves. Both indicated that a neutral role was important because students tend to come in with one-sided views in regard to controversial topics. Chad pointed out the danger of the teacher expressing his or her point of view, “I don’t let the students know what my beliefs are ... because once people know you believe a certain thing you might lose them. Like for instance that one student with the religion issue, she thinks that I’m not like her so I’ve lost her.” There was general agreement that teachers should present a balanced perspective regardless of the topic. Chad pointed out that doing this “is so tricky because I don’t want them to think I’m coming at them because of my political beliefs ... I’ve told them numerous times you are free to think what you want but I want to know why you believe that.” Nonetheless, the teachers interviewed did realize how student values could be challenged and threatened even by this neutrality. Chad referred to the fact that many topics studied in his sixth-grade curriculum pertain to religion. He noted that before “I talk about anything with religion the first thought is ‘do I have students who are not going to like this’? Because there are so many students in the classroom who have very defined views about how things are. And they don’t like being told things are different...” He went on to raise the issue of parent response, “I am not trying to just please the parents. They (the students) need to be challenged in their beliefs and so I have to find the fine line between challenging them and not getting yelled out. Ha-ha!”

Several of the interviewed teachers said part of the duty of teachers was to see to it that students are exposed to age-appropriate content material about controversial issues. Some pointed out that students had limited references for developing and examining their points of view, - parents, churches, peers, and TV. These interviewed teachers said part of their duty was to neutrally give students all of the facts and help them accept that others have different points of view. People do not all have to believe the same thing. In his interview, Bruce explained this viewpoint, saying, “We want them to be able to embrace these issues while they may not agree with them to know about controversial issues and share those ideas with others. That is part of learning.” All the interviewees seemed to share the belief that controversial issues help students with concepts related to citizenship education.

Students’ Sensitivity About Controversial Issues

Several comments made in the interviews related to negativity of students toward their peers when discussing different points of view about controversial issues. This can be seen in Leslie’s discussion of the reactions of four of her African American students about a particular book.

This year specifically I had some girls looking in a book about the Civil Rights Movement and they found a picture of the protest.... An African American being beat by (sic) police officers and I saw them show it to another little girl and say ‘look what those white people were doing to us’ and so it was a real touchy subject for a few weeks.

With controversial issues, like the one Leslie described, students often became emotional and felt attacked when they perceived comments made by classmates as personally offensive. The teachers interviewed described this most often when using examples of classroom discussions about religion. Chad described the discussion of religion as a difficult topic, “because there are so many students in the classroom who have very defined views about how things are and they don’t like being told things are different...” Lisa stated that students are defensive when talking about religious values that they think contradicts their personal core values. She said this manifests into students feeling as if they need to stand up for and vocalize their conviction about the merits and truth of their own religious views.

Sometimes, the discussion of a controversial topic like religion caused students to shut down and not participate in the class discussion. Chad described such a situation in his class, "When we talked about Islam; I had one student who refused to take part. She just didn't want to know anything about it, she didn't care about it, and she didn't take notes about it." Chad went on to explain that the student felt he was "out to get her religion." Chad found this interesting since he and the student knowingly share the same religious denomination.

The consensus amongst research participants, as to why students become offended, seemed to be that controversial issues, such as religion, get at core values which students find to be deeply personal. Lisa and Bruce described the nature of students' core values as being "ingrained in the students." Greg stated that, "a lot of these kids are heavily influenced by their parents' beliefs because they are at an age where they have not stepped out yet... they just look at it as their parents, their grandparents, their aunts and uncles see it..." For Chad, challenging these beliefs seemed to be one of the key roles of education.

I just think as educators, we make a huge impact and a lot of times we can be a reasonable voice where they might not always have one. Or, we can be a voice that challenges them--where otherwise they may not have one. Umm that is our job as role models--- to show how we handle controversial topics.

While students have sensitivity and feelings about certain issues, several comments, such as the one above from Chad, indicated that educators must discuss controversial issues to prepare students for life. Bruce summarized, "Kids have got to understand that as they grow in the workforce and college that they are going to meet people who think differently than they do." Kim stated in her interview, "I guess my view of it is try to help the students be able to see things from the other person's view, so even if they are not going to change their mind about things (they should) like at least be able to understand why others might see things differently."

Teachers' Discomfort in Teaching Controversial Issues

All six of research participants described their own uncomfortable situations surrounding topics of controversy. Leslie described discussing controversial issues with her fifth-graders as "touchy" because of their age and sensitivity. After encountering a situation where students were personally offended by a discussion surrounding the Civil Rights Movement, Leslie felt apprehension saying that after the encounter "I would get nervous before I went into those lessons." Chad described his anguish when he felt he "lost" a student after a class lesson on Islam. He described a Christian female student who refused to learn about Islam and even stopped taking notes. One participant described instances where students would yell out inappropriate comments to other students who possessed differing opinions, while another participant vividly expressed that classroom discussions about controversial issues could develop into a sparring of words equivalent to a "WWE smack down... or... play ground brawl."

Teachers also described discomfort thinking about potential repercussions brought about by discussing certain topics within the walls of the classroom. The research participants noted they were frightened of repercussions that ranged from contending with parent disapproval to potential lawsuits. Leslie said that she felt safe talking about issues in the mandated curriculum but that she would not "bring any of my own out" into the classroom for fear of consequences. Bruce observed that he is of the opinion that his school system wants "to avoid the discussion of controversial issues just because it can lead to complaints from the community". Although none of the interviewed teachers described instances where the administration or parents reprimanded them, for including controversial issues in their teaching the fear of it occurring was palatable by all.

In the interviews, research participants described how they changed teaching styles when issues of controversy arose in the classroom. Participants said that when teaching about controversial issues they took an authoritarian role by not allowing students freedom to talk freely.

One participant put it very succinctly, “right now I am comfortable, if it is a controversial thing, with me doing most of the talking.” Another participant described his style of the teaching of controversial issues as being “militant” and “tough” by not allowing open discussion or open questions. He said he liked to have complete control over his classroom, but did note, “I almost hate being so militaristic towards them, but I want them to know we are not messing around.”

Chad said about days when controversial issues are mentioned, “So those days are really hard. It is really a lot of trying to keep people from being hurt. It is like being on a playground watching everyone, trying to make sure no one is going to get hit with a ball.” This comment illustrates the idea that teachers not only fear potential community and administration backlash but that teachers also fear that a student could leave a classroom with hurt feelings.

The Lack of Preparation and Support for Teaching Controversial Issues

Participants asserted that their teacher education programs did not adequately prepare them to teach controversial issues. Chad could only remember an instructor saying “You are going to have controversial things and you just need to go through it like it is no big deal. But no one explained what to do when a parent is angry”. He said, in regards to teaching controversial issues, that he modeled his teaching style to that of a former high school teacher who always kept his opinion to himself. Leslie said that the only thing she remembered from college about the teaching of controversial issues was that you should “not share your viewpoint.” Bruce likened the lack of training to maneuvering in an unfamiliar room with the lights off by saying the teaching of controversial issues is “almost like groping in the dark”. Lisa mentioned that she did not know many specific ways of teaching controversial issues that arise in the classroom but that “I deal with it in the moment to some extent ...”

Likewise, participants asserted that school systems, much like teacher education programs, did not provide training or professional development concerning the teaching of controversial topics. Steve, a second year teacher in a rural high school, voiced concern that he had not received any training on how to teach using controversial issues in the classroom. This feeling was echoed by Bruce, a ten-year veteran high school teacher. He felt that proper training would give teachers a “better handle” on using controversial issues in the classroom. The only training Chad received from his school was advice from a mentor teacher who said that if the controversial issue appears in the textbook, then to go ahead and teach the content.

All of the interviewed teachers felt that training should be provided both in teacher education programs and in school systems. Training in how to use controversial issues could, as Steve said, help teachers know “how to present controversial issue and how to make the kids look at things different ways.”

Concluding Discussions

The researchers were looking to determine how teachers felt about three questions in these interviews:

1. What is the nature of controversy?
2. How do teachers determine when to engage students in a controversial issue?
3. How should teachers conduct themselves when teaching a controversial issue?

Stradling (1984) said that controversial issues are “issues that deeply divide a society, that generate conflicting explanations and solutions based on alternative value systems.” Based on the interviews from this study, it appears that participating teachers had a similar viewpoint as they most often described controversial issues as “sensitive” subjects. Participants also said the nature of controversial issues in the classroom could be found in historic and current topics that spark emotional responses from students. The inclusion of these present and past events illustrated that

the teachers interviewed perceived that the nature of controversy is inherent in both current issues and historical issues. What Hess (2001) calls a disagreement of values is what seems to bind the events together. Whether or not the issue occurred in the present or the past, the underlying foundation of each issue, such as religion, racism, violence against humankind, and political opinions are all based on personal values. Furthermore these underlying value issues (i.e. race and religion) are often too taboo (Evans, Avery, & Pederson, 2000) to discuss in polite public discussions outside the classroom.

Whether or not teachers should invite these controversial issues into the classroom by engaging students into discussions was the second question. In answer to this inquiry, the interviewed teachers agree with NCSS (2001) that teaching controversial issues is a necessary and, as one participant says “unavoidable” component of educating citizens. Comments made by all six teachers indicated that they felt students benefited from the discussion of controversial topics because it helped students craft informed personal beliefs, assisted in developing tolerance for others who possess alternate views points, helped students learn to communicate with people who possess different beliefs without belittling their values, and that discussions helped increase higher-order thinking skills.

How teachers answered the third question relating to their perceptions of how they should conduct themselves in teaching controversial issues is more difficult to describe, as the interviewed teachers seemed unsure as to how exactly they should behave. Apparent was the perception from the participants that they should remain neutral, by not providing an opinion about the topic at hand, and that the teacher should ensure that all sides of an issue are presented fully. This correlates to the literature by Malikow (2006) who says that teachers should be authentic and admit they do have an opinion but that they should not share it with the class. This also correlates to the literature of Hess (2005) who supports a balanced approach to the teaching of controversial issues where all sides of a controversial issue are fully presented. So even though the interviewed teachers discussed the benefits of using controversial issues in the classroom, and perceived that the role of the teacher should be neutral and rich with information about all sides of an issue, the educators interviewed still felt uncertain about exactly how to deal with these sensitive issues; especially with the emotional conflict and raised classroom temperatures which discussion usually creates (Harwood and Hahn, 1990). Neither did they feel comfortable with dealing with any lasting conflict or personal upset that may result indirectly from such discussions. As classroom discussions of controversial issues often provoke extreme emotions, exposure of sensitive feelings, anger that can lead to violence, or lasting fear and unease (Harwood and Hahn, 1990), they can potentially produce insecurity and division in the class that are long term. To prevent this, teachers need to understand how to scaffold support and objectivity. They need to know when and how to support students and when and how to take issue with them. As the researchers learned from this study, the participating teachers did not always know how to respond to cultural bigotry and prejudice. The interviewed teachers feel that they have had little or no support or direction from their teacher education programs, their school system in-service, or the materials that they have been given or personally found. Chad described both his apprehension and desire of discussing controversial issues in the classroom best by saying “you can’t just put your head in the sand...we just have to be careful.” This apprehension juxtaposed with a mission to trudge ahead suggests that teacher education programs and professional development opportunities about the teaching of controversial issues should be arranged for educators.

Tackling controversial issues is inevitable as curriculum standards mandate that certain topics (Civil Rights Movement, Holocaust, world religions, etc...) must be included in the course content for specific grade levels. Some of these topics, which on the surface do not divide society based on a right answer and a wrong answer about the event itself, do elicit sensitive discussions surrounding the underlying issues of the topic, such as racism, genocide, and religion which society has grappled with and experienced throughout human existence. So although the curriculum

guides and standards do provide a safety net for teachers who might be fearful of discussing controversial issues in the classroom, teachers continue to be uncomfortable leading discussions about these sensitive topics. Malikow (2006) and Hess (2001) both say that the relevance of the controversial issue to the curriculum of the course validates the inclusion of the controversial item in the classroom, which might be a reason why even though the interviewed teachers were full of apprehension that they chose to include topics of controversy in their classrooms.

While the interview protocol did not encourage or directly ask what questions teachers had about teaching controversial issues, it was obvious that the interviewees felt that they had not received the training and support needed to prepare them to deal with controversial issues. The researchers in this study found from our participants and from past research participants (Ersoy, 2010) that teachers lack adequate pre-service teacher training experiences in how to discuss controversial issues.

Even though controversial issues are included in the curriculum, teachers face uncertainty on how to best teach the content. What is unclear from the interviews and past research is the nature and kinds of support and training needed by educators. Further research may be helpful with answering questions about which of the following in-service and pre-service training can help with and how. The participants seemed unclear about what they needed to emphasize in teaching controversial issues. Some indicated that they felt that, at least in part, they needed to help students select and better verbalize their arguments related to issues, at the same time, some indicated that they needed to be better prepared to choose issues for discussion that were age appropriate.

Some more assured teachers wanted to know more about how to teach students about the importance of dissent in a free society. Controversial issues were also viewed as a vehicle for preparing students to avoid and resolve conflict and to look for peaceful solutions when conflict is inevitable. Obviously, a great deal of research needs to be done related to the best practices of teaching of controversial issues. But one thing, above all else, is crystal clear; it appears that today's teachers have received almost no preparation or training related to how to deal with the sensitive topic of controversy. That is something that needs to change.

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Appendix A

Interview Protocol

1. How would you define a controversial issue?
2. Tell us your experiences with teaching controversial issues?
3. How do you use controversial issues in the classroom?
4. What should the teacher's roll be when discussing controversial issues?
5. What policies does your school system have in place dealing with controversial issues?

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