

Examining Social Studies Teachers' Roles as Gatekeepers to Controversial Topics

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Abstract: This research examines the impact of social studies teachers' personal practical knowledge on their roles as gatekeepers to controversial topics in the classroom. The findings indicate that the context of the school and community directly impact the teachers' decision-making process. Furthermore, the teachers perceived the content area standards as granting them permission to address controversial topics in the classroom; however, they did not report any formal preparation via university coursework or professional development to achieve this.

Introduction

Although K-12 social studies teachers in the U.S. may enter the classroom with extensive content and pedagogical knowledge, as Engebretson (2018) describes, "what actually happens in the classroom is largely at the discretion of the teacher." In this manner, teachers serve as "gatekeepers" to key curricular decisions (Thornton, 1991). This gatekeeping should account for the geographic and sociopolitical contexts of the school and community. When ignored, we have seen that schools will dismiss teachers for perceived improper handling of controversial issues (Kiley, 2021), and some states have crafted laws to prohibit addressing certain issues in the classroom (Gross, 2022). With such potential for conflict surrounding a teacher's decision to address controversial issues, a key question to answer is why teachers might decide to include or exclude a particular topic within their classroom.

Many teachers report feeling unprepared to address controversial topics in the classroom (Abu-Hamdan & Khader, 2014; Nganga et al., 2020) or afraid their students are unequipped to do so (Oulton et al., 2004). Others have documented the role the community (Nganga et al., 2020) or administration (Byford et al., 2009) play in swaying a teacher's decision. Numerous factors may persuade or deter a teacher from incorporating controversial issues in their teaching. Yet, most research investigates these as discrete factors, rather than capturing a fuller understanding of teachers' gatekeeping processes. The research presented here analyzes gatekeeping using the theory of personal practical knowledge (Clandinin, 1985), which provides a holistic framework for analyzing teachers' decisions in terms of their personal experience, community support, and administrative support. In Hung's (2020) words, "teaching begins with the explicit recognition that

SRATE Journal



A peer-reviewed publication of the
Southeastern Regional Association of Teacher Educators (SRATE)
2023, Volume 32, Issue 1
SRATE.org

teachers' personal beliefs and life experiences significantly influence their pedagogy, which in turn influences the curriculum they teach." (p. 284).

Controversial Issues in Social Studies Education

Controversial topics are those where "significant numbers of people argue about them without reaching a conclusion, typically based on value judgments located within individuals and their moral and ethical principles" (Oulton et al., 2004, p. 411). In recent years, many communities have debated a variety of controversial issues in education, including LGBTQ rights (Fernandez, 2020), racism (Kiley, 2021), and religious themes (Nord, 2014). We have also seen that controversial issues are highly subjective and vary from one sociopolitical or geographical context to another. For example, a teacher who works in a coal-dependent state, such as Wyoming, might find climate change or dependence on fossil fuels to be a controversial issue (Nganga et al., 2020). This research focuses on immigration, considered controversial by many in the U.S. (Dabach et al., 2018), because it is a complex phenomenon that often leads to arguments with clear opposing sides and a general lack of consensus around any solution. However, the level of controversy stirred by this topic varies by context.

Integrating controversial issues, including immigration, into social studies education is imperative to ensure that it is democratic and encourages critical thinking. The National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) endorses teaching controversial issues within the social studies curriculum to prepare students to be active, informed, and engaged citizens (2020), and they outline a formal position, which emphasizes valuing different viewpoints. Annenberg delineates specific steps to unpacking controversial issues, including: conducting research using several resources, discussing the facts linked to the controversy, determining points of view, supporting a point of view with evidence gathered from research, listening to opposing points of view and engaging in a debate, and proposing solutions (Annenberg Learner, 2022).

Related research links such classroom deliberations, especially small group exchanges, to encouraging students to find their own voices (Mittra, 2018; Yannuzzi & Martin, 2014) and connect social studies learning with the past, present, and future through lenses of morality, justice, and injustice (Misco & Tseng, 2018). To date, research reveals that this form of learning yields students who are more informed citizens (Lin et al., 2015) who think critically about complex issues (Lennon, 2017).

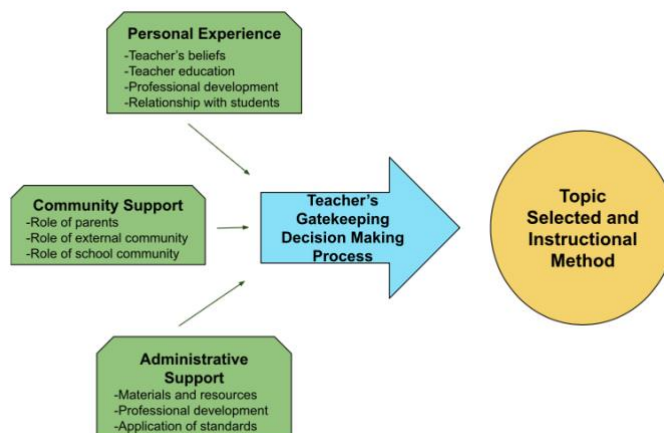
Controversial Issues, Gatekeeping and Teachers' Personal Practical Knowledge

While there is value in addressing controversial issues, teachers have concerns about doing so, including doubts about their own ability to teach controversial issues (Bickmore & Parker, 2014) and balance sharing one's personal opinions with maintaining objectivity that enables students to formulate their own perspectives. Other teachers cite concerns about anticipated classroom disruptions caused by the nature of the discussions (Byford et al., 2009). Impeding factors external to the classroom include a lack of administrative support (Byford et al., 2009), standardized testing and strict schedules (Bickmore & Parker, 2014), and community-based priorities (Nganga et al., 2020). However, with a supportive school

environment, teachers may feel more comfortable teaching controversial issues (Bickmore & Parker, 2014).

Although there are many factors that impact key curricular decisions such as what to teach, often teachers make the final decisions. Thornton (1991) referred to the phenomenon of teachers deciding to include, or exclude, certain topics as “gatekeeping” and saw teachers as “curricular-instructional gatekeepers” (p. 237). The role of gatekeeper includes “curriculum choosing, assignment creating, and conflict dialogue building” (Hung, 2020, p. 286). Furthermore, it is this role as gatekeeper that stems from a teacher’s values, experiences, and knowledge (Hung, 2020; Hung, 2018). Hung (2020) accounts for this relationship with the theory of personal practical knowledge, which aims to demonstrate the interrelatedness of a teacher’s personal and professional experience and their decision making (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Overview of Personal Practice Knowledge and Gatekeeping.



As depicted, a teacher’s personal practical knowledge influences gatekeeping decisions, or curriculum decisions, made within the classroom (Hung, 2020; Hung, 2018). This direct connection makes it imperative that we investigate more closely how teachers’ ideas about teaching and learning relate to their practice of teaching and learning.

Research Questions

Through the following research questions, this study attempts to uncover how teachers from different geographic settings approach controversial topics in the classroom and to what extent elements of their personal practical knowledge affect their role as gatekeeper:

1. How do social studies teachers perceive controversial topics in the classroom, specifically immigration, and their approach to teaching these topics?
2. To what extent does a teacher’s personal practical knowledge impact their gatekeeping approach to controversial topics?

Methods

This study utilized a multiple case study approach to examine social studies teachers' roles as gatekeepers to teaching controversial issues. This approach draws on the benefits of examining teachers in their "context" and to "get to know their world and what they are trying to do in it" (Gillham, 2008, pp 11-12). The researchers applied purposeful sampling to select three secondary teachers from a rural, suburban, and urban school in the state of Oklahoma. This type of purposeful sampling helped to ensure that selected participants provided information relevant to the study, including school setting and experience with controversial topics in the classroom.

The researchers implemented an informational survey to gather perceptions of teaching controversial issues, a follow-up interview, and a review of instructional items provided by the teachers related to teaching immigration in the classroom. Discourse analysis of the data allowed the researchers to analyze the survey findings for emerging themes. Similarly, the researchers applied content analysis and the constant comparison method (Glaser & Strauss, 2009) to examine the interview transcripts and to analyze the teaching artifacts. The researchers coded the transcripts and identified emerging themes using three recursive processes as outlined by Merriam (2009): category construction, data verification, and testing and interrater reliability.

Findings

To answer research question one, how teachers perceive and teach controversial topics, the following sections present the cases, depicted in Table 1, using data from their survey responses, interviews, and review of teaching materials.

Table 1. Presentation of the Cases.

Participant	Demographics	School Setting	Teaching Experience	Certification	Community demographics
Mr. Jones (Case #1)	Middle-aged, white male teacher	Public, suburban high school	15 years	Accredited teacher education program	50,000 residents: 77% White, 6% Asian, 5% African American, 4.3% Hispanic, and 3.6% Native American
Ms. Smith (Case #2)	White, female teacher in early 30s	Public, urban high school	5+ years	Accredited teacher education program	690,000 residents: 66% White, 20% Hispanic, 20% African American, 4% Asian, and 3% Native American
Mr. Harris (Case #3)	White, male teacher in early 30s	Public, rural high school	10+ years	Accredited teacher education program	3,000 residents: 90% White, 6% African American, 3% Native American, and 1% Hispanic

Case #1

In the initial survey, Mr. Jones defined a controversial topic as “any topic where there are two distinct sides that believe differently and hold strong opinions of the subject” and cited Critical Race Theory and LGBTQ issues as examples. When asked to rank controversial issues, he claimed that immigration, racism, and the legislation of gay marriage are “extremely controversial” topics for the classroom. Mr. Jones reported that controversial topics should be taught in the classroom and that he regularly teaches them throughout the school year. While he indicated feeling “strongly” prepared to teach controversial topics in the classroom, he attributed this more to professional development activities than to his teacher preparation coursework.

Mr. Jones also provided sample instructional materials for a lesson on immigration, which compares historical and current immigration in the U.S. They consisted of a publisher’s PowerPoint presentation, historical cartoons, and an online assessment. When asked about the lesson, he explained the importance of presenting both sides of the issue: the motivating factors and impact of immigration on the U.S. By presenting both sides, he feels the students are more capable of engaging in discussion. He also he relies on historical documents, cartoons, and images to provoke meaningful discussions with the students to develop empathy for others.

Case #2

When asked to define controversial topics, Ms. Smith provided examples, such as the Tulsa Race Massacre and the Civil Rights Era, and noted controversial topics vary from state to state. Specifically, she finds immigration, racism, religious differences, and the legislation of gay marriage to be “extremely controversial” topics for the classroom. Ms. Smith also feels controversial topics should be addressed and reports teaching some throughout the year; however, she feels unprepared to do so, because her teacher preparation coursework and school professional development did not prepare her in this area. Based on this perceived lack of training, she “strongly agreed” that social studies teachers need to learn how to teach controversial topics and need more practical preparation to achieve this.

When asked to describe her approach to teaching immigration, Ms. Smith provided a Nearpod lesson she uses to lead students in whole group discussion of U.S. immigration 1880-1920. In particular, the lesson consists of three phases of learning: Engage and Explore, Explain and Elaborate, and Evaluate. During the first phase, the Nearpod presents a virtual tour of Ellis Island to give the students the feel of arriving as an immigrant. The second phase includes opportunities for the students to respond anonymously to thought-provoking questions via interactive polls. Here, Ms. Smith stressed the importance of giving time in classroom discussions for the students to share their personal experiences and to feel validated in their experiences. The last phase consists of an online quiz consisting of opinion-based questions.

Case #3

Mr. Harris defined a controversial topic in Social Studies education as “something that takes you out of your comfort zone, something political, religious, social, or popular culture.” He indicated the topic of the presidential election is “extremely controversial.” Mr. Harris “strongly disagreed” that controversial topics should be avoided in the classroom and reported “frequently” teaching controversial topics such as immigration. However, he described not being prepared to teach controversial topics in his teacher preparation program or through professional development opportunities. As a result, he agreed that social studies teachers need to learn how to teach controversial topics in their classes and that pre-service and in-service teachers need more preparation in this area. When asked how he approaches the teaching of controversial issues, Mr. Harris indicated that he teaches controversial topics in a “straightforward” manner, in which he gives students the facts and lets them draw their own conclusions.

Impact of Personal Practical Knowledge

To answer research question two, to what extent does a teacher’s personal practical knowledge impact their gatekeeping approach to the controversial topic of immigration, the following sections highlight the participants’ interview responses related to their administrative support, community support, and personal experience.

Role of Administrators: Curriculum Standards

All three participants discussed their administration's desire for them to stay within the boundaries of the state academic standards for social studies. Whereas Mr. Jones and Mr. Harris perceive the content area standards as granting freedom to teach as desired, Ms. Smith considers the standards as protection from administration when teaching controversial topics. Mr. Jones reported that the “principals trust their teachers,” as long as “we're following the standards and keeping within that framework.” On the contrary, Ms. Smith spoke of her need to justify what she teaches with the standards. As revealed in the context of this study, however, the teachers’ gatekeeping did not include deciding which topics to cover; rather, they described adhering to the content area standards to predetermine content included in the classroom.

Role of the Community

A clear distinction between the participants was the level of homogeneity each teacher experienced with their community and how that likeness translated to their perception of the role of the community. When describing students in the community, Mr. Jones noted that his students “need to see the bigger picture” on immigration, because his community has a high number of international families. Mr. Harris, teaching in a rural setting, seemed more homogeneous with his community, both in race and viewpoints on immigration. Both Mr. Jones and Mr. Harris indicated that the community does not impact how they approach teaching controversial issues such as immigration. Ms. Smith, on the other hand, stated that if she “were teaching in a predominantly White district or rural district that was predominantly White, (she) would teach a lot differently.” Ms. Smith stated

that she feels more comfortable “flying under the radar,” and that she is concerned about getting reprimanded for teaching controversial topics in the classroom. This finding illustrates the role that the context of the surrounding community plays in the minds of social studies teachers as they decide how to approach certain topics.

Homogeneity again played a role in how parents might serve as a potential source of conflict; the more homogenous they perceived themselves to be with the community impacted how the teacher perceived potential conflict with parents. Mr. Jones reported not knowing how parents personally feel about immigration. During times in which a parent has questions about what has been taught in the classroom, Mr. Jones reported being able to have productive conversations with parents. Similarly, Mr. Harris reported not having experienced any conflict with parents over topics covered in class. On the contrary, Ms. Smith’s experiences with parents in an urban school setting are vastly different. Ms. Smith described knowing that “if somebody is made uncomfortable by what we’re teaching, then we can be, we can be punished.” Ms. Smith also reported seeing a “wedge” being driven between public school parents and teachers and expressed concern that the level of respect for teachers within her community is declining, and this directly impacts to what extent she is willing to tackle certain issues in the classroom.

Personal Experience: Classroom Connections

All the participants considered themselves personally connected to immigration through students in their classes (Mr. Jones and Ms. Smith) or staff in their schools (Mr. Harris), which impacted how they approach the topic of immigration. Each expressed their gatekeeping decisions to encourage students to share their personal immigration stories. Mr. Jones, for example, described a student sharing about a civil war in their home country. This seemed to make an impact on his students. Similarly, Ms. Smith described the immigration process as “extremely personal” to her because of the high number of first-generation students and undocumented families in her classrooms. She also described sharing personal stories as a way of validating students as individuals. Last, Mr. Harris explained that he knows a teacher from the school who is from another country. The rural community in which Mr. Harris teaches, historically lacking diversity, is currently experiencing increased immigration, and Mr. Harris noted he has been more intentional about addressing such topics in the classroom.

Personal Experience: Lack of Teacher Preparation

None of the participants could recall specific university coursework related to teaching controversial topics or immigration. Ms. Smith stated, “I took an African history class, European history classes. Nothing specific on immigration, controversy, or how to approach this.” Similarly, Mr. Harris described not being prepared to teach controversial topics in his teacher preparation program, and instead he learned how to teach controversial topics over time by engaging in what he considers to be best practices. Although none of the participants reported being prepared in best practices, each expressed confidence in their ability to teach controversial issues based on intuitive strategies, such as discussions and sharing personal stories. In addition, none of the participants recalled having any related professional development. Ms. Smith indicated that students are comfortable with learning

about controversial topics, but the teachers need professional development. As she states, “those trainings need to focus on trying to make the teacher comfortable about discussing controversial issues.”

Conclusion

This study illustrates how personal practical knowledge may impact a social studies teacher’s role as a gatekeeper to the curriculum, instruction, and planning. The geographic and contextual setting of each teacher and the level of diversity within each community were significant in shaping the teachers’ gatekeeping decisions. The results imply that teachers may be held accountable by administrators and the community, including parents, if there is disagreement with their topics or methods selected. As such, teachers are not the only gatekeepers to the curriculum, and as a result, the participants appear to rely on the academic standards to justify their decisions. This finding reinforces previous research that highlights the potential disconnect between teachers and their community (Nganga et al., 2020).

Further examination of the teaching materials provided reveals solid alignment with best practices outlined by Annenberg Learner (2022): conducting research, discussing facts, debating, and supporting a view. Each of the three participants also described a general lack of teacher preparation, including pre-service coursework and in-service professional development, related to addressing controversial topics in the classroom. This finding aligns with recent research (Abu-Hamdan & Khader, 2014; Misco & Tseng, 2018; Nganga et al., 2020) and signals that teachers, without prior training, may employ intuitive approaches to teaching controversy such as the use of personal stories (Hung, 2020). Interestingly, the participants of this study did not express concern about their ability to address controversial topics, as found in previous research (Bickmore & Parker, 2014), despite not having any training to do so.

Notably, this study reinforces the need for teacher preparation programs and in-service professional development to explicitly address instructional strategies related to controversial topics. Considering the evolving nature of teaching in the U.S., a society plagued by dichotomous points of view, we must prepare teachers to approach controversial topics carefully and effectively. With this suggestion in mind, future research should examine the impact of explicit coursework or professional development on teachers’ gatekeeping decisions.

Although this research yielded several interesting findings, there are several limitations to acknowledge. First, the study engaged a limited number of participants, which prevents generalizing the findings to other contexts. Therefore, future studies may expand the number of participants when conducting similar research. Second, the participants self-reported the data gathered. Even though the researchers implemented strong measures to ensure anonymity, the participants may fear reprisal or simply provide information they feel is expected by the researchers. Therefore, readers should exercise caution in applying the findings to other contexts.

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