

The Teaching of Controversial Issues in Civic Education in Secondary Schools in Kabwe, Zambia the Teachers Voices

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ABSTRACT

Teaching controversial issues in Civic Education is critical for instilling democratic values, critical thinking, and responsible citizenship. The study conducted in-depth interviews with 15 teachers, employing a qualitative research approach and a phenomenological research design. The study's findings revealed that secondary school teachers in Kabwe, Zambia, face a variety of challenges when discussing controversial issues such as exam-focused curricula, learner resistance, teacher discomfort and fear of repercussions, topics that contradicted teachers' norms, and curriculum rigidity. The study also found that human rights, politics, governance, comprehensive sexuality education, and gender equality were all considered controversial. It was also revealed that teachers employed debates, group discussions, question-and-answer sessions, and role-play to teach controversial topics. The findings also revealed the importance of teacher training, institutional support structures, and a more flexible curriculum for effectively teaching controversial topics.

Keywords: Controversial issues, Civic Education, secondary school, challenges

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Understanding Controversial Issues

Controversial issues and themes are topics that spark debate, disagreement, and opposing opinions in society. Governance, human rights, gender equality, and religious liberties are among the topics considered to be controversial in the teaching of civic education (Sihubwa *et al.*, 2020). Teaching controversial issues helps learners develop critical thinking abilities, tolerance for different points of view, and the ability to engage in meaningful discussions about societal challenges. Teaching about controversial issues in Civic Education is vital for fostering critical thinking, democratic involvement, and active citizenship (Kittelmann, 2019). Flensner (2020) defines controversial issues as those in which society has differing viewpoints and perceptions, which tend to elicit strong emotions, resulting in controversy. According to Oxfam (2006), controversial topics are those that have a political, societal, or personal impact, provoke emotions and call into question principles or beliefs. Controversial topics split classroom opinions, resulting in opposing explanations and views based on different value systems. Such topics can cause conflict in the classroom because learners come from different backgrounds and hold different values (Stradling, 1984).

Civic Education is a core subject in Zambian secondary schools, and the syllabus includes potentially controversial topics. However, some teachers avoid discussing these issues in depth for fear of repercussions, a lack of training, or concerns about being neutral in politically or socially sensitive environments (Sihubwa *et al.*, 2020). This study aimed to investigate the perspectives of Civic Education teachers in Kabwe, Zambia, to better understand how they approach teaching controversial issues, the problems they confront, and the resources they require to improve their instructional practices.

Controversial Issues in Civic Education

Teaching controversial issues in civic education is an effective way to promote democratic and critical thinking abilities among pupils. However, Sihubwa *et al.* (2020) found that, despite its known benefits, the technique is very uncommon in secondary schools. This is related to the emotional and cognitive dangers that make teachers to avoid discussing controversial issues. Mostly, dialectic teaching, which involves teaching controversial issues through teacher-learner conversations is preferred in secondary schools in recent years as a means of encouraging civic involvement in society (Kittelman, 2019). This method encourages pupils to explore, negotiate, and debate competing opinions, with teachers fostering the exchange of multiple perspectives rather than explicitly directing pupils to consider opposing viewpoints. The teaching of controversial issues is especially important in the context of civic education, which has become mandatory in Zambian secondary schools (Flensner, 2020). However, Oxfam (2006) found that many teachers feel underprepared and limited in their capacity to handle this component of their teaching successfully. In these situations, the avoidance of controversial issues is the preferred option in the teaching in civic education.

The literature reviewed above demonstrates the necessity to alter classroom teaching practices to match the teaching of controversial issues. For example, Larsson and Larsson (2019) investigated how controversial themes are handled in Swedish social studies classrooms for learners in grades 7-9. Teachers translated the material into classroom instruction by mixing topical problems with curriculum objectives. The study also argued that to better explain teachers' judgements, in teaching controversial topics established reflective practice in the learners' classroom interactions.

Kindlinger and Hahn-Laudenberg (2023) study in Germany revealed pre-service teachers' attitudes towards various criteria for discussing controversial matters in their future classrooms, as well as to propose a method for balancing different points of view. The study highlighted diverse attitudes that pre-service teachers took on controversial issues, and it employed a convenience sample of 162 German pre-service teachers to provide the foundation for a standardized instrument that may be used to detect different ideas about the limits of controversial classroom conversations. Despite the fact that the teaching of controversial issues is widely accepted and approved by many experts, including teachers in Zambian secondary schools, many teachers choose to disregard it. The preference can be explained by a variety of factors. Pace (2019) maintained that teaching controversial issues is urgent, especially in divided countries. The risks of teaching controversial issues include emotional outbursts that disrupt teaching.

In many educational institutions, teaching controversial issues is an important part of the curriculum. Journell's (2022) study, done in the United States, found that difficult subject conversations are an essential component of high-quality civic education. Teachers are less likely to involve pupils in debates about sensitive political matters. The primary element in deciding whether teachers will engage pupils in controversial issue conversations depend on the support of their school officials. Sihubwa *et al.* (2020) argued that controversial topics in civic education instruction in a few Zambian schools. The study's findings identified several perceived controversial issues with civic education instruction in a few Zambian schools, including criticism of the government, political discussion, current affairs-related topics, government abuse of human rights, and fundamental freedoms. According to the study, teacher preparation programmes must instruct teachers to effectively address controversial topics. Teachers in several nations avoid teaching controversial issues to prevent controversy. Pollak *et al.* (2018) argued that the curriculum in Israel was designed to build a common national ethos and, as a result, minimize controversy, despite the fact that it tackles exceedingly sensitive themes. Teachers and learners avoided to discuss challenging themes in ways that served to alleviate their anxiety.

The teaching of controversial issues is regarded as an important component of civic education because it exposes learners to the complexities of modern social situations. According to Misco (2012), controversial issues foster critical thinking, and democratic engagement necessitates confronting controversial ideas. Learning about controversial topics helps learners improve their capacity to analyse competing ideas, engage in civil conversation, and reach well-informed decisions. Similarly, Zimmerman and Robertson (2017) found that teaching pupils about controversial issues prepares them to be responsible, engaged citizens who can successfully navigate the problems of democratic life.

Pedagogical Approaches to teach Controversial Issues

In a study carried out in Sweden, Flensner (2020) examined the pedagogical strategies used by teachers when discussing subjects related to regional, cultural, and/or religious conflicts, such as migration, terrorism, radicalization, xenophobia, anti-Semitism, and Islamophobia, as part of their lesson plans. The study revealed that ethnographic observations and interviews were used to teach civics and religious education classes in upper secondary schools in Sweden. A study by Ho *et al.* (2017) looked at two primary areas of research in the teaching of controversial issues: (1) educational practices related to teaching controversial issues, and (2) contextual factors influencing the teaching of controversial themes. The study revealed various contextual elements, such as official curriculum policies, community attitudes, teaching methods, emotional history, and teachers' varying opinions and sense of purpose, influence teachers' decisions to teach contentious subjects. Zimmerman and Robertson (2017), stated that teachers used discussion and deliberation to teach controversial issues. The stated teaching methods had shown to foster civic involvement and a better comprehension of controversial issues by the pupil.

In his research, Al Badri (2015) made a case for appropriate teaching methods in teaching controversial issues. According to him, teacher-centred teaching methods, dictate to their learners what they should think and how they should act on a certain subject based on their values and views but limit their creativity. Teacher-centred teaching methods restrict the learners' ability to investigate and comprehend competing viewpoints, they are inappropriate for dealing with controversial issues. Additionally, Cush (2007); Hand (2008) and Misco (2012) argued that some curricula purposefully omit teaching about controversial topics from their curricula. Learners can benefit from teaching controversial topics in the classroom by critically analyzing knowledge taught. As a result, teachers require specialized instructional abilities that makes it easy to teach controversial issues.

According to Oxfam (2006), it is essential to establish ground rules for discussing controversial subject to create a conducive learning and teaching environment. These guidelines create a polite, safe, and open space for learners to voice their opinions. Only one learner should be able to talk at a time without interruption, and teachers should ask the other learners to listen and respect other people's opinions (Oxfam, 2006). The language used in these discussions should be polite; any sort of prejudiced speech, such as that which is racist, sexist, or intolerant, is unacceptable; the goal is to confront the ideas, not the individuals (Pollak *et al.*, 2018). Teachers should provide everyone the opportunity to voice their opinions to make sure that everyone is heard and respected.

Challenges of Teaching Controversial Issues

Teachers in Zambia commonly face challenges when dealing with controversial issues in civic education (Sihubwa *et al.*, 2020). Sihubwa *et al.*, (2020) found that Zambian teachers commonly felt unprepared to tackle sensitive topics such as human rights, political convictions, and sexuality. Many teachers reported feeling pressured to avoid problematic topics due to cultural norms or fear of retaliation from parents, school administrators, and the community. Although the Zambian Civic Education syllabus encourages discourse on controversial issues such as governance and human rights, Sihubwa *et al.*, (2020) found that it provides no guidance on how to discuss controversial topics without inciting controversy. The study by Kittelmann (2019) emphasized the lack of professional development and training for teachers on sensitive themes, worsening the problem. Teachers frequently lacked the confidence and pedagogical skills required to lead debates on controversial issues without prejudice leaving them to rely on their experience and interpretations, which were influenced sometimes by personal beliefs. Cultural and religious beliefs in Zambia, particularly in Kabwe, have a great influence on teachers and pupils opinion on controversial matters. Sihubwa *et al.*, (2020) found that Zambian teachers frequently struggled to balance their professional responsibilities with personal or societal expectations due to traditional, cultural, political, and religious beliefs. Teachers and pupils frequently oppose themes such as gender equality, governance, political critique, sexual and reproductive health, and LGBTQ+ rights.

The impact of teaching controversial issues necessitates those teachers be well-prepared and competent in leading debates in a classroom. Sakala and Kalimaposo (2018) suggested that teachers require professional development programmes to prepare them to address controversial topics in ways that enable free conversation

while avoiding bias. Without sufficient training, teachers may either avoid controversial issues entirely or struggle to manage classrooms. Magasu et al. (2020) claimed that curricular rigidity is another impediment to teachers' choice of pedagogical approaches. The Zambian curriculum is exam-oriented, leaving little room for conversations about topics that necessitate significant participation and critical thoughts. Sakala (2024) stated that curricula need to be flexible, allowing teachers to tailor lessons and encouraging democratic discourse in a classroom. Sakala and Kalimaposo (2018) state that civic education is a vital subject in the Zambian secondary school curriculum, aimed at developing responsible and active citizens who can participate in the governance of their country. However, teaching controversial issues in civic education has been a challenge for many Zambian secondary school teachers. There is a lack of guidance on how to teach controversial issues, leading to inconsistency in teaching and confusion among learners. The problem is compounded by the fact that some teachers avoid controversial issues for fear of offending pupils or being reprimanded by school authorities and the community.

Theoretical Framework

This study is based on Hess's theory of deliberative discussion, which emphasizes the need for open dialogue and critical thinking in classrooms. Hess and Avery (2008) believe that deliberative debates that encourage learners to investigate diverse views, analyse evidence, and construct reasoned arguments are the most effective ways to confront controversial issues. According to Hess, the purpose of teaching controversial topics is not to reach a consensus but rather to foster a greater knowledge of opposing ideas, thereby promoting democratic principles such as tolerance, respect, and civic duty.

Hess's theory is especially pertinent in Zambia, where Civic Education teachers must handle politically and culturally controversial topics. The theory supports the idea that learners should be exposed to controversial topics in a way that promotes deliberate reflection rather than indoctrination. It also emphasizes the significance of teacher neutrality, arguing that teachers should facilitate rather than dominate discussions. This approach enables learners to develop critical thinking abilities while also becoming active, informed participants in democratic processes. This study established how Kabwe teachers balance the need for free debate with the difficulties of teaching in an environment where controversial issues are frequently avoided. It also focused on how teachers employ deliberative teaching strategies to create a safe space for discussing controversial topics while being balanced and unbiased.

Purpose of the study

The main purpose of this study was to establish the teaching of controversial issues in Civic Education in selected secondary schools in Kabwe District, Zambia.

Significance of the Study

A study on the teaching of controversial issues in Civic Education in selected secondary schools in Kabwe District is vital in understanding the extent to which civic education was responsive towards controversial issues. The study will be useful to curriculum planners, lecturers, teachers and pupils by helping them come up with practical insights about the teaching and learning of controversial issues in civic education.

Ethical considerations

All ethical considerations in this study such as seeking permission from the secondary schools and teachers, issues of confidentiality were taken into account and other basic research conventions.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research approach and a phenomenological design to investigate the lived experiences of civic education teachers of teaching controversial issues in secondary schools in Kabwe. The phenomenological method focuses on understanding individuals' subjective experiences, making it appropriate for investigating teachers' viewpoints on controversial issues (Creswell, 2012). A purposeful sample strategy

was utilized to select 15 secondary school teachers from various Kabwe schools. Data was gathered using semi-structured interviews, which allowed for a thorough examination of instructors' experiences and viewpoints. The interviews centred on teachers' experiences with contentious matters, the obstacles they confront, and the techniques they employ in the classroom. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and categorized for theme analysis.

RESULTS

This study exclusively focused on finding out the teaching of controversial issues from the perspective of civic education teachers. Interviews were used to collect data. When the teachers were asked to state their views of the teaching of controversial issues, the following themes emerged; perceptions and experiences of secondary school teachers.

Perceptions and experiences of secondary school teachers

The findings revealed that teachers perceived the teaching of controversial issues in Civic Education as important. The following were some of the views as indicated by the participants:

"It is important to teach controversial issues in civic education because it helps learners to understand different viewpoints and to make informed decisions."

Another participant expressed that:

"Teaching controversial issues is vital as it helps the learners appreciate complex issues affecting society. It helps in developing critical thinking in the learners as they take up responsibilities in society later."

Challenges teachers face when teaching controversial issues

The exam-focused curriculum

The study revealed that the exam-focused curriculum in Zambia left little room for the in-depth exploration of controversial issues. Teachers reported feeling pressured to cover the syllabus, which limited their ability to engage learners in meaningful discussions on complex societal issues. One participant noted:

"The curriculum is too rigid, and there's not enough time to explore these issues in detail. We need more support from the ministry to make Civic Education more interactive and responsive to the real-world challenges that learners face."

Another participant noted that:

The syllabus is too loaded to give room for more critical interaction and experiential learning. Hence the focus is to prepare learners to pass the exam.

Resistance from learners

Other participants noted resistance from some learners when discussing controversial issues, particularly those related to gender and sexuality. One participant noted that:

Learners are not very open to discussing reproductive rights and religious teachings. Others opt to be mute when such topics are under discussion.

In Kabwe, where religion plays a central role in the lives of many learners, the study found that learners often rejected discussions on topics such as reproductive rights and gender equality due to religious teachings.

Teacher Discomfort and Fear of Repercussions

The findings of the study suggested that most Zambian secondary school Civic Education teachers were hesitant to teach controversial topics such as governance, politics and human rights. One teacher stated:

"I am afraid to teach widely controversial issues such as governance, politics, election rigging and human rights because parents, government and the community may react negatively."

Topics that conflicted with teachers norms

Teachers expressed discomfort in teaching controversial issues, especially when these issues conflicted with their personal, religious beliefs or cultural norms. Several teachers mentioned fear of backlash from society or school administrators if they were perceived to be promoting ideas contrary to societal norms. A participant stated that:

"It is difficult to teach topics that conflict with my beliefs, especially topic such as gay rights. These are referred to as minority rights when teaching human rights."

Rigidity of the curriculum

The rigidity of the curriculum is another barrier to teaching controversial issues. The teacher argued that:

The curriculum is exam-oriented, leaving little room for discussions on controversial topics that require deep engagement and critical thinking. Curricula should offer flexibility, allowing teachers to adapt lessons to include controversial issues in a way that promotes democratic dialogue. Without flexibility, teachers may find it difficult to prioritize these discussions in an already packed syllabus.

Strategies for teaching controversial issues

Debates and Group Discussions

Despite the challenges, the study revealed that some teachers reported using innovative strategies to engage learners in debates and group discussions on controversial topics. One of the participants expressed that:

For me, I usually use debate for the pupils to freely express themselves. So I usually give pupils the topic of discussion in advance for them to research for the debate.

Another participant added that:

"When the topic is controversial, I usually like the learners to discuss, the topic without taking sides with them."

Question and answer and Role Play

The study further revealed that some teachers organized question and answer and role-plays, to encourage learners to think critically and respectfully engage with diverse perspectives. One participant commented that:

"I try to give a platform for the pupils to discuss issues freely, through methods such as question and answer and role play. This enables the pupils to feel free when discussing issues that maybe not comfortable for the class."

Teacher support and training to teach controversial issues

Teachers expressed a desire for more training on how to facilitate discussions on sensitive topics and how to manage conflicts that may arise in the classroom. A teacher expressed his concerns that:

"I feel the initial teacher training did not adequately prepare us to deal with controversial issues, hence there is a need for continuous professional development."

DISCUSSION

Perceptions and experiences of secondary school teachers

The study's findings demonstrated that Civic Education teachers appreciated the importance of teaching controversial issues in Civic Education. Most teachers thought that engaging pupils in themes such as governance, human rights, and gender equality was crucial for developing critical thinking skills and democratic participation. This is congruent with Hess's (2009) beliefs, which stressed the democratic power of engaging pupils in discussions about controversial matters, noting that it encouraged pupils to cope with complex social issues and develop critical thinking skills. These findings are similar to the perspectives of Larsson (2019) and Misco (2012), who considered teaching controversial themes in Civic Education as crucial to developing critical thinking, democratic participation, and active citizenship. However, Civic Education teachers expressed concerns about their ability to appropriately teach these themes in Civic Education due to their sensitive nature. Gender roles, minority rights (including LGBTQ+ rights), governance, and government criticism were identified as particularly challenging topics to discuss in the classroom due to cultural, religious, and political sensitivity.

Challenges teachers face when teaching controversial issues

The study revealed that Civic Education teachers felt underprepared to facilitate discussions on controversial topics. They expressed a need for professional development programmes to provide pedagogical strategies for managing controversial discussions and maintaining neutrality. This view is in alignment with Kittelmann (2019), who argued that the lack of teacher training and professional development exacerbates the problem of teaching controversial issues. In many cases, teachers lacked the confidence and pedagogical skills to facilitate discussions on controversial issues without bias. This concern is also expressed by Sihubwa *et al.*, (2020) who argued that teachers expressed concerns about potential backlash from parents, learners, or the community if they were perceived to be promoting a particular viewpoint. This fear often led teachers to avoid or gloss over controversial topics.

The finding of the study also revealed that some participants expressed concern that the exam-focused curriculum in Zambia left little room for the in-depth exploration of controversial issues. Teachers reported feeling pressured to cover the syllabus, which limited their ability to engage learners in meaningful discussions on complex societal issues. The findings of the study also highlighted the need for greater institutional support and flexibility in the curriculum. Magasu *et al.*, (2020) and Sakala and Kalimaposo (2018) also observed similar concerns that the curricula should offer flexibility, to allow teachers to adapt lessons to include controversial issues in a way that promoted democratic dialogue. Without institutional support, teachers may find it difficult to prioritise these discussions in an already packed syllabus. Teachers in the study suggested that the Civic Education curriculum should provide more explicit guidelines on how to approach controversial topics. Additionally, teachers called for more support from school administrations in fostering a classroom environment that encourages open dialogue on sensitive issues.

Strategies for teaching controversial issues

The study also indicated that some Civic Education teachers employed various pedagogical approaches to teach controversial topics in their classes. These pedagogical approaches included group discussions, debates, role-plays, and question-and-answer sessions. These instructional strategies are consistent with Hess's deliberative discussion theory. Civic Education teachers reported that these strategies promote learner participation, open conversation, and exploration of others' points of view. This viewpoint is consistent with Hess (2009), who suggested that pedagogical approaches such as debates, role-playing, and case studies enable learners to engage with others' points of view while also developing critical thinking abilities. Furthermore, Cooling (2012) suggested that creating a safe and inclusive classroom environment is crucial for fostering open dialogue on controversial topics. However, many teachers noted that they often avoid delving too deeply into

controversial topics to avoid potential conflicts with learners, parents, government officials or the school administration.

CONCLUSION

With regards to the teaching of controversial issues in secondary schools in Kabwe, the findings of this study revealed that Zambian secondary school teachers perceived the teaching of controversial issues as important as it helped develop critical thinking in the pupils and decision-making skills among learners. The teachers, however, faced several challenges in teaching controversial issues, including lack of training, fear of backlash, and limited support from the education system.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommends that;

1. Training institutions should include strategies of how teachers can teach controversial topics in their curricula.
2. The teaching of controversial issues will require participatory pedagogical approaches, which facilitate better learning and educational benefits. For example, the use of debates and small group discussions can make Civic education teachers comfortable with teaching controversial issues.
3. Secondary schools should strengthen Continuing Professional Development (CPD) activities to improve teaching strategies for controversial issues in Civic Education.

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