

“Strategies, Competence, and Challenges of Teachers in Teaching Controversial Issues: A Qualitative Study from Northern Philippines”

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explores the strategies, competence, and challenges of teachers in teaching controversial issues in the Northern Philippines, with a focus on Araling Panlipunan educators in Ilocos Norte. Addressing controversial topics in the classroom is essential for promoting critical thinking, democratic engagement, and social awareness. However, these discussions are often constrained by institutional limitations, emotional sensitivities, and the lack of appropriate training and resources. Using a descriptive qualitative design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 10 purposively selected teachers from various public and private schools. Thematic analysis revealed three key findings. First, teachers commonly employed student-centered and inquiry-based methods such as the Socratic Method, debates, simulations, role-playing, and the use of primary sources to encourage critical engagement and respectful dialogue. Second, while most participants reported high levels of confidence in handling controversial issues—attributing this to content expertise and teaching experience—they also acknowledged a lack of formal training and professional development in this area. Third, teachers identified significant challenges, including limited access to updated and balanced instructional materials, difficulties in ICT integration, emotional and ethical complexities of certain topics, and the subjectivity of assessing students' critical thinking. Despite these constraints, educators displayed a strong commitment to fostering inclusive, respectful, and evidence-based discussions in their classrooms. The findings highlight the need for targeted professional development, improved instructional resources, and the implementation of robust assessment strategies to support teachers in effectively facilitating controversial issue discussions. This study offers valuable insights for educational policy, curriculum reform, and teacher training programs in the Philippines.

Keywords: controversial issues, teacher competence, inquiry-based learning, qualitative research, Northern Philippines

INTRODUCTION

In today's increasingly polarized society, teaching controversial issues in the classroom is vital in cultivating critical thinking, civic engagement, and democratic values among students. Particularly in Social Studies and Araling Panlipunan classes, controversial topics such as political ideologies, historical disputes, cultural practices, and social injustices present essential opportunities for learners to examine multiple perspectives and develop informed opinions. However, incorporating these topics into classroom instruction presents challenges for teachers, who must navigate deeply rooted community beliefs, curriculum limitations, emotional sensitivities, and varying levels of student preparedness. In the context of the Philippine educational system—especially in culturally and historically diverse regions like Northern Luzon—the task of teaching controversial issues is further complicated by limited access to updated instructional resources and professional training.

Theoretical and empirical studies have emphasized the significance of engaging students in controversial discussions. Freire's (1970) *Critical Pedagogy* and Vygotsky's (1978) *Social Constructivism* serve as foundational frameworks, highlighting the importance of dialogue, reflection, and social interaction in developing critical awareness. Hess and McAvoy (2015) argue that structured deliberations in classrooms foster civic tolerance and informed political reasoning. Meanwhile, Hand (2008) and Kelly (1986) explore teachers' roles in maintaining neutrality and ethical responsibility during such discussions. Despite these insights, studies (Byford et al., 2009; Tatar & Adigüzel, 2022) reveal that teachers often lack the training and institutional support needed to effectively facilitate these dialogues, especially in contexts where political, religious, and cultural sensitivities influence educational decisions.

In the Philippine context, particularly in Ilocos Norte, where historical consciousness and traditional values are deeply embedded in community life, teachers face distinctive challenges in initiating classroom discussions on controversial issues. These include fear of backlash, limited digital and academic resources, difficulties in integrating ICT, and the need for context-sensitive pedagogies. Although teachers express a strong commitment to fostering meaningful classroom engagement, their instructional strategies and confidence often rely more on personal experience and intuition than on structured professional development. This mismatch between curricular ideals and classroom realities underscores a significant gap in both local and international literature: the need to understand how teachers navigate the complex intersection of pedagogy, ethics, competence, and controversy in specific sociocultural settings.

This study seeks to address that gap by exploring the lived experiences of basic education teachers in Northern Philippines. Specifically, it investigates three core dimensions: the teaching strategies teachers employ when dealing with controversial issues, their perceived levels of competence in handling such topics, and the challenges they encounter in relation to learning resources, ICT integration, content mastery, and assessment methods. Through qualitative inquiry, this research aims to generate grounded insights that can inform teacher training programs, curricular development, and institutional support mechanisms that are sensitive to the local educational context.

By uncovering how teachers in Northern Philippines approach controversial topics, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of pedagogical practices that are both contextually responsive and democratically grounded. It also provides a foundation for developing targeted interventions that empower educators to create inclusive, respectful, and critically engaging learning environments—essential for preparing students to navigate the complexities of 21st-century democratic life.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design to explore the strategies, competence, and challenges of teachers in teaching controversial issues in Araling Panlipunan classes in Northern Philippines. A purposive sampling technique was used to select 10 basic education teachers from various public and private schools in Ilocos Norte who have had recent experience in facilitating discussions on controversial topics. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews guided by frameworks from Hess (2009), Oulton et al. (2004), and UNESCO (2017), allowing for consistent yet flexible inquiry into participants' pedagogical practices, perceived competence, and encountered obstacles. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's method of coding and categorizing patterns to extract recurring themes. Ethical considerations were rigorously observed: informed consent was obtained from all participants, identities were anonymized using pseudonyms, and participants were given the right to withdraw at any time. To minimize emotional distress, debriefing sessions were conducted after each interview, especially since discussions involved potentially sensitive or controversial topics. The study ensured confidentiality and data security throughout the process, with all digital files securely stored and accessed only by the research team. This methodological approach enabled a rich, nuanced understanding of how teachers

negotiate pedagogical and ethical complexities in teaching controversial issues within their specific socio-cultural contexts.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the thematic findings from the interviews conducted with 20 Araling Panlipunan teachers in Northern Philippines. The data reveal three major themes: (1) common strategies used in teaching controversial issues, (2) levels of teacher competence, and (3) challenges encountered in content delivery, resource availability, ICT integration, and assessment.

Strategies in Teaching Controversial Issues

Teachers commonly utilize student-centered, inquiry-based strategies to teach controversial issues. Many emphasized the use of the Socratic Method, which fosters critical thinking by guiding students through structured questioning. As one teacher noted,

"I make sure to use the Socratic method. This approach allows me to engage my students through a series of thoughtful questions and follow-ups, encouraging deeper discussion." -Teacher 1

In addition to Socratic questioning, other strategies include peer teaching, group discussions, simulations, debates, role-playing, and the use of primary sources such as speeches, diaries, and news articles. For instance, a teacher shared,

"I incorporate primary sources like speeches, diaries, interviews, and news articles... to develop their own well-informed opinions." -Teacher 2

These strategies align with constructivist teaching practices, where learners actively construct understanding through engagement and interaction (Vygotsky, 1978).

Furthermore, teachers foster a respectful classroom environment by setting ground rules and encouraging evidence-based dialogue. A participant emphasized,

"I establish clear classroom norms, emphasizing active listening, respect for differing opinions, and the importance of evidence-based argument." -Teacher 3

This echoes Hess and McAvoy's (2015) argument that democratic classrooms must allow diverse viewpoints and structured, respectful deliberation to thrive. Teachers also set ground rules to promote evidence-based discussions and mutual respect among students. The consistent application of such pedagogical practices underscores the educators' commitment to nurturing civic reasoning and open-mindedness in their learners, despite the sensitive nature of some topics.

Teacher Competence in Handling Controversial Issues

Teachers reported high levels of confidence in handling controversial issues, though some novice teachers expressed modest uncertainty. Many rated themselves around 80% confident or higher, attributing their competence to content mastery, classroom experience, use of credible sources, and personal commitment to neutrality. As one teacher remarked,

"I am very confident... I support my insights with relevant theories and scholarly studies to ensure that my perspectives are well-grounded. I rely on credible sources like books, factual evidence, and films... this helps me guide respectful and balanced conversations." -Teacher 4

and teachers recognize the importance of preparation and neutrality, which contributes to their confidence. However, some newer educators admitted challenges due to lack of experience, with one stating,

“Average. Because I am new in the field and fresh graduate.” -Teacher 5

Despite their confidence, many acknowledged a lack of formal training. As reported,

“Not yet,” -Teacher 1

“None,” -Teacher 4

And

“None, However during my college days we were immersed with various seminars addressing sensitive and controversial topics,” -Teacher 9

This highlights the gap in structured professional development. This supports findings by Byford, Lennon, and Russell (2009), who argue that while teachers recognize the value of controversial issue discussions, they often lack the training needed to effectively facilitate them. The absence of structured training programs limits teachers' ability to refine facilitation skills, especially for novice educators who expressed uncertainty due to limited classroom experience.

Challenges in Teaching Controversial Issues

Despite their dedication, teachers face multiple obstacles. A dominant theme is the lack of updated and balanced materials. One teacher commented,

“The limited availability of updated and balanced learning resources... Some textbooks may present information in a one-sided manner or avoid sensitive issues altogether.” -Teacher 4

Teachers often compensate by curating credible articles and integrating real-world examples. This resource scarcity reflects a broader issue in social studies education, where materials may lag behind contemporary discourse (Barton & Levstik, 2004).

While ICT is used widely—such as videos, online articles, digital archives, and social media simulations—accessibility and reliability remain problematic. One teacher explained,

“I use photos and videos to get their attention and sometimes I use memes... but difficulties... are locating a reliable source.” -Teacher 1

Some also noted technological limitations like power interruptions and lack of tools. Despite challenges, ICT use enriches lessons, promoting media literacy and engagement (Ribble, 2012).

Most teachers feel competent, often citing their specialization in social studies and personal interest. As one affirmed,

“Yes, I believe I have the mastery in teaching controversial topics because not only is it my field of specialization, it is also within my interests.” -Teacher 6

However, emotional intensity and maintaining neutrality can challenge even experienced educators:

“One of the most challenging aspects is maintaining neutrality... especially when dealing with highly sensitive or polarizing issues.” -Teacher 4

This supports Harwood and Hahn (1990), who noted that the emotional nature of controversial issues requires both pedagogical skill and emotional intelligence.

Teachers use a range of assessments such as essays, debates, reaction papers, performance tasks, and peer reviews, but struggle with subjectivity and emotional responses. One reported,

“It can be difficult to assess whether students truly understand the context... they focus more on the emotional aspects.” -Teacher 2

Others struggle with evaluating critical thinking objectively:

“Measuring depth of understanding and critical thinking... is often subjective and complex.” -Teacher 8

This mirrors concerns raised by Kerr and Huddleston (2015), who advocate for robust qualitative assessment frameworks that account for the ethical and analytical dimensions of student learning.

The findings highlight a complex interplay between teacher commitment and systemic limitations. Teachers in Northern Philippines are actively working to engage students in meaningful discussions, drawing upon a variety of inquiry-based strategies to foster democratic values and critical reflection. Their willingness to teach controversial issues—despite the emotional, technological, and institutional barriers—demonstrates professional resilience and a strong sense of civic responsibility.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study examined the strategies, competence, and challenges of Araling Panlipunan teachers in Northern Philippines in teaching controversial issues. Teachers commonly use inquiry-based and student-centered methods like debates, simulations, and the Socratic Method to promote critical thinking and respectful dialogue. While many feel confident due to their subject expertise and experience, most lack formal training on how to facilitate controversial discussions, particularly those involving sensitive or emotionally charged topics. Challenges include outdated learning materials, limited ICT access, difficulty maintaining neutrality, and the lack of effective tools to assess students' critical thinking. Despite these hurdles, teachers remain committed to fostering inclusive and democratic classroom environments.

To address these challenges, teacher education programs should include training on controversial issue pedagogy, focusing on facilitation, neutrality, and ethical sensitivity. Schools and curriculum developers must provide updated, balanced, and culturally inclusive learning resources, and invest in ICT infrastructure and digital literacy. Alternative assessment methods—such as structured debates, reflection papers, and rubrics—should be used to evaluate critical thinking fairly. Lastly, school leaders should support collaborative teacher communities to promote shared learning and build confidence in addressing complex classroom topics.

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