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

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INTRODUCTION

Teaching controversial issues in K-12 curricula is considerable in the promotion of critical thinking, democratic values, and the preparation of students to engage in increasingly complex societal debates. It allows learners to develop and maintain diverse perspectives, informed views, and active civic engagement. The fact that very challenging circumstances exist to include controversial issues into discussions involves individual, institutional, and social constraints.

Studies have brought light on the importance of and obstacles faced in teaching controversial issues. Tatar and Adigüzel (2022) explores the reasons why certain controversial topics are part of the "null curriculum," excluded from instruction because of apprehension on the part of educators and the systemic structures in which teaching is carried out. Their work legitimates seriously introducing such topics into conversations in classrooms. According to Goldberg and Savenije (2018), while discussing historical controversies and present-day social issues, it mattered that they see themselves in the context, and teachers need to present a range of perspectives yet manage their biases. In support of this, Kunzman (n.d.) elaborates the preparation schools should give to teachers with administrative assistance, techniques to keep neutrality, and instructive exercises to address current situations. In secondary education, Tannebaum (2020) scrutinizes perceptions of teachers regarding teaching controversial public issues in classroom discussion.

Teachers express their awareness of the educational value of such topics, though many do refrain from these due to fear of community fallout and personal worries. The research proposes more professional development and institutional support for teachers to have such talks. Similarly, Hung (2020) analyzes how elementary teachers' personal experiences influence their instructional approach toward controversial topics, particularly immigration, showing how teachers tweak the styles they use around their life experiences. Stitzlein (2024) talks about difficulty in teaching controversial issues in heated political climates, this time for discussions rooted in historical contexts and democratic principles to gain higher legitimacy and acceptance. Apart from that, teachers have to perform equally important roles in promoting discussions on sensitive topics. Kaka et al. (2021) discuss how digital simulations in preservice social studies teacher training develop skills in moderating classroom debates on controversial issues. They conclude that teacher training for future educators must contain theoretical content and practical experience so they can facilitate such discussions.

If there is anywhere in the Philippines where the teaching of controversial issues can take on a special significance, it is in the savanna and hilly Northern Luzon region, where such great diversity exists under the influences of socio-political spectra, of historic narratives, and terrain of local concerns from which much of this tumultuous controversy arises. Being entrenched with rich cultural traditions and historical aspects, Northern Luzon is home to indigenous communities, agricultural economies, and spaces for political activism. This diversity breeds quite a number of controversial topics in need of critical engagement during classroom discussions and debates, whereby land rights transgress historical injustices and political governance blends with environmental sustainability. These dynamics give teachers in the region a particular challenge over instilling controversial topics in their lessons. The challenges may include limited access to appropriate learning resources, difficulties with ICT integration, weaknesses in the teachers' mastery of intricate subjects, and poor assessment

methods to determine students' deep understanding. Contextually, sociocultural factors can matter, such as the sensitivities in their communities and traditional perspectives that might govern the way educators approach controversial talks in the classroom. This contextual challenge, therefore, drives this study to elucidate the strategies, competence, and the challenges faced by teachers from Northern Philippines when engaging students

in discussions towards controversial issues. Such an understanding would thus be important in enhancing professional development programs, refining curriculum content, and even providing students with a more balanced and informed education.

In bringing to the fore these unresolved gaps, the study seeks to describe the strategies, competence, and challenges of teachers in teaching controversial issues in the Northern Philippines, specifically to identify the various teaching methods employed by teachers in the classroom for controversial issues. It is also intended to evaluate the teachers' competence in leading discussions about such materials, focusing on how well they can make students engage in worthwhile, critical discourse.

Moreover, it looks into particular problems the teachers face, the unavailability of available learning resources which can also apply to the projection of using ICT tools, mastery of content in a subject, and methods of effective assessment. Most specifically, the research shall address the following questions:

1. What are the common teaching strategies used by teachers?
2. What is the level of competence of teachers on the handling of controversial issues?
3. What are the challenges teachers experience with respect to learning resources, ICT integration, mastery of lessons, and assessment techniques?

These areas will help in garnering better and detailed insights into the teaching methods, preparedness of the teachers, and challenges faced when teaching controversial topics in a meaningful manner.

Importance of this Study

The findings of this study will make a significant contribution to educational policy and teacher training programs by highlighting best practices and obstacles in teaching controversial issues. The study will also support curriculum development and pedagogical approaches by spotlighting effective instructional strategies and areas needing improvement. In addition, this study is aimed at helping teachers, students-for an interesting and well-informed learning-and policymakers in developing policies to support educators in addressing controversial topics more effectively.

Delimitations of the Study

This study will focus on the pedagogical practices of teachers from Northern Philippines handling subjects that require discussion on controversial issues. It investigates their teaching methods, professionalism, and challenges in stimulating a discussion on these issues. Note, however, that this research is limited in scope to a particular 30 teachers from the basic education in the Province of Ilocos Norte and involves qualitative methods of data collection; these may limit the generalizability of the findings to other contexts. However, the study will be of great importance in providing knowledge for teacher education, curriculum design, and policy formulation to promote the teaching of controversial issues in the Philippine educational system.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Theoretical Framework

Theories on teaching controversial issues (e.g., critical pedagogy, social constructivism)

When addressing controversial topics in class, teachers adopt research-aided reflection-based strategies aimed at developing critical thinking and civic engagement and ethical reasoning. In building this environment in which students can grapple with complex topics themselves while respecting differing opinions, many theorists offer

blueprints for effectively directing these discussions. One of these approaches is Freirean Critical Pedagogy, which emphasizes education as a tool in the pursuit of social justice and encourages students to question dominant narratives while being aware of power relations in society. According to Freire (1970), his "problem-posing education" radically transforms passive learning into an active dialogue that allows students to develop a critical consciousness. Studies show that schools which have adopted this approach educate students who become socially conscious and politically engaged during their life (Giroux, 2011). A straightforward application of this theory is to have kids examine the media's portrayal of social and political issues as a segue into discussions about bias and inequality. Another significant theory is social constructivism proposed by Lev Vygotsky, who puts emphasis on the role of social interaction in learning. Vygotsky (1978) also claims that the building of knowledge takes place cooperatively through dialogue, thus valuing collaborative discussions as a powerful teaching tool for controversial topics. This was supported by Mercer and Littleton (2007), who assert that structured group discussion improves the reasoning and problem-solving skills of students. In practice, teachers can encourage classroom debates and think-pair-share strategies that provide students with the chance to reflect on competing viewpoints to a controversial topic. Providing a firm grounding for student engagement with contentious topics is the theory of John Dewey and Amy Gutmann's Deliberative Democracy. They contended that students who participated in open discussion and reasoned deliberation were equipped to play a role in democratic participation (Gutmann & Thompson, 2004). In a study on democratic education, Hess and McAvoy (2015) found that classrooms in which students engage in structured debates regarding real-world issues tend to cultivate increased levels of political tolerance and civic engagement. This might look like organizing mock policy discussions or town hall meetings where students wrestle with real-world case studies. When addressing the ethical dimensions of controversial issues, Lawrence Kohlberg and Carol Gilligan's theories of moral and ethical development are helpful here. Kohlberg (1981) suggested that ethical dilemmas encountered by students develop increasingly mature forms of moral thinking in students based on his six-stage model of moral reasoning. Gilligan (1982) took a different approach and advocated an ethics of care that detailed relational and contextual moral reasoning. Classrooms that integrate discussions and case study discussions are shown to help students acquire both empathy and ethical decision-making skills (Narvaez & Lapsley, 2008). An example of this theory in practice is utilizing personal dilemmas-climate ethics or human rights debates-as thoughtful tools through which students might explore moral complexity. Similarly, Matthew Lipman's Pedagogy of Inquiry encourages students to indulge in philosophical questioning and deep reflection. Lipman (1991) presented Philosophy for Children (P4C), which uses inductive and dialectical reasoning. Investigations done by Topping and Trickey (2007) affirm that P4C is effective in the development of improved cognitive and social skills; thus, it can be recommended for disturbing topics. Teachers may use Socratic methods of questioning to enable students to think critically about ethical and political issues. Lastly, Controversy and Inquiry-Based Learning, as explored by Diana Hess, provides a structure for addressing contentious subjects. Hess (2009) distinguishes between "open" and "settled" issues, suggesting that teachers should provide opportunities for debate on open issues and guide discussions that pertain to settled issues with factual grounding. Her scholarship indicates that classrooms that embrace controversy with respect and in an orderly manner usually foster greater civic roles and open-mindedness. Role-playing exercises, simulations, and case studies are effective tools for implementing this theory.

Teaching with the theories develops students' critical thinking attributes while informing their sense of citizenship toward responsibility. Numerous studies have reaffirmed the view that well-run discussions on controversial issues cultivate democratic engagement, ethical reasoning, and social awareness among young people. Teachers can create environments where students feel enabled to engage with difficult topics in a meaningful way through these strategies.

Models of teacher competence and professional development

Teacher competence and professional development are core to effective teaching. Contemporary developments in education are placing increased demands on teachers. Different models offer systematic paths for the development of teacher capacities and further learning throughout their lives. Research shows that effective professional development improves the quality of instruction and ultimately impacts student achievement positively (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). Below are some major models that govern teacher competence and their professional learning. One of the widely recognized approaches is through the Competency-Based Model.

This Approach works on defining specific skills and behavior that the teachers must master to be effective. Shulman's Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK) framework (1987) stresses that subject matter knowledge must be successfully blended with an array of teaching strategies for student understanding to take place. Likewise, is the Danielson Framework of Teaching (1996) which categorizes the teacher effectiveness into four domains: planning; classroom environment; instruction; and professional responsibilities. Research findings suggest that competency-based training helps teachers develop knowledge for the pedagogic application and engage students better (Goe et al., 2008). For instance, professional development programs often emphasize differentiated instruction and formative assessment to help make classrooms effective.

Another critical approach is the Reflective Practitioner Model, which focuses on self-evaluation and development, or self-improvement. Also, Donald Schön (1983) introduced the idea of reflective practice in teaching in order to make sure the teacher perfects skills of instruction. This idea expands on John Dewey's reflective thinking (1933), urging teachers to analyze their experiences to arrive at informed decisions. Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle (1984) supports this notion by proposing that learning occurs through experience, reflection, conceptualization, and experimentation. Studies have indicated that teachers engaged in reflective practices such as journaling and peer discussions have a deeper understanding of their methodologies and the needs of their students (Zeichner & Liston, 1996). Many studies endorse Lifelong Learning Models for the development of teachers. From this perspective, this is a gradual process that emphasizes continuous professional growth rather than achievement only once in a lifetime. Eraut (1994), in stages of professional development, describes the change from novice to expert-cum-learners being lifelong professionals-and TALIS (OECD, 2019) advocates for a rational program of professional development based on workshops, peer collaboration, and so forth. Research indicates that continuous professional learning helps improve teaching effectiveness and students' outcomes (Avalos, 2011).

Several teachers enhance their expertise-some by attending conferences, others by the way of taking online courses, while others join mentorship programs-to keep abreast of educational research. Collaboration is critical to professional development, as with the PLC model. DuFour and Eaker (1998) define PLCs as structured while ongoing collaborative opportunities for teachers to collectively share effective practices, analyze student data, and improve instruction. Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) argue that shared professional responsibility supports successful growth in teachers. Studies show that PLCs enhance teacher efficacy, increase student performance, and strengthen school communities (Vescio et al., 2008). Schools implementing PLCs generally view teacher’s cooperative in lesson planning, classroom observations, and reflective dialogues.

In light of the fact that teacher development is an evolutionary process within a career, researchers have developed the Stages of Teacher DevelopmentModel. Fuller's Concern-Based Model (1969) identifies three main stages of development: self-concern (survival in the classroom), task concern (ways on how to improve teaching strategies), and impact concern (what it means for learning). Similarly, Huberman's Teacher Career Cycle (1995) shows the phases of exploration, stabilization, and renewal. Research also supports that professional development should be aligned to the teacher's career stage in order to be effective (Day & Gu, 2007). For instance, beginning teachers may need assistance with classroom management, whereas more experienced teachers can take on leadership roles or new teaching methods.

In the current digital age integrating technology into the curriculum is compulsory, and that is why the TPACK model gets highlighted in the discourse. Developed in 2006 by Mishra and Koehler, TPACK brings to attention the connection among three fundamental areas: Content Knowledge (CK) (knowledge about subjects), Pedagogical Knowledge (PK) (teaching strategies), and Technological Knowledge (TK) (use of digital tools). Relevant research suggests that blending sublime pedagogy with sound technology integration enhances effective student learning (Koehler & Mishra, 2009). A good example would be a math teacher showing the application of TPACK by using interactive simulations to convey algebraic concepts.

For more focused professional development, teachers benefit greatly from the Mentoring and Coaching Model. This teacher development model incorporates guidance from seasoned educators or instructional coaches, providing an area for professional growth. Cognitive Coaching (Costa & Garmston, 1994) and Knight's Instructional Coaching (2007) serve as frameworks for structured reflective conversations to increase teacher effectiveness. Studies show that teachers with mentors and coaches are more confident, stay longer in the

profession, and provide higher quality instruction (Kraft et al., 2018). A mentor teacher supporting a novice teacher with lesson planning and classroom management is a practical example of how this model operates.

Finally, the Inquiry-Based Professional Development Model molds teachers into searching conduits of improvement guided by research. Stenhouse's (1975) Research-Based Teacher encourages teachers to employ action research. The Lesson Study Model (Fernandez & Yoshida, 2004), which has found space inside Japan, collaborates a lesson plan, observation, and refining based on student learning outcomes. Research shows that inquiry-based professional development creates an environment which encourages teachers to keep grow and evolve (Timperley et al., 2007). One group of science teachers trying out various strategies to provide instruction in scientific inquiry is one concrete expression of the idea.

Such models articulate that teacher competence and professional development are multifaceted, requiring a mix of structured learning, collaboration, reflection, and technology integration for effectiveness. The most effective strategies for professional growth combine several models, ensuring that teachers remain adaptable and responsive to the evolving needs of its students and the educational landscape. As teachers cultivate their learning thoughtfully, they contribute immensely to student success and the larger learning community.

Teaching Strategies in Controversial Issues

Teaching controversial issues in the classroom needs thoughtful strategies, actively cultivating critical thinking, respectful dialogue, and evidence-based reasoning. These often touch on deeply held beliefs, competing perspectives, and the most challenging ethical dilemmas. To take on these challenges, educators can utilize three research-supported strategies: inquiry-based learning, discussion and debate techniques, and case-based learning-all designed to get students engaged with controversial issues in a way that is meaningful and analytical. Inquiry-Based Learning: Developing Critical Investigations Inquiry-based learning (IBL) in which learners ask questions, investigate multiple sources, and construct their own well-reasoned conclusions is a student-centered approach. Instead of providing one answer or perspective, this method creates opportunities for students to engage in critical thinking about issues. Building on the ideas of Dewey's experiential learning (1938) and Bruner's discovery learning (1961), IBL views students as active participants in their learning, which fosters curiosity and independent thinking. Key among them is an emphasis on open-ended questioning and research. In a social studies class researching climate-change policies, for example, students may explore questions such as "What are the economic and social impacts of renewable energy policies?" In this process, they would analyze government reports, scientific studies, and media perspectives to formulate informed arguments. The process not only improves research skills but also allows students to grapple with different perspectives. Empirical research has commendably corroborated IBL with students. According to Hmelo-Silver el al. (2007), IBL significantly improves student engagement and analytical skills. In addition, when applied to controversial issues, IBL promotes civic reasoning and media literacy (McAvoy & Hess, 2013), giving students the ability to make informed decisions in a democratic society.

Treating Argumentation and Perspective-Taking Debate and structured discussions allow students a safe platform on which they can express diverse views while acquiring argumentation skills. Lev Vygotsky's notion of social constructivism (1978) says that learning is very identifiably rooted within social interaction and that discussions enable one to refine his/her understanding through dialogue. In engaging in debates and structured discussions, students learn to evaluate evidence and construct logical arguments and to engage with other viewpoints in a civil manner. Several debate techniques have been propounded for use to promote classroom discussion. A Structured Academic Controversy (SAC) (Johnson & Johnson, 1979) requires the students to explore the multiple perspectives on an issue before reaching some consensus on it. Socratic Seminars encourage open-ended discussions, where students can engage each other using critical questioning, while Philosophical Chairs allow students to take and defend their positions and be open to changing them. For instance, in a government class studying issues of free speech and misinformation on social media, students could conduct a pro/con debate on whether platforms ought to regulate misinformation. Through structured argumentation, they examine real-world cases, contemplate legal frameworks, and assess the implications of various policies for society. Several studies have also pointed to the benefits of debate-based learning. Zare & Othman (2015) found structured debates to be an avenue to enhance critical thinking, empathy, and communication skills.

Further, Hess& McAvoy (2015) argue that discussing controversial issues in classes prepares students for future civic engagement by providing experiences of diverse viewpoints and presenting opportunities to formulate reasoned opinions.

Utilizing Real Scenarios Case-based learning (CBL) involves students engaged in real or hypothetical situations that require them to analyze complex dilemmas and make decisions. Originally developed for law and medicine, CBL has grown into a powerful pedagogical tool for instructing ethics, history, and the social sciences. This methodology challenges the student to balance fact-based information, ethics, and perspectives/input from stakeholders when addressing a controversial issue.

The prime strength of case-based learning (CBL) is its ability to nurture students into being problem-solvers and moral reasoners. For instance, in an applied ethics course, students might investigate the case of Edward Snowden's whistleblowing and discuss whether national security-related concerns warrant government policing through surveillances. Through analysis from perspectives of privacy advocates, government officials, and legal scholars, students are engaged with a multifaceted problem of real-world consequence.

It has been supported by research evidence for the effectiveness of case-based learning for more profound learning. Krain (2016) found that students who engaged in case-based discussions showed better critical thinking and decision-making abilities than students in traditional lecture-based classroom teaching contexts. Further, case-based learning fosters engagement by linking classroom learning with real-life problems, thereby making mental abstract ideas more accessible.

With inquiry-based learning, deliberation and discussion, and cases, the educator does engage the student into probing through direct discussion of critical issues through critical thinking, based on evidence, or in open discussion. Each methodology carries with it somewhat different advantages: inquiry-based learning builds curiosity and independent research skills, debate fosters structured argument and perspective-taking, and CBL nurtures real-world applications and ethical reasoning.

Varied combinations of these strategies mean that learners will have an understanding of divergent viewpoints and thereby hone their analytical powers to remain as active citizens. In this era of complexities and polarized feelings, these teaching methods confer youngsters with capabilities to carry on deliberations in a thoughtful, informed, and respectful way—one that is at the heart of not just learning but also for all of society.

Teacher Competence in Teaching Controversial Issues

Teaching controversial topics tends to require a higher level of competence from teachers. The discussions in this regard may be complex, asking for a careful gatekeeping balance of expertise, instructional strategies, ethical issues, and neutrality. In this regard, teacher competences needed for an environment conducive to the discussion approach in question include pedagogical knowledge, content knowledge, ethical awareness, and some understanding of neutrality. Such competencies provide teachers with the means to enable discussion that leads the pupils into engaging with multiple perspectives, reflecting on their values, and basing their arguments on some kind of objective evidence. Pedagogical Knowledge: Designing Learning Experiences This competence leading teaching of controversial issues has been identified as that of pedagogical knowledge--that knowledge concerning structuring and guiding learning, which can foster critical thinking and respectful dialogues. Where divisive or delicate topics emerge, teachers must ensure discussion is constructive, based on evidence, and covers as wide of a range of viewpoints as possible. With this respect, Hess and McAvoy (2015) suggest that well-structured discussions can engage students in a manner that adequately prepares the students for democratic participation. The teacher may consider integrating structured debate formats, such as Socratic seminars, Structured Academic Controversy (SAC), or Philosophical Chairs. Each of these strategies fosters students' skills in analyzing various points of view and arguing (Parker, 2006). Inquiry-based learning does allow for student research freedom in forming their own conclusions about controversial issues, allowing for intellectual independence, as per McAvoy and Hess, (2013). A teacher's capabilities in the strategic implementation of student learning stand to affect student civic engagement and their adopting an analysis approach (Kuhn, 1991). Content Knowledge: The Knowledge of the Subject Matter Beyond pedagogical skills, when it comes to controversial discussions, teachers' content knowledge represents another essential aspect. An informed teacher

makes certain these discussions are accurate, balanced, and anchored in trustworthy information sources. Lacking strong subject knowledge, educators may oversimplify nuanced issues or, worse still, inadvertent misinformation. A history teacher, for instance, needs to provide some context for colonialism; this could encompass colonialism's economic, political, and cultural impacts from various historical perspectives. Similarly, in discussing climate change with students, a science teacher should help students distinguish between scientific consensus and misinformation so that they can evaluate credible sources. In civics discussion, free speech and hate speech come with certain knowledge of Constitutional principles and legal precedents. Shulman (1986) highlights that teachers with strong content expertise are equipped to anticipate student misconceptions, leading discussions with clarity and depth. Furthermore, content knowledge will allow them to present several perspectives of an issue without resorting to false equivalence. By trying to model the basis for balanced consideration in the treatment of controversial issues, teachers would be provoking the development of a rich understanding within the students' comprehension. Teachers must make efforts to create inclusivity and respectfulness in discussions in the classroom, whereby students' diverse backgrounds and beliefs are considered. Educators must consider ethical aspects in how discussions might leave an emotional footprint on students and make their classes a safe place for students to express their opinions. According to Hess (2009), teachers function as both facilitators and ethical guides helping students solve their moral and social dilemmas. The ethical competence in the classroom should include some elements avoiding harm by ensuring that discussions do not promote discrimination, hostility, or emotional distress; encouraging diverse perspectives while challenging misinformation and harmful ideologies; transparency about biases and the acceptance that all viewpoints, including the teacher's, are shaped by experiences and values. Educators are to be particularly sensitive to power dynamics in the classroom on issues of race, gender, religion, or political ideologies. Research shows that classrooms that embrace ethical teaching approaches generate more trust, open dialogue, and intellectual curiosity among students (McAvoy & Hess, 2013).

These various approaches to neutrality in the classroom can contrast with one another on multiple axes: The first model is what is termed Neutral Impartiality: Teachers are obliged to expose multiple perspectives but may never indicate a personal standpoint towards them (Kelly, 1986). The second model is Committed Impartiality: This approach obliges the teacher to represent all views in a discussion but also acknowledge that some of them are better based than others (Hess & McAvoy, 2015). The third, Balanced Advocacy: Unlike an advocacy of political opinions to which an educator should remain neutral, educators ought to champion democratic values, such as human rights or equality (Hand, 2008). To illustrate, in a discussion on climate change, a science teacher may engage in committed impartiality whereby students are exposed to the various climate policy proposals along with the teacher's emphasis on the scientific consensus on climate change as caused by humans. Some researchers, however, warn that an excessive display of neutrality may give the false equivalence of all opinions that are presented-they assume that both views are equal in worth even if one lacks factual basis (McAvoy & Hess, 2013). On the other hand, taking an overt political stand by the teacher actually runs the risk of alienating the learner with a different historical or experiential point of reference. The challenge will be to find the middle path in allowing critical actors an analysis with little imposition of molded opinion. Conclusion: Shaping Competent Educators for Thoughtful Discussions The successful teaching of controversial issues will bring together strong pedagogical approaches, content knowledge, an ethical responsibility, and nuanced neutrality. Classroom talk must be orderly and promote inclusivity while being evidence-based, allowing the critical capacity of students to be developed together with civic engagement and skills of dealing with complex socio-political issues. By integrating effective instructional practices with appropriate content knowledge, ethical sensitivity, and thoughtful neutrality, teachers can guide students in examining controversial issues in ways that are analytical, respectful, and reflective. In the process, they prepare students for academic success and contribute to the development of responsible, informed, and open-minded citizens.

Challenges in Teaching Controversial Issues

Teaching controversial issues comes with a set of challenges where an educator must navigate the sensitivity of the topics while ensuring meaningful discussions based on evidence. The most critical challenges include availability of learning resources, integration of ICT tools in teaching, mastery of content and instructional approaches, and even assessment and evaluation. Each of the obstacles forms an integral part of how students hardly engage with complex issues taking differing perspectives and developing critical thinking skills. One

major obstacle relates to the provision of high-quality and, more importantly, unbiased learning resources. Many controversial issues around climate change, immigration policies, or social justice movements often remain factored with bias, misinformation, or outdated narratives dabbling from textbooks, media, and online sources. Studies have claimed that textbooks may one-sidedly present whatever is being presented, thus limiting students' exposure to varying worldviews (Apple 2004). The rise of digital misinformation complicates this, making it harder for the students to separate the credible from the misleading content (McGrew et al. 2017). In addition, underfunded schools may also be lacking updated textbooks, research databases, or digital resources, thus limiting the authority that educators have in ensuring it becomes a well-rounded discussion. To emerge out of these challenges, teachers are expected to go beyond the textbooks, bringing in academic research, government reports, as well as trustworthy news, all the way to endowing the students with critical skills in evaluating information (Wineburg et al. 2016). Another challenge was integrating ICT tools in teaching highly contested issues. Channels of digital platforming, from forums to multimedia resource sharing, enhance conversations while possibly enhancing the associated risks of inequity, misinformation, and technological literacy. Thus, fundamental attention ought to the "internet divide," where inequity in access enables limited engagement within ICT-centered pedagogy (Van Dijk 2020). Furthermore, prejudiced algorithms and social media filter bubbles most commonly faced by students keep them more reinforced towards filtered ideas than subjected to unconditional reasoning (Pariser 2011). Teachers must incorporate digital literacy and fact-checking strategies into their lessons actively, detailed management of online discussion is very difficult when anonymity on social platforms gets in the way of an open-ended dialogue, that is displaced to instances of a polarized and at times just simply disrespectful arena debate over ideas (Suler 2004). Educators should thus be properly trained in digital literacy to maximize benefits with infrastructural support for well-structured online arguments that advocate self-control and evidence-based reasoning (Kahne, Bowyer 2017). Set against this, the notable challenge is an authority of thought and manner delivering instruction. Areas oriented towards science, politics, or ethics continuously evolve, placing a persistent burden on educators, who must regularly consummate furtherance-level insights to produce appropriately relevant input into teachings (Shulman 1986). Combating resistance and emotional response by students can be challenging due to some of them possessing very strongly held beliefs, which can lead to some emotional or defensive response (Hess & McAvoy, 2015). Such discussions should be handled with great sensitivity if teachers wish to keep students from becoming alienated or discouraged in their participation. Also, how to balance objectivity and engagement is another common struggle. Some educators, preferring impeccable neutrality, support the research that says a more effective approach is "committed impartiality," whereby teachers assure a free space for discussion but promote a stronger body of evidence for some viewpoints than for others (Hand, 2008). Nevertheless, professional development programs, collaborations in various fields of study, and reflective practices can play a crucial role in assisting teachers to advance their content knowledge and pedagogical approach.

Assessment and evaluation methods present considerable difficulty in teaching controversial issues. Conventional assessments, such as multiple-choice tests, usually do not capture the students' critical thinking, argumentation skills, and ability to analyze multi-dimensional issues. One of the dilemmas comes with the subjectivity of grading discussions and debates, as evaluating student responses on controversial issues requires a very explicit and fair grading system (Brookhart, 2013). Students may also hesitate to articulate unpopular or minority points of view for fear of being somehow penalized for their perspectives. To support a positive learning environment, teachers will need to develop rubrics that reward logical reasoning, evidence-supported arguments, and respectful discourse-namely, whatever the students' own beliefs and opinions (McAvoy & Hess, 2013). Growth in critical reasoning is difficult to assess because it is not simply about reciting facts. Alternative assessment methods, like reflective journals, position papers, peer feedback, and structured debates, can provide better insights into students' exposure to learning (Zohar & Dori, 2003). Besides, the teachers should employ formative assessments that could include self-assessments and peer evaluations to trace out students' progress over a period of time.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study will employ a qualitative approach, specifically a descriptive qualitative design. This approach is

suitable for exploring the complex and nuanced experiences of teachers in teaching controversial issues, allowing for in-depth understanding of their strategies, competence levels, and challenges. The descriptive nature allows for a rich portrayal of the phenomenon without pre-defined hypotheses.

Research Participants

A purposive sampling method will identify teachers from the Northern Philippines who have taught Araling Panlipunan in basic education within the last two academic years. Selection may take into account various factors, such as teaching experience at different grade levels and diverse school settings, whether public or private. The estimated sample is about 15 to 20 teachers; however, this number may change depending on the data gathered. Information regarding each participant's profiles, such as length of service, subject specializations, qualifications, and any trainings they had previously attended in regard to teaching controversial topics in Araling Panlipunan, will also be gathered to provide context to the findings.

Data Collection Methods

Individual in-depth semi-structured interviews will be carried out to further understand the experiences, strategies, and challenges that teachers face when dealing with controversial issues. While a semi-structured interview guide would be used to ensure some uniformity between interviews, it would permit some degree of freedom to ask follow-up questions stemming from the responses from the participants to ensure a more holistic view of what they think.

The development of this semi-structured interview guide is based upon key frameworks and research on teaching controversial issues; this sublime semi-structured interview guide gives teachers' experiences both a structured and unstructured view. It is essentially developed on the Hess's (2009) Controversial Issues Discussion Model, which caters to structured dialogue and teacher neutrality, and that reflects in questions with respect to the objectivity and respect of any discussion (Section 2; Questions 5-7). The Framework for Teaching Controversial Issues proposed by Oulton et al. (2004) encompasses a variety of aspects, including preparation by the teacher, means used in instruction, and ways of managing disagreements among students; accordingly, Section 3 deals with teacher competence. Byford, Lennon, and Russell (2009) name bias, emotional reactions, and limitation of resources among common obstacles; Section 4 addresses mastery lessons, integration of I.C.T., and assessment techniques. In addition, the guidelines provided in the document by UNESCO (2017) on Global Citizenship Education build in critical thinking and discussion-oriented learning, thus the emphasis on teaching strategies (Section 2) and professional development needs (Section 5) therein works in congruence. Thus, by way of embracing these models and evidence from the findings, the guide provides an all-around lens through which strategies, competence, and barriers to teaching controversial topics can be examined.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis will be the primary method of data analysis. This involves systematically identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within the data. Data from interviews, FGDs, and classroom observations will be transcribed verbatim. The transcribed data will then be coded, and themes will be developed through an iterative process of reviewing and refining codes. Thematic maps will be created to visualize the relationships between themes. Direct quotes from participants will be used to illustrate the themes.

Ethical Considerations

All participants are asked to provide written informed consent before entering into the study. The form shall include, among other things, the research objectives, what will be done during the study, potential hazards and benefits, and participants' rights to withdraw at any time without any repercussions. Information pertaining to participants will be treated as highly confidential. The identities of the participants will be kept secret; in their stead, only pseudonyms will be given to the participants. Also, data collected will be securely stored and shall only be used by the research team. Due to the nature of the study possibly involving sensitive topics, there shall be priority for ethical considerations to make the environment safe and supportive for the participants. The subjects will be informed that they are not in any way required to respond to a question that would be unpleasant

to them. Supportive debriefing sessions will be held after interviews and focus group discussions to aid the participants in dealing with any emotional distress that arises from the study. The research team will, on all occasions, keep in mind the emotional aspects of the study and will act in a manner to ensure there will be no further damage to the participant.

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