

Demystifying the Pedagogy of Teaching Controversial Issues in Civic Education in selected Zambian Schools

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Abstract: This study explored controversial issues in the teaching of Civic Education in selected Zambian school. The study applied qualitative methodology with a narrative design to generate evidence. Unstructured interviews were used as instruments for data production. Schools and participants were purposively selected from the five zones in Lusaka District. Findings of the study revealed the following as some of the perceived controversial issues noted in the teaching of Civic Education in selected Zambian school among others: being critical to the government, discussing of political oriented issues, discussions bordering on current affairs, discussions on abuse of human rights by the government, discussions on fundamental freedoms. The study recommended that teacher education programmes should be training teachers on how best to teach controversial issues. The public should be sensitised on the role of Civic Education in a democratic society like Zambia and also there is need to undertake further research on the best techniques of teaching controversial issues in schools.

Key words: Civic Education, Controversial issues, Teachers of Civic Education.

I. CONTEXT

The emphasis on why controversial issues should be included in Civic Education courses is not a new phenomenon. Hess (2004:257) noted from the publication of an influential report on social studies in 1916 that schools were challenged to “load Civic Education curriculum with hotly debatable political issues in order to make young people realise that controversy were not an unfortunate by product of democracy but one of its core and vital element” in strengthening democracy. Further, Hess observed that political issues were meant to enrich what learners both at elementary and secondary schools learnt with regard to democracy and democratic participation. Walsh (2013) also contends that public education plays a very important role in preparing young people for effective engagement in the community. Muleya in his works (2019, 2018a, 2018b, 2018c; 2017a, 2017b, 2016, 2015; Bergersen & Muleya, 2019; Magasu, Muleya & Mweemba, 2020; Machila, Sompa, Muleya & Pitsoe 2018; Mupeta, Muleya, Kanyamuna & Simui 2020 notes that equally Civic Education plays an important role in preparing learners or young people for effective participation in society. . As such Peterson (2011), contends that Civic Education does not only incorporate

structures, school ethos and classroom based lessons, rather encourages learning that is meant to ignite participation in the community by the learners once they are in their communities. This entails that what learners are taught should not be separated from the happenings of society. The Resource for Citizenship Education (2012) outlines some of the factors that bring about controversies in Civic Education such as : social climate, parents’ views, the media, teacher and pupils’ background, political climate and school ethos among many others. Consequently the teacher operates in an environment influenced by forces from outside the classroom, such as the, community context, education policies, parental expectation and school ethos. Therefore teaching topics deemed controversial becomes challenging for teachers owing to the foregone factors. Stradling (1984:2) defines controversial issues as “those problems and disputes that divide society and for which significant groups within society offer conflicting explanations and solutions based on alternative values”.

Statement of the problem

Teaching controversial issues in Civic Education is a powerful tool which can be applied in equipping learners with basic skills necessary for managing conflicts constructively and motivation to solve problems (King, 2009). Providing opportunities for learners to learn to listen speak and write increases not only civic knowledge but also the ability to make distinction between fraudulent and authentic in human discourse (Boyer, 1990). Muleya (2015) contends also that Civic Education now is seen as a subject that encourages citizens, and the young in particular to actively engage in the social and political life of their communities. Ideally availing young learners platforms where they can engage with each other in the classroom debates over current affairs, creates; interests in political issues, improved critical thinking, ability to communicate effectively, increased civic empowerment and greater interests in discussing public affairs even out of school, (Hess, 2004). Despite all these arguments about Civic Education , controversial issues inherent in Civic Education curriculum are intimidating, divisive; they make teachers and learners uncomfortable dealing with them in the classroom as they can disturb the peace and stability in the scholastic environment due to uncontrolled behaviour of students during discussion (Emerson, Gannon, Harrison, Lewis and Poynor,

2012:12 -13; Hess, 2004; Byford *et al*,2009; Philpott *et al*, 2011). Therefore, there is limited information on how controversial issues in Civic Education are taught in some selected schools in Zambia and such a study was imperative in exploring how controversial issues in Civic Education were handled.

Theoretical Framework

This study was guided by two contemporary proponents of the Critical Theory namely, Paulo Freire and Henry Giroux whose works emanated from the works of the Germany scholars, commonly referred to as the “Frankfurt School” which begun between the 1920s and 1930s in response to the rise in fascism and they included among others Max Horkheimer, Theodora Adorno, Herbert Marcuse and JurgenHarbermers. Critical Theory enlightens citizens by making them to be aware of their suffering, pain, frustration and unhappiness of their present situation (Guess, 1981). Critical Theory also seeks to uncover the domination, control and suppression which hides under the guise of what could appear as neutral, progressive and necessary, when in actual sense it could be working against the wishes of the citizens (Harney, 2014). Others have emphasised that civic learning classrooms are sources by which learners can establish the foundation for critical thinking, problem solving, decision making, global awareness and civic knowledge (Waliaula, 2011). This theory was adopted in order to establish how controversial issues in Civic Education could be addressed.

II. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Teaching of Controversial Issues in Schools

Abu-Hamdan and Khader (2014) undertook a study in Amman/Jordan to establish the perception of teachers of social studies on teaching contemporary controversial issues. Controversial issues are usually highly disputable and as such they are instrumental in developing abilities and strong emotions so as to manage conflicts peacefully. The results revealed that teachers had a favourable perception with regards to teaching contemporary controversial issues during their routine lessons but were not free to do so due to a number of challenges. They had in mind the policy of the Ministry of Education which did not allow them to incorporate complex topics in their courses. Teachers were confident about their abilities to teach controversial issues given a chance, but would not for fear of repercussions. The study concluded that there still existed a disparity between teacher’s perceptions regarding teaching controversial issues and their practices because of the perceived consequences.

Another study was conducted to establish whether or not teachers taught controversial issues in schools at the University of Tennessee in the United States of America by Philpott *et al*, (2011). Social Studies curriculum was robust with many controversial historical and contemporary issues these included: civil rights movements, government’s involvement in racism, genocide, civil rights of individuals

and the historical treatment of the Native Americans, these were some of the controversial issues which were not easy to teach (Philpott *et al*, 2011). Findings revealed that due to the nature of the controversy surrounding such topics teachers were uncomfortable to teach and instinctively avoided conflicts and risks that were likely to occur in the process of discussing controversial issues in the classroom. However, Philpott *et al*, (2011) observed that teachers and schools had their own ways of managing controversial issues ranging from purposeful avoidance to the one sided advocacy of a particular point of view. The study further revealed that teachers felt uncertain on how they should deal with challenging issues considering the emotional conflict and the classroom temperatures that flared when sensitive topics were being discussed. Furthermore, findings revealed that teacher education programs did not adequately equip teachers to teach controversial issues and that teachers had little or no support and direction from their educational programs. They could also not find materials to help them on how to manage controversial issues. The fear of retribution was another major concern with regards to teaching controversial issues.

Byford *et al*, (2009) conducted a comparative study of two states of Northern Indiana and Central Oklahoma, aimed at examining teachers’ attitudes towards teaching controversial issues in social studies classrooms. The findings revealed that teachers believed in developing an “informed and enlightened” citizenry but were “less assured” about engaging in controversial issues. Many teachers neglected teaching controversial issues to learners because the school had a strict policy that did not allow them to venture into sensitive issues.) revealed that dealing with controversial topics appeared difficult because young people had a tendency of accepting opinions expressed by their parents and close relations and would take them as their own without giving any convincing reasons for their position. This study was in social studies and not necessarily in Civic Education.

Similarly, Roberta (2013) carried out a study on Tackling Climate Change in a science classroom from New York University of Albany. The findings indicated that as a result of the challenges encountered when teaching controversial issues, teachers found themselves in a dilemma, either to teach or not to teach at all. The observation by Roberta (2013) shows that many teachers find themselves in similar situations because they know what is expected of them as teachers, they have the ability to teach but cannot express themselves because of the fears from the outside, and hence they find themselves in this dilemma. Furthermore it was revealed that teachers faced greater difficulties when teaching topics that conflicted with the values of society in the curriculum unlike topics that appeared neutral. Roberta (2013) discovered that it was more complex to teach controversial issues in some areas of the country that seemed more traditionally, politically and religiously conservative as they would not easily give in to change. In line with this observation, Metko (2018) noted that teachers themselves are a product of the larger community in

which they have grown up and have been socialised with the same pre-conceptions as the rest of society on a number of aspects which could have been internalised for a long time. This makes it difficult, for both learners and themselves as teachers to reflect and move beyond family and community influence. This study was again not on Civic Education but in science based programme.

Cotton (2006) conducted an investigation on the beliefs and practices of teachers of geography teaching controversial issues in Secondary Schools in the United Kingdom. . Cotton, (2006) contended that environmental issues in most cases were controversial because they involved conflict of interests and values of the communities on their attitude towards nature. The results from the study revealed that teachers believed that they needed to either adopt “neutrality or balance approach” when teaching controversial environmental issues. Furthermore a detailed analysis of the classroom environment demonstrated that teachers’ attitudes still had a greater influence than intended, this indicates that in practice teachers still had to make their positions known on controversial environmental issues and as such could not practice neutrality or balance

In his quest to guide college educators on how to conduct a productive classroom discussion, Ezzedeen(2008) undertook a study in the United States and made recommendations derived from teaching a course that was structured around discussing current and controversial social, cultural and political issues facing the business community. The findings revealed that different and unexpected facets of an issue surfaces mostly when discussed by individuals that come from different backgrounds because it opens up for the acquisition of a more complete intellectual picture. The other finding on this study was that facilitating successful classroom discussions on controversial issues was a very challenging task especially when discussing potentially divisive issues on account that conversation took unpredictable routes and emotions heightened, feelings stimulated, hence making it difficult to facilitate.

Factors Contributing to the slow pace of Teaching Controversial Issues in Civic Education

Kelly (1999:426) and Evans et al (2000) observed that “inappropriate staff development for teachers impedes their progress towards meeting the needs of the students from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds”. The other point to note here is that of clinging to traditional teacher training methods which was limiting in teaching controversial issues. This was the reason why Roberta (2013) stressed the necessity of teacher preparation in best techniques as well the necessary materials so as to facilitate effective teaching and learning in many areas and these includes controversial issues.

Another limiting factor was that some educators tend to focus so much on the prescribed curriculum and would not bring in some creativity (Waliala, 2011 and Byford, et al, 2009). Teachers less involvement in curriculum development makes

them rely mainly on approaches prescribed in the curriculum and this in most cases does not bring in creativity especially when teaching controversial issues. Byford et al, (2009) observed that educators in most cases used: lecture- based instructions, rote memorisation of what is in the text book to address controversial topics

Fear of sanctions also hindered the effective teaching of controversial issues in schools. For instance, Evans et al (2000) and Roberta (2013) contended that teaching controversial issues attracted sanctions imposed by sanctioning agencies such as the administrators, text book critics, civic or religious organisations, fellow teachers and so on and so forth.

III. METHODOLOGY

The study was qualitative in nature and employed a qualitative narrative design. The study was carried out in some selected Lusaka District of Zambia. Target population comprised teachers of Civic Education and Heads of Department, from five selected schools in Lusaka District. The sample size consisted of 21 participants from the targeted population. Purposive sampling was used to select participants through homogenous purposive sampling. Data was collected through unstructured interviews and document analysis. Collected data was thematically analysed.

Presentation of Findings

Topics Criticising the Government

Topics criticising the government were viewed as controversial issues and therefore the study noted that teachers were not keen enough to bring out such topics during Civic Education lessons The following were some of the views that were indicated by the participants:

“As a government worker you are not supposed to criticise the government; even when you are not in support of certain things you keep those to yourself and one is not supposed to show affiliation to political parties in your conduct. The challenge comes in when you have to make comments on a lot of things going on in the country or giving examples in class on sensitive issues, especially where government have indicated their position, issues of that nature are spoken with a lot reservations” (interview-T2, 2018).

Political oriented topics

Another participant commented that:

“It is difficult for us teachers to teach sensitive topics freely, we are scared because you end up being cited that you belong to the opposition political parties and you are working against the government of the day” (Interview-T1, 2018).

Topics on Abuse of Human Rights by the Government

The study further revealed that topics that were bordering on the abuse of human rights by the government were deemed controversial and teachers rarely talked about them with the

learners. If they did, it was done while trading very carefully on them.

“Sometimes it is when teaching that pupils will ask questions on for instance topics such as the abuse of human rights or political violence, for such regardless of the perpetrators we do not mention names, neither names of political parties when explaining such topics you have limitations. You have to be very careful so that you do not offend pupils coming from homes where some members may be either in support of this political party or the other party. As such topics that appear sensitive we avoid them in most cases or just use one’s discretion” (interview-T5, 2018).

Current Affairs Topics

The study noted also that current affairs topics were seen as controversial especially if the issues were those that attracted discussions on the current events.. In most cases teachers did not engage effectively with the learners on account that they would be misconstrued either by their colleagues or the learners.

“ *We also need to remember that Civic Education involves discussing current affairs, as a teacher you may find yourself in situation where you may be commenting on things that might be before courts of law and can be cited for contempt of court*”(interview-T5, 2018).

“We really have to be very careful on how to pass the information because our pupils follow information on the news, and many other channels and this social media the challenge you face as a teacher is how to harmonise what you are teaching and what they know because they come with a lot of information with them to the classroom” (interview-T1, 2018).

“*How to explain these issues, you have to be very careful on what you say, you avoid mentioning certain things and instead you find ways to dodge answering sensitive questions from the pupils*”(interview-T3, 2018).

Topics on fundamental freedoms

Topics bordering on Fundamental freedoms and more so on the freedom of expression were viewed as critical on account that learners would be taught to challenge taken for granted position in the community. This made teachers to just touch on the surface whenever, they were teaching. The following verbatim below confirms the above point.

Yet another respondent stated that:

“*Teachers fail to hit the nail on the head especially when discussing sensitive issues that are of political in nature and also those that give learners any possibility to express themselves.*” (interview- T4, 2018).

IV. DISCUSSION OF FINDING

Despite the challenges teachers of Civic Education encounter when teaching controversial issues in schools, there are also a number of benefits. King (2009:215) observed the “widespread agreement concerning the social, academic and civic benefits gained from discussing controversial public issues within the classroom with learners”. Additionally, Hess, (2004) and Mhlauli, (2011) pointed out that when young people are accorded opportunities to discuss current issues and events in the classroom setting, they develop interest and are motivated to discuss politics, they have improved critical thinking, more civic knowledge, communication and deliberative skills are developed as learners enjoy discussing public affairs in and outside school.

In spite of notable benefits of applying the controversial issues through correct pedagogical practices, available literature indicates that, it is a rare phenomenon among many teachers of Civic Education in most schools (King, 2009; Abu-Hamdan and Khader, 2014; Oulton *et al*, 2004). Living in a world where human survival is at stake, ignoring or neglecting public issues is an unacceptable option (Walsh, 2013). In the 21st Century world driven by digital innovations, there is need to mold effective and responsible citizens who are well informed and able to participate in public affairs (Simui, Mwewa, Chota, Kakana, Mundende Lukali, Mwanza, Ndhlovu, Namangala, 2018; Simui, Namangala, Tambulukani and Ndhlovu, 2018 & Simui, Nyaruwata and Kasonde-Ngandu, 2017). Educating Our Future (1996) a Ministry of Education policy document in Zambia, contends that the education for young people in today’s world would be incomplete if teachers fail to prepare learners for citizenship and responsible living.

Implications and Conclusion

The findings of the study indicate that Civic Education has a number of topics that are deemed controversial and the strategies applied in most cases are very ordinary and cannot stimulate the minds of the learners to think beyond their immediate world. Additionally, the teaching of Civic Education is not anchored on the ideas of critical theory; hence raising learners who cannot think critically on a number of aspects in the community. This is coupled with the fear of victimisation and being charged with professional misconduct, lack of adequate training and curricula provision as well as the level of exposure to the many sources of information also posed a challenge to teachers. This is a clear indication that raising democratic citizens who are able to challenge injustice and question authority and do things with understanding is far-fetched in Zambia, because democracy should be practised first in a learning environment. Thereafter it becomes easy to replicate the same practices in the communities outside school because it would have become part and parcel of their lives.

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