

## **Teaching Controversial Issues in the classroom: A Study of Secondary Social Studies and Civic Teachers in Port Harcourt Metropolis, Rivers State, Nigeria**

**Njoku Chimezie (PhD), Anyanwu Jerome (PhD)**

Department of Curriculum Studies and Educational Technology

Faculty of Education, University of Port Harcourt, Nigeria

[chimezie.njoku@uniport.edu.ng](mailto:chimezie.njoku@uniport.edu.ng), [jerome.anyanwu@uniport.edu.ng](mailto:jerome.anyanwu@uniport.edu.ng)

### **Abstract**

The purpose of this study was among other things to explore how discussion of controversial issues skills are being implemented in Social Studies classrooms. The study was conducted to explore teachers' opinions, beliefs, and experiences through, classroom observation and questionnaires to reveal perceptions, opinions, implementation and challenges of controversial issues discussion in Social Studies and Civics classroom. Three research questions guided the study and descriptive survey design was adopted. All the 39 teachers teaching Social Studies and Civic Education from the total population of 686 teachers from the 15 secondary schools in Port Harcourt Metropolis participated in the study. A structured questionnaire tagged; "Teachers Opinion on controversial issues discussions in the classroom" was used to collect data for the study with a reliability index of 0.89, obtained using Pearson's Product Moment Correlation Coefficient Formular( $r$ ) The instrument was properly validated using face and content validation method. Percentages were used to answer the research questions. Some findings that emerged from the study are; Social Studies teachers are aware of the relevance of discussing controversial issues in the classroom, they believe that it will help the students acquire the required skill that will help them develop into a well-informed citizen, the teachers were reluctant about teaching controversial issues to students even when they recognized the importance of doing so, Lack of pedagogical knowledge is among the factors limiting teachers in developing and teaching controversial issues. The authors then suggested among other things that teachers should be supported and helped in every possible way that will help them practice and implement controversial issues discussion skills in their classrooms.

**Keywords:** Social Studies, teachers, controversial issues, Opinion and Implementation

## 1. Introduction

Teaching controversial issues is an efficient strategy supported by the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS). In May 2007, the NCSS announced its updated position on teaching controversial issues, emphasizing, controversial issues must be studied in the classroom without the guess that they are settled beforehand or the belief that there is only one right answer in matters of controversy or conflict. They emphasized that Social Studies teachers must handle such issues in a spirit of critical inquiry giving the students the opportunity to a variety of ideas, even if they are different from their own. Additionally, the NCSS recognized four skills and attitudes that the study of controversial issues should inculcate in the students:

1. The competence to study important social problems of the past or present and make informed decisions or conclusions;
2. The ability to apply critical reasoning and evidence-based evaluation in the study and analysis of vital issues and ideas; this involves the development of skills of critical analysis and evaluation in taking into account ideas, opinions, information, and sources of information;
3. The awareness that diverse viewpoints are very important and rational as a part of social discourse; and
4. The acknowledgement that reasonable compromise is often an important part of the democratic decision-making process. (NCSS 2007)

Again, Stradling (1984) grouped the rationale for the teaching of controversial issues into two: Product-based and Process-based.

Product-based; In product-based rational, issues are seen as vital in themselves, either because they are connected to the major social, political, economic or moral issues of our time, or they are precisely vital to student's lives. This is one of the major justifications of teaching controversial issues enumerated in the Crick Report (1998) in the UK which precisely stated that Controversial issues are vital in themselves and to skip discussing them is to leave a broad and important gap in the educational experience of young people. Stradling (1984)

Another important opinion is that it is vital to teach controversial issues to make up for the biased and complex ways in which some issues are presented in the media. Hence, Scarratt and Davison (2012) recognized that the emergent of mass media has to a great extent exposed

children to sensitive issues, which require disclosure and discussion. There are proliferation of media sources and outlets and young children have easy access to them.

Process-based; In process-based analysis, the core or wealth of controversial issues is seen as less vital than the learning skills or civic competences and attitudes which can be developed by engaging with them. These skills include; the ability to discuss controversial issues in a civil and productive manner, realizing that everyone's opinion matters and should be respected; good communication and interpersonal skills, as well as creative thinking and evaluation skills; more civic knowledge which will of course result to greater interest in discussing public affairs out of school.

Sadly, in our society today, students are usually not able to defend their own opinions and debate different issues through logical reasoning. One obvious reason for this deficit skill is the current 'internet society' we have. Disagreements by students are not usually based on rational and realistic reasoning but on information on Web sites or from their parents and close relatives that just reflect their own beliefs. Thus, Russel research in 2004 among others showed that, when dealing with political and social issues, students typically accept their parents' and close relatives' opinions and views as their own, without caring to have a deeper understanding of the issues at hand.

### **Purpose of the Study**

Having knowledge of teacher's attitudes and perceptions in relation to controversial issues has the potential to enhance teacher instruction, improve available reference materials, and also improve classroom learning. Therefore, the major purpose of this study is to examine Social Studies teacher, attitudes, perceptions and challenges of teaching controversial issues.

### **Research Questions**

More specifically, the purpose of this study is to attempt to answer the following Research questions:

- (1) What is teachers' attitude towards dealing with controversial Issues in the class?
- (2) How often and what strategy do they employ?
- (3) What challenges do they face?

## **2. Research Methodology**

Descriptive survey design was used for this study which sought to among other things explore Social Studies teachers attitudes towards discussing controversial issues in their class. The study was conducted to explore teachers' opinions, beliefs, and experiences through

questionnaires to reveal perceptions, opinions and challenges of discussing controversial issues in their classrooms. The population of the study consists of the 39 Social Studies teachers in the 15 secondary schools in Port Harcourt metropolis. A questionnaire titled “Teachers Opinion on controversial issues discussions in the classroom” was used to collect data for the study. It was designed by the researcher. It had two sections, A and B. Section A was designed to cover demographic variables such as; sex, educational qualification, years of experience, and so on, while section B was designed to determine their perception, teaching strategies and challenges. The researcher validated the questionnaire using face and content validity. The Pearson Product Moment Correlation (PPMC) was applied to determine the measure of accurate consistency of the questionnaire which gave a coefficient of 0.78. The researcher with the help of her colleagues and her students on Teaching Practice Exercise distributed the questionnaire to the respondents. A total of 39 questionnaires were distributed, 37 was returned but only 30 were filled properly. The Data obtained were analysed using percentages. The results are below.

Table1 What are Social Studies teacher’s perceptions and attitude towards teaching controversial issues in class.

| S/N | Statements  | SA  | A   | D   | SD  |
|-----|---|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| 1   | All issue should be included in the social studies classroom.   | 51% | 32% | 10% | 5%  |
| 2   | Students are required to study controversial issues.  | 44% | 31% | 20% | 10% |
| 3   | Students wouldn’t want to deal with bickering and controversy.  | 35% | 30% | 15% | 20% |
| 4   | The strength of our nation depends on general agreement among citizens on critical issues.                        | 49% | 35% | 9%  | 7%  |
| 5   | It is important to teach students how to deal with disagreement and controversy.                                  | 63% | 30% | 5%  | 2%  |
| 6   | It is only by investigating all sides of an issue that one can establish realistic and passionately held beliefs. | 59% | 31% | 7%  | 3%  |
| 7   | Dealing with controversial issues misinforms and  | 37% | 14% | 16% | 33% |

|    |   |     |     |    |    |
|----|---|-----|-----|----|----|
|    | frustrates students.  |     |     |    |    |
| 8  | Teachers should be exposed to efficient method for teaching about controversial issues          | 56% | 36% | 5% | 3% |
| 9  | Teachers should not teach about an issue that is controversial for their own safety             | 48% | 47% | 2% | 3% |
| 10 | It is sometimes better to avoid the contention within an issue and just teach the simple facts. | 55% | 36% | 5% | 4% |
|    |   |     |     |    |    |

*Modified version of Diveki, R (2018)*

Table 2 How often do they incorporate controversial Issues discussion? what teaching strategies/approaches do they use? Scale, 1=Never, 2= 1-2times a term, 3=3-4times a term, 4=5times and above

| S/N | Statement  | Never    | 1-2   | 3-4    | 5 and above |
|-----|--|----------|-------|--------|-------------|
| 1   | How frequent do you discuss controversial issues in your class | 53%      | 41%   | 5%     | 1%          |
|     |  |          |       |        |             |
|     | Which of these teaching roles/ strategies do you use for CI    | Not sure | Never | Rarely | Always      |
| 1   | De-personalizing strategy                                      | 6%       | 54%   | 40%    | 0%          |
| 2   | Structured discussion format                                   | 5%       | 52%   | 43%    | 0%          |
| 3   | Establishment of ground rules                                  | 1%       | 43%   | 45%    | 0%          |
| 4   | Neutral Chairperson  | 0%       | 50%   | 48%    | 2%          |
| 5   | Balanced Approach  | 3%       | 47%   | 49%    | 1%          |
| 6   | Devil's Advocate   | 7%       | 31%   | 62%    | 0%          |
| 7   | Stated Commitment  | 39%      | 41%   | 10%    | 0%          |

*Modified version of Diveki, R (2018)*

Table 3 What are their challenges in discussing controversial Issues in their classrooms

| S/N | Statements  | SA  | A   | D   | SD  |
|-----|---|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| 1   | I discuss controversial Issues in my class if my students will be interested in the topic | 51% | 40% | 6%  | 3%  |
| 2   | I discuss controversial issues only if I am interested in the topic                       | 7%  | 13% | 31% | 49% |
| 3   | How other teachers manage controversial issues in their classes is important to me        | 53% | 18% | 20% | 9%  |
| 4   | I can handle any fracas that arise from controversial issues discussions                  | 9%  | 11% | 32% | 48% |
| 5   | Resources for handling controversial Issues are accessible to me                          | 3%  | 8%  | 31% | 58% |
| 6   | I engage in controversial issues even when it is sensitive                                | 3%  | 5%  | 35% | 57% |
| 7   | Social Studies texts deal adequately with controversial issues.                           | 4%  | 6%  | 13% | 77% |
| 8   | There are forbidden topics I cannot discuss with students                                 | 69% | 25% | 2%  | 4%  |
|     |   |     |     |     |     |

*Modified version of Diveki, R (2018)*

### 3. Discussion of Findings

The findings were discussed based on the three research questions that guided the study, these findings emerged from the teacher questionnaire on discussing controversial Issues in the classroom.

The first two questions in table which sought to get information on the teacher's opinion on if all issues should be discussed and whether they believe students should study controversial Issues showed related responses, 83% and 85% of the teachers strongly agree or agree to the statements. This shows strong support for controversial Issues discussions in the class). This supports the recent awakening of the importance of schools as well as teachers dealing with these issues. An example is, the Council of Europe created a professional development

programme for teachers to support and promote the teaching of controversial issues in schools in Europe (Council of Europe, 2015).

A striking relationship is obvious between the teachers' responses on Statement 1 and 2 of table 1 and those to statement 9: "Teachers should not teach controversial issues for their own safety." 95% of the teachers were in agreement with this statement, only 10% disagreed. This shows that teachers believe that teaching controversial issues is important as long as it does not put their careers and their relationship with their students and the community in jeopardy. The strong support for teaching controversial issues seen in the teachers' responses to 1 and 2 statements is also expressed by their responses to statements 4 and 6: "The strength of a nation depends on consensus among citizens about its most important issues" and "It is only by investigating all sides of an issue that a person can develop rational and deeply held convictions." Well over 90% of the teachers were in agreement with these statements. This shows that the teachers have strong belief in the importance of knowing and discussing controversial issues.

Surprisingly in statement 10, that sort information on if it is better to just teach the bare facts, the teachers responded in an equal distribution, half of the teachers agreed while the other half disagreed. This shows that half of the teachers' response is in conflict with their belief about controversial issues. Though it is worthy of note that they also agreed to discuss controversial issues as long as it will not affect their career.

The teachers' response to statement 3 that inquire to understand how they agree to the statement that student wouldn't want to deal with controversial issues shows that 75% of the teachers agreed with this statement, but 25% disagreed. It appears that many teachers believe students want to deal with controversial issues since this belief is held by the majority. Only 15% of the teacher strongly agree. This result shows the divergence in the teachers' optimistic view of the relevance of students understanding of controversial issues and their realistic opinion on the challenges of teaching them to the students.

The statement in 5 and 7; It is important to teach students how to deal with controversy and controversial issues confuses and frustrates students shows divergent views. 42% agrees that it will misinform students while 35% disagrees, 9% strongly agree and 16% strongly disagree, then statement 5, if it is important to teach controversial issues, majority of them responded positively with only 7% disagreeing but none of them strongly disagreed. These shows that the teachers believe that it is beneficial to teach controversial issues.

Majority of the teachers agree that they should be trained on effective teaching method for teaching controversial issues, this reveals teachers' perception of their ability to effectively teach controversial issues. It appears that teachers are unsure of their ability to teach controversial issues.

On the frequency of the teaching controversial issues, majority of the do not (53%) while 41% of them said only once or twice in a term. It is surprising to discover that 82% of the teachers make use of lecture teaching approach. Earlier research like, Anker & von der Lippe, (2018); Pollak, Segal, Lefstein, & Meshulam, (2018) has shown that teachers find teaching controversial issues in their classrooms challenging and because of that sometimes avoid them. In addition, Kahne, J., Westheimer, J., & Rogers, B. (2000) surveyed eighth- and tenth-grade social studies classes and discovered that there is almost complete absence of opportunities for students to discuss and analyse controversial social issues.

There is over whelming negative response toward textbooks as an effective instructional resource for controversial issues and resources being available for them to handle controversial issues. 90% of teachers responded negatively to statement 7 and 87% to statement 5. This large percentage of negative responses may come from the fact that many textbooks are not up-to-date on relevant controversial issues or the fact that students rely more on the Internet for information.

#### **4. Conclusion and Recommendation**

The data from the teachers show that Social Studies teachers are aware of the relevance of discussing controversial issues in the classroom. They believe that it will help the students acquire the required skill that will help them develop into a well-informed citizen. The teachers were reluctant about teaching controversial issues to students, even when they recognized the importance of doing so. Lack of pedagogical knowledge is the major factor that limit teachers in developing and teaching controversial issues.

Teachers' responses concerning pedagogy confirmed this concern, with a meaningful percentage not sure of their ability to effectively teach controversial issues, this concern is also evident on their response on the ability of textbooks and other teaching resources to assist in teaching controversial issues. In summary, Social Studies teachers understood the relevance of discussing controversial issues with their students but the concern is the limitations, the most critical being their teaching effectiveness.



Therefore, since teacher professional development programs improve teachers' understanding and advancement, and since controversial issues is a very important component of Social Studies, teachers should be encouraged in every way possible that will help them foster these skills in their students.

It is worth mentioning that this study was limited to only one local government area of Rivers State Nigeria with limited number of schools and the data for the study was collected at one time in a qualitative strand so one should exercise cautious when applying the results to teachers in general.

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