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"I will not mention controversial issues unless they are in the textbook": An exploration of curriculum instructional gatekeeping in Taiwan

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ABSTRACT

We conducted this study in order to understand the extent to which Taiwanese social studies teachers are prepared to grapple with controversial issues in their classrooms. To do so, we employed a curricular-instructional gatekeeping framework to make meaning of teacher decisions and the contexts in which they work. We conducted semi-structured interviews with 18 preservice teachers and five university professors of teacher education in Taiwan. The findings suggest that writ large, *social studies education* in Taiwan is largely *social science education* and within this context, preservice teachers have variable conceptualizations of controversial issues which are shaped by a wide variety of external forces that ultimately serve to undermine enactment of discussion.

1. Introduction

Controversial issues are integral to democratic citizenship education (Hess, 2008, 2009; Hunt & Metcalf, 1968; Misco, 2009, 2016; Ochoa-Becker, 2007; Parker, 2012). Student uncoverage of controversial issues constitutes a normative anchor within citizenship education curriculum and the degree to which they are subjected to reflection has profound implications for the vibrancy of a democracy. Because controversial issues change over time, as personal narratives are interpreted and mediated with local knowledge to create new knowledge (Levinson, 2008), context is a critical lever for how an issue is filtered, rendered, or avoided.

Controversial issues are those where "significant numbers of people argue about them without reaching a conclusion" typically based within value judgments located within individuals and their moral and ethical principles (Oulton, Dillon, & Grace, 2004, p. 411). We can think of controversial issues as those without a fixed or universally held point of view that divide society and have conflicting explanations and solutions (Crick, 1998). Simply put, they are "reasonable disagreements" (Levinson, 2008, p. 1217) that have two legitimate opposing viewpoints (Stoddard, 2009), where people are divided and have different opinions of "pertinacity and vehemence" (Thorndike, 1937, p. 1). Controversial issues involve a connection of the past, present, future, and are saturated with normativity, morality, and elements of justice and injustice (Misco & DeGroof, 2014).

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Of the numerous variables influencing the discussion of controversial issues, a key determinant is the extent to which the classroom enjoys an "open climate" where students are encouraged to examine competing views of controversial public issues. But classroom climate, while important for a flow of diverse ideas among teachers and peers (Hahn, 1998), is not a panacea. Teachers are not the sole condition of climate as student perception of peers has such a profound influence leading to self-censure (Hess, 2002; King, 2009). Forces external to the teacher, pointing to context, are significant variables where the "wider cultural milieu also mediates the effects of classroom climate" (Hahn & Tocci, 1990, p. 358) and an intractable web of "social, cultural, and historical relations in which students themselves are situated" (King, 2009, p. 240). In some communities, issues simply take on more controversy if they are perceived as "inappropriate for the curriculum or because there is pressure to deal with only one perspective on an issue" (Misco & DeGroof, 2014; Hess, 2002, p. 14). Similar to other free and liberal democracies, controversial issue education is central to Taiwan's citizenship education.

Taiwanese context

As a democratic state with a complicated political, social, and historical juxtaposition with neighboring mainland China, Taiwan's citizenship and social studies education are deserving of international attention. Taiwan's transition from authoritarianism to democracy is still unfolding within education, including a nascent shift from centralized to localized and deregulated policies. From 1949 to 1987, the Kuomintang-led (KMT) Taiwanese government and affiliated Ministry of Education were the sole fountainheads for determining what knowledge is of most worth and the transmission of privileged traditional values systems within education, as well as the suppressing source of alternative values and sources of knowledge. The KMT government politicized education with the primary goal of maintaining "strong historical ties to the Chinese mainland as the rationale for recovering China from the communist party" (Law, 2004, p. 267). Even after the lifting of martial law in 1987, Taiwan's educational system has endured criticism for maintaining this focus and "inflexibility and for failing to address the particular needs of Taiwan's rapidly changing society" (Liu & Doong, 2002, p. 26).

Democracy, both as a form of government and a method of conjoint living, does not "suddenly emerge" (Lu & Hung, 1999, p. 253) and it cannot be achieved with legislative fiat. Rather, as Taiwan continually works to become more democratic, the limited vibrancy of its democratic citizenship education has become quite salient. Within this broader context, history as taught within schools has endured fierce acrimony and reveals political orientations aligned with differing national identities which informs divergent views for Taiwan's future (Sung & Yang, 2009). Yet, Taiwan has also enjoyed a paradigmatic transition away from uniform structures in terms of its capacity to embrace diversity in all of its forms. This ongoing dialectical tension, as well as the interplay of traditional/modern and *a priori*/*a posteriori* epistemological positions, are found throughout all corners of society and citizenship education is no exception.

The Taiwanese context is informed by a history of colonial influence. Since the 16th Century, Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch, and the English, as well as the Hang and Qing dynasties (1644–1911) and the Japanese (1895–1945) have given rise to multiple and overlapping Taiwanese identities (Lee, 2004). Similar to Japanese colonial education efforts during their rule, the KMT "suppressed local concerns" whereby teaching Taiwanese history prior to 1949 was banned, geography and history focused on mainland China, and "delocalization" kept students from developing local identities (Law, 2004, p. 260–261). Taiwan's four main ethnic groups include indigenous Taiwanese, the Hakka from Guangdong Province, the Southern Min from Fujian Province, and mainland Chinese associated with the KMT retreat in 1949 (Lee, 2004). With political victories by the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) and eight years of their rule, a Taiwan-centered narrative, which has challenged the China-centered narrative, has emerged (Sung & Yang, 2009). This shift has led to curricular changes with a clear Taiwanese orientation, as evinced in the introduction of a mandatory Taiwanese history course and a focus on "heroes of the island" rather than notions of mainland "motherland" (Sung & Yang, 2009, p. 180), as well as identity formation as separate and distinct from mainland China (Law, 2004). Although Taiwan has enjoyed controversial discussions about national identity (Liu & Doong, 2002) and the free-release of previously suppressed languages and dialects, it still struggles to properly respond to the "cultural, ethnic, and national identities of the people while also balancing global and local, and its relationship with China (Lee, 2004, p. 578).

Identity and ideology, as it relates to mainland China, ultimately coalesces around three main positions: pro-unification, status quo, and pro-independence. These stances very much inform political affiliations, as well as conceptions of history (Sung & Yang, 2009). Losing membership in the UN and World Health Organization negated some perceptions of nationhood (Law, 2004) and some suggest Taiwan suffers from an "orphan complex" that is the "cultural essence of the Taiwanese identity," ell as entrenched "victimhood" manifesting as sinophobia and xenophobia (Baik, 2010, p. 595). From this perspective, unification is a taboo topic and the cross-strait issue is not about unification or independence, but rather Taiwan's trajectory toward post-imperialism and self-determination (Baik, 2010).

Within this broader context, citizenship education curriculum has enjoyed a shift to competencies rather than values, and a focus on developing democratic citizens, including an emphasis on students being able to explore, compare, analyze, measure, and evaluate. Yet, a noticeable schism exists between education for democracy in principle and in practice (Lu & Hung, 1999; Liu & Doong, 2002). The status of recent approaches to citizenship education helps explain this disconnect, as do other forces of the milieu, including Confucianism. Although the dialectal development of Taiwanese citizenship education would ideally involve the "grafting" of traditional and modern approaches and values (Lu & Hung, 1999, p. 255), Confucian traditions can also undermine curricular and instructional attention to controversial issue instruction.

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