



High school teachers' attitudes and reported behaviors towards controversial issues



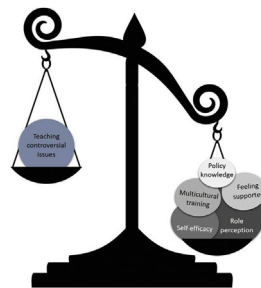
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HIGHLIGHTS

- 30% of teachers know the official policy regarding political discussions in class.
- Teachers who feel supported conduct more discussions of controversial topics.
- Teachers' who view civic education as part of their role report more discussions.
- Teachers' self-efficacy predict more discussions in class.
- Teachers who undergo multicultural training discuss controversial topics more.

GRAPHICAL ABSTRACT



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1. Introduction

School is the ideal location for students to develop their ability to cope with controversial topics and to expose them to the democratic process (Parker, 2012; Tannebaum, 2013). However, teachers are faced with a multitude of dilemmas when introducing controversial topics in the classroom despite its importance. Oulton, Day, Dillon, and Grace (2004) suggested that teachers felt ill-equipped to present such topics in the classroom and that the pedagogy for doing that is in itself controversial. Moore (2012) has

shown that many teachers hesitate to discuss controversial topics, and several studies have shown that such discussions are seldom held (Nystrand, Gamoran, & Carbonaro, 1998; Rossi, 2006). Bekerman (2016) pointed to teachers' status within the sociopolitical context, e.g., Israeli teachers' lack of agency within the context of the nation state. The difficulty teachers face around controversial topics is an important issue for teacher training worldwide and particularly in Israel. In this study, we explored high school teachers' attitudes about conducting class discussions on the relationship between Jews and Arabs in Israel. This study may afford an opportunity to examine the factors that are associated with teachers' willingness to engage in such discussions in the Israeli context, and to draw general conclusions regarding teacher training and practices.

1.1. Handling controversial issues in the classroom

In the context of the classroom, a controversial issue is one that relates to phenomena on which social opinions are divided, whereby different groups in society offer distinct interpretations and solutions (Lieb, 1998). In this context, there has been extensive research about the importance of discussions of Controversial Political Issues (CPI) in the classroom. Research has shown that discussions of CPI promote democratic values (Hess, 2009), content

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comprehension (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005), interest in politics (McAvoy & Hess, 2013), tolerance for minorities (Bekerman & Cohen, 2017) and active citizenship (Lemish, 2003; Lin, Lawrence, Snow, & Taylor, 2016).

Nonetheless, teachers find it difficult to discuss CPI, and the more current the topic, the more difficult it is, because it is difficult to anticipate the outcomes of such a discussion and because students are bound to come up with various interpretations and prejudices (Barton & McCully, 2007). Kelly (1986) presented four types of perceptions regarding teachers' role in handling controversial issues in the classroom to demonstrate: 1. Complete neutrality – teachers make sure not to touch on sensitive topics during class discussions; 2. Partial neutrality – the teacher presents all sides without indicating his or her own attitude; 3. Total one-sidedness – the teacher presents a specific attitude on the topic as if it were the single and only truth (which usually reflects the teacher's own opinion on the matter), without holding a discussion or providing room for contradictory opinions; 4. Partial one-sidedness – the teacher presents the students with numerous viewpoints, while clarifying and elaborating his or her own attitude. The study by Lieb (1998) reviewed the advantages and disadvantages of each of these approaches and determined that no single one could be considered better than the other. Rather, the author claimed that the best option should be determined taking into consideration the specific students in the class and the specific issue of controversy.

Kohlberg (1984), in addition to his renowned work on children's moral development, focused on the issue of moral education in general and on the importance of civic studies in particular. He argued that education, and especially civic studies, constitutes an important means for nurturing people's moral development. Systematic intervention by the teacher, in the form of open discussions of moral dilemmas, is likely to promote the moral development of students. Kohlberg (1976) addressed the subject of the American Constitution in civics classes in the US. He considered the Constitution a moral document in the post-conventional stage, because it dealt with the existence of inalienable basic and universal rights. Kohlberg's student, Blatt (1969), studied the use of class discussions of hypothetical moral issues as an educational instrument for moral development. His main finding was that students who participated in classroom discussions on various dilemmas demonstrated advanced thinking skills and advanced moral development in comparison with students who did not. These findings coincide with Tannebaum (2013) and Parker (2012) recommendations to use civics studies, and specifically discussions of dilemmas, to promote students' civic awareness and prepare them for a democratic life.

1.2. Teachers' sense of self-efficacy and cultural competence

In most Western countries, students increasingly come from various cultural and ethnic backgrounds, and teachers still come from relatively homogeneous backgrounds; hence, the gap between teachers and students seems to be ever-increasing (Denslow, 2000). Teachers who work with heterogeneous populations encounter various challenges, which oblige them to contend with educational, social, and psychological issues. It has been shown that teachers lack the knowledge, skills, and motivation needed to successfully cope with such challenges (Horenczyk & Tatar, 2003). Moreover, even in cases when professionals work with a younger generation from a similar non-Western background, they can expect to encounter conflict, due to the fact that their professional training is itself rooted in Western culture (Zuaby, 2015).

Cultural competence is part of teachers' self-efficacy and has been explored in several studies (e.g., Siwatu, 2007). For example, in a study of 34 pre-service teachers, Siwatu (2011) found that their

culturally responsive teaching self-efficacy appraisals were lower when they were exposed to a more multicultural urban school than when they were exposed to a suburban school. Teachers who participated in multicultural service learning (MSL) in Canada, Australia, Singapore and Israel, exhibited higher awareness of cultural bias, understanding of social inequality and more commitment to teach diverse students (Chang, Anagnostopoulos, & Omae, 2011).

In an ideal world, teachers would have the opportunity in the course of their training to develop awareness of their unique and personal cultural perspective and of the principles that guide their expectations, beliefs, and behaviors (Denslow, 2000). Teachers would be able to acquire cultural competence, i.e., the ability to function in a multicultural environment and to communicate with people whose backgrounds were different from their own. This competence would improve with experience, as individuals encounter more people from various backgrounds and acquire knowledge about the history and culture of different minority groups. In contrast to the ideal, the reality of teacher training is that in many cases, pre-service teachers are not sufficiently exposed to people from various backgrounds and cultures, nor are they trained in the course of their studies to work in a multicultural environment (Chisholm, 1994). Teacher's self-efficacy and cultural competence are also related to teachers' role perception which will be reviewed next.

1.3. Teachers' role perception

Professional identity is defined as a sense of belonging and identification with one's profession. Teachers' professional identity is determined not only by their own perceptions, but also by the way others perceive the profession (Tickle, 1999). Both pre-service and in-service teachers' role perceptions undergo shifts and changes in the course of their professional development (Kozminsky & Klavir, 2010). Teachers' professional beliefs and worldviews are pivotal to their role perception, and have a major effect on the scope of their professional work (Kozminsky & Klavir, 2010).

The discussion of the concept of teachers' professional identity and the attempt to define its components has led many researchers to conclude that, rather than a single identity, professional identity is a complex construct, composed of various sub-identities (Bates, Swennen, & Jones, 2014). Role perception in the field of education is anchored in a particular time and place. The ongoing professional identity construction process is driven by changes in teachers' knowledge, the accumulation of professional experience, and by the constant and dynamic encounter between their ideals, knowledge, and experiences (Laron & Shkedi, 2006).

The numerous policy changes and educational reforms, to which teachers in the 21st century are exposed, create ongoing shifts in educators' role perception. These shifts have a detrimental effect on their commitment to teaching and on various emotional aspects, such as their degree of motivation, self-efficacy, job satisfaction, and sense of inner and personal coherence (Kozminsky & Klavir, 2010).

The present study examines teachers' handling of controversial issues within the context of Israeli society and the Israeli-Arab conflict. While we argue that this example has implications to the challenges teachers face in any country, we will now explore some unique features of the Israeli context.

1.4. The socio-political context and related teachers' practices in Israel

Israeli society is composed of nationally and socially competing

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