Balance within Limits: Examining Preservice Teachers' Approaches to Controversial Issues

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Short Abstract

We live in a time of increasing political polarization. This makes it important for teachers to be able to aptly navigate controversial issues within the classroom. This mixed-methods study examines the stances of preservice teachers regarding the limits of legitimate positions for controversial classroom discussions. The research questions focus on identifying and understanding the range of strategies preservice teachers anticipate adopting when confronted with controversial issues as well as the theoretical and practical implications of these stances for democratic education. As a normative approach to teacher education, we propose a strategy of "reflective balancing" by avoiding false equivalences between fundamentally unequal positions while maintaining a space for conflict and controversy where it is fruitful.

Objectives

To Develop and Validate a Questionnaire Instrument: Our first objective is to conceptualize and validate a standardized instrument that can detect preservice teachers' ideas about handling controversial discussions. This tool is intended to assist in the broader understanding and training of teachers regarding controversial issues.

To Explore Preservice Teachers' Stances on Controversial Issues in the Classroom: The study aims to unveil the array of approaches that future educators anticipate adopting in response to controversial topics in their classrooms. Through two convenience survey samples of 162 and 90 German preservice teachers and qualitative interviews with a subset, our study seeks to uncover the nuanced strategies ranging from avoidance to the emerging trend of committed balancing.

To Theorize 'Reflective Balancing': The study proposes and explores the concept of committed balancing, a method of addressing controversial issues that acknowledges the necessity of weighing different viewpoints while remaining committed to democratic and epistemic values.

Theoretical Framework

This study situates itself within the discourse of civic and citizenship education, particularly focusing on how teachers handle controversial issues in the classroom, a task critical to the practice of deliberative democracy as conceptualized by Gutmann & Thompson (2004) and, especially in educational contexts, Hess & McAvoy (2015). Prior research suggests that teachers, both novice and experienced, frequently hesitate to engage with controversial issues in the classroom. This reluctance may be particularly pronounced among younger

educators, who often attribute their avoidance to a lack of confidence and preparedness for addressing these challenging topics (Bickmore & Parker, 2014; Gindi et al., 2021; Nganga et al., 2020). Empirical insights (Flensner, 2020; Pollak et al., 2017; Oberle et al., 2018) highlight the varied and often problematic strategies and attitudes teachers exhibit towards controversial discussions, reflecting a broader need to understand how preservice teachers approach these complex topics. In this context, our study builds upon Hess' (2004) typology of teacher strategies for controversial issues—avoidance, denial, privileging one side, and balancing—which are reassessed under the proposed model of 'reflective balancing.' This approach is particularly pertinent in light of the challenges of false balancing and the need for epistemic integrity in educational contexts (Barzilai & Chinn, 2018; Leiviskä, 2023).

To discuss questions surrounding the limits to classroom controversy, the study further engages with the debate around possible criteria for teaching about such issues in school contexts (Hand, 2008; Yacek, 2018; Drerup, 2021). Within this debate the teaching of controversial issues is often distinguished in 'directive' and 'non-directive' styles. In the attempt to distinguish issues that should be discussed in a controversial, non-directive fashion from those that require more active teacher steering, several criteria are often discussed – particularly the behavioral, political, and epistemic criteria. These three respectively relate to a) the degree of controversy in wider society, b) the compatibility with liberal-democratic norms, and c) rational, factual justification. This debate directly informs our methodological approach to develop a standardized way of capturing different stances towards these issues.

Methodology, Methods, Research Instruments or Sources Used

Participants and Procedure

Our study utilized a two-phase data collection approach. Initially, from October 2021 to February 2022, 162 students (MAge = 25.7; 49.4% female, 40.1% male, 10.5% other or not answered) enrolled in German teacher education programs completed a questionnaire as part of their coursework, focusing on the topics and positions they would discuss in a non-directive fashion. A follow-up survey in April 2022 involved 90 additional students from similar programs (MAge = 24.9; 56.7% female, 33.3% male, 6.6% other, 3.3% not answered). Participants ranged in their focus from social sciences to a variety of subjects, with the majority preparing to teach at middle or high school levels. Additionally, 27 students (MAge = 26.6; 44.4% female, 51.9% male, 3.7% other) from the initial cohort were interviewed by extensively briefed student assistants to gain deeper insights into their stances on handling controversial and discriminatory views in the classroom. These semi-structured interviews were aligned with the questionnaire responses through unique codes, ensuring anonymity. We used the results of our quantitative data analysis to select interviews with contrasting questionnaire response patterns for analysis. In total, we selected five cases from the 27 transcripts.

Questionnaire Development

The questionnaire was designed to map behavioral, political, and epistemic criteria (see above; BC, PC, and EC) for discussing controversial issues. Twelve statements, four for each criterion with equal numbers of exclusionary and inclusionary items, were presented for

participants to rate on a six-point Likert scale. We conceived of the three criteria as complementary criteria, each of which excluded different kinds of positions from the space of acceptable controversial debate. The questionnaire aimed to explore how teachers decide what issues are suitable for non-directive, multi-perspective classroom discussion.

Data Cleaning and Analysis

Inconsistent responses and missing data led to the exclusion of a few cases from both datasets. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was applied to both sets of questionnaire data to test and validate the latent factor structure of BC, PC, and EC. The analysis adhered to standard assumptions like multivariate normality and absence of multicollinearity. For a nuanced understanding, interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was used to analyze selected interviews, focusing on the participants' experiences and perceptions of controversial issues in the educational context. This mixed-methods approach aimed to provide both a broad quantitative overview and in-depth qualitative insights into preservice teachers' stances on controversy.
Conclusions, Expected Outcomes or Findings
Quantitative Results

Descriptively, we saw notable openness (10-20%) towards discussing extremist and anti-scientific perspectives in a non-directive way. CFA and internal consistency measures indicated an inadequate model fit for the three separate latent factors. After reorganizing the items and merging PC and EC into a single factor, the model showed adequate measures ($\chi 2$ (13) = 222.88, p = .04, TLI = .93, CFI = .96, RMSEA = .07, SRMR = .05, $\alpha1$ = .67, $\alpha2$ = .75). The two-factor structure was further validated with a second data set ($\chi 2$ (26) = 30.84, p = .23, TLI = .96, CFI = .97, RMSEA = .05, SRMR = .084, $\alpha1$ = .73, $\alpha2$ = .80).

Qualitative Results

Two 'open' participants saw their roles as teachers as those of neutral providers of information. One of the two represented a strongly permissive view, valuing freedom of opinion and non-selectivity. Two other participants with more restrictive responses were highly heterogenous, with one seeing herself as a fighter against misinformation, and the other one tending towards risk-aversion out of fear of marginalizing individual students. All four participants showed different forms of avoidance, denial, or privileging in their approaches to classroom controversy. One more participant, whose responses varied on the two factors, outlined a selective balance based on epistemic and normative grounds while maintaining openness to marginal issues.

Interpretation

The quantitative results indicated an overlap between political and epistemic criteria in preservice teachers' stances. The interviews showed varied motivations for the questionnaire responses. Some preservice teachers showed tendencies towards avoidance or denial strategies; however, we saw different degrees of reflectivity around possible criteria and thus potential for professional growth. In our discussion, we outline how 'reflective balancing' can be understood as the creation of a space for controversy within epistemic and political-normative boundaries.