Exploring Controversial Issues in the Primary Social Studies Classroom

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Abstract

In order to better prepare students to handle the complexities of the 21ˢᵗ century world, it is imperative that primary Social Studies educators in Singapore grow to become comfortable with the uncomfortable – carving out space for children to critically and meaningfully engage in educative controversial discussions. This article explores the merits of introducing controversy in the classroom and demonstrates how an affective instructional approach in the controversial issues literature, known as constructive conflict talk, can be used to prepare young learners to display respect, imagination and inventiveness when addressing actual conflicts in their lives.

Introduction

The curriculum is an inextricable part of what prolific author and cultural critic Raymond Williams refers to as the "selective tradition" of schooling (Williams, 1977). What this means is that through the very selection of what is taught in school, only certain knowledge and perspectives will become official and legitimised, while others end up minimised or excluded (Luke, 1994; Versfeld, 2005). Against this backdrop, all educators invariably end up selecting for or against the various competing beliefs and interest groups situated within society.

Yet, the rise of new technologies in today's global landscape has disrupted the status quo, providing many students unfettered access to alternative views across a spectrum of controversies that surround us – climate change, economic inequality, immigration, racism and how best to address them. It is becoming increasingly difficult for individuals, groups and especially schools to assert that they have sole custody and guardianship of the truth (Apple, 2009).

Given this context, there are pertinent questions that all Social Studies educators should consider. What role should schools play in addressing these powerful concerns of today's youth? What type of controversial issues should teachers introduce in the classroom? Should teachers act as neutral facilitators or share their personal stance on these matters? Last but not least, what and whose knowledge should teachers teach?

Definition of Controversial Issues

Controversial or sensitive educational issues have been defined in various ways over the years. In one understanding, Crick (1998) highlights controversy as "an issue about which there is no one fixed universally held point of view" (p. 56). The discussion of such issues serve to "arouse strong feelings and divide communities and society," which would then lead to the creation of explanations and solutions steeped in these alternative beliefs and values (Kerr & Huddleston, 2015, p. 13). This definition of controversial issues presumes that the discussion of divisive

ideas benefits society (e.g., enhances democratic thinking, promotes tolerance for diverse perspectives and prepares students to engage in civil discourse) even if it could invite suspicion, scrutiny or even anger from parents, school administrators and the wider public (Hess, 2004).

In a second understanding, the study of controversial issues refers to the use of a range of pedagogical strategies that tap on the social scientific method or historical method, requiring students to gather data from multiple and competing views and evaluate the soundness and validity of the data, before deriving a well-reasoned conclusion supported by evidence (Ho, McAvoy, Hess, & Gibbs, 2017). This approach focuses on developing capacities, such as criticality and data-based argumentation, to nurture effective citizens capable of analysing competing viewpoints before deciding for themselves what they think or believe (Lockwood, 1996). Within this context, controversial issues in Social Studies generally take on two broad forms:

1. **Empirical:** Was it necessary to drop the atomic bombs to end the war with Japan?
2. **Value Judgment:** Should Singapore abolish the death penalty?

Although this article seeks to distinguish between issues raised during disciplined inquiry from those arising from the examination of values, these two domains are more often than not inextricably intertwined.

It is also worthwhile at this juncture to clarify that controversial issues are deemed controversial because they are often underpinned by uncomfortable ideas related to equity, rights, power and privilege (Cooper & Portelli, 2012). The goal in addressing controversial issues in the Social Studies classroom is not to search for universal truth or achieve consensus, but to develop tolerance and understanding for different perspectives so as to enable students to eventually contribute to civil society peacebuilding (Avery, 2002).

Controversial Issues in School

There is good evidence to support the claim that discussing controversial issues promotes democratic thinking and positive citizenship outcomes in student-citizens. Research has found that exposure to polemical discussions develops understandings of justice and the common good, essential civic competencies, as well as communicative virtues such as listening to understand, disagreeing respectfully, the willingness to suspend judgment and the humility to change one's position in light of new information (Burbules & Rice, 1991; Hess, 2004; Young, 1996).

There is also evidence to suggest that discussing controversial issues in school significantly influences students' civic behaviour after they graduate. A study by Andolina, Jenkins, Keeter and Zukin (2002) reported that students who discussed conflictual issues in school were more likely to demonstrate their desire for economic and social justice through tangible actions, like volunteering for the community and participating in online petitions and consumer boycotts.

Despite significant educational and societal benefits, controversial issues often receive little attention in schools due to institutional and pedagogical constraints faced by teachers (Carrington & Troyna, 1988; Zimmerman & Robertson, 2017). The socio-political milieu within which schools operate invariably shapes what is deemed as appropriate and inappropriate, leaving teachers with many disincentives, including the fear of breaking laws or facing censure from peers, superiors and the

general public (McCully, 2006; Phillips, 2008). In addition, mandated content coverage for the purpose of testing, a lack of pedagogical confidence and the tendency to over-emphasise conflict avoidance in the name of promoting safe and caring learning spaces are some other reasons why controversial issues are rarely broached in schools (Hess, 2002; Ho, 2017; Houser, 1996).

Pedagogical Approaches to Teaching Controversial Issues

Recent pedagogical approaches to teaching controversial issues in Social Studies have largely focused on the use of discussion to help students better understand the characteristics of an ideal democracy and the role citizens play in the political process (Ho, McAvoy, Hess, & Gibbs, 2017). This section will address different discussion-based instructional approaches to teaching controversial issues, namely the argumentative design and an alternative affective approach more suited for primary school students.

Advocates of argumentative approaches, such as the Structured Academic Controversy (SAC) model, draw on the theory of constructive controversy. The theory suggests that conceptual disequilibrium and uncertainty brought about by the exposure to alternative views motivates epistemic curiosity, which in turn results in an active search for more information, more experiences and a more adequate reasoning process to resolve uncertainty (Johnson, 2015). Implementing the constructive controversy procedure in the classroom involves (a) researching and investigating a position, (b) supporting it, (c) rebutting opposing argumentation while defending one's own position and (d) reversing perspectives, before (e) synthesising the various positions to create a joint position that all sides can collectively agree on (Johnson & Johnson, 2012).

On the other end of the spectrum, critics of argumentative design contend that the approach is too rationalistic, as students are expected to clinically weigh the evidence for and against opposing positions while engaging in dispassionate forms of communication. They argue that for students to find meaning and value in classroom conversations about conflictual issues, educators must move beyond students' rational cognition and grapple with their imaginative and emotional responses (Barton & McCully, 2007; Smith & Fairman, 2005). Against this backdrop, Bickmore and Parker (2014) offer an alternative approach known as constructive conflict talk. This relatively under-researched instructional method in the controversial issues literature focuses on developing norms and relationships for respectful non-violent interactions as well as understanding the perspectives held by diverse stakeholders in the community. Under this paradigm, inclusive opportunities for all students are provided to teach them how to voice their own views, consider alternative perspectives, understand how these perspectives matter to others and participate in restorative peacemaking circle dialogue in preparation for collective problem-solving (Parker, 2010; Bickmore & Parker, 2014).

Another key feature of conflict dialogue education is the emphasis on emotional and imaginative engagement on top of the development of rational cognition (e.g., Barton & McCully, 2005; Zembylas & Kambani, 2012). This is often achieved by tapping on the multiplicity of perspectives of characters found in fictional literature and historical narratives, to provide opportunities for students to discuss diverse frames of reference and consider questions of justice through dramatic role-play and

inclusive peacemaking circles (McCall, 2004; McCully, 2006). It is believed that when students are given such opportunities to imaginatively consider and perform roles other than their own in conflict, they become more willing to share divergent points of view in classroom conversations (Parker & Bickmore, 2012; Hemmings, 2000).

Participants and Data Collection

In this article, we examine the work of two experienced Primary Social Studies teachers, Ms. Angsana and Ms. Mimosa (names are pseudonyms), in a government school in Singapore. Both teachers belong to the same Professional Learning Communities (PLC) group and had participated in the same professional development initiative by the writer, who is the Subject Head of National Education and Social Studies in Rosyth School. The initiative comprised a series of school-based workshops that introduced teachers to controversial issues pedagogy, role-play and peacemaking dialogue circles, which involved the use of a talking piece and asking a series of open-ended questions to teach children how to listen and communicate with one other to develop community understanding and engage in collective problem-solving. More specifically, this initiative illustrated to participants how peacemaking circles and role-play can be applied in the discussion of conflictual issues in Social Studies or even children's fiction.

Following the professional development workshops, Ms. Angsana and Ms. Mimosa designed an integrated unit that prompted students to investigate what makes a fair society. Both teachers wanted to help students critically examine the concept of governance, the role of a government and the rights of citizens, as they felt that these important concepts were inadequately addressed in the Primary Social Studies national curriculum. They built the unit around a short controversial story and infused lessons with student-centred conflict dialogue pedagogy, such as establishing constructive conflict norms and skills, small group discussions, teacher-guided peacemaking circles and community decision making.

The case study featured in this article is based on one Student Learning Space (SLS) lesson and four classroom observations, sixty minutes each, conducted between June 2020 and July 2020 in a Primary 5 Social Studies class made up of nineteen boys and fourteen girls. All lessons were co-taught by both Ms. Angsana and Ms. Mimosa. Field notes were written or typed during and after each lesson observation. At the end of all the lessons, one formal thirty-minute interview was conducted with each teacher to highlight their key takeaways and the shift in their thinking pertaining to the teaching of Social Studies.

Preparing to Engage in Conflict Dialogue

Drawing on their background in teaching affective education in the Primary Gifted Education Programme (GEP), both teachers created an online SLS lesson that explicitly taught verbal and non-verbal communication norms and skills for engaging with different viewpoints. The SLS lesson, created in response to COVID-19 Phase 2 restrictions, featured a video conceptualised and directed by both teachers to teach students the power of cooperative dialogue, listening to understand, suspending judgement and reading nonverbal cues (refer to Figure 1 below). A class discussion board was also set up for students to pen down their reflections (refer to Figure 2 below). Some responded in general terms which required the teacher to probe further, while others

provided insightful analysis that reflected

deep learning.

Figure 1: Pay Your Bills Right Video. Retrieved from: https://youtu.be/2bn1Y-asOAc
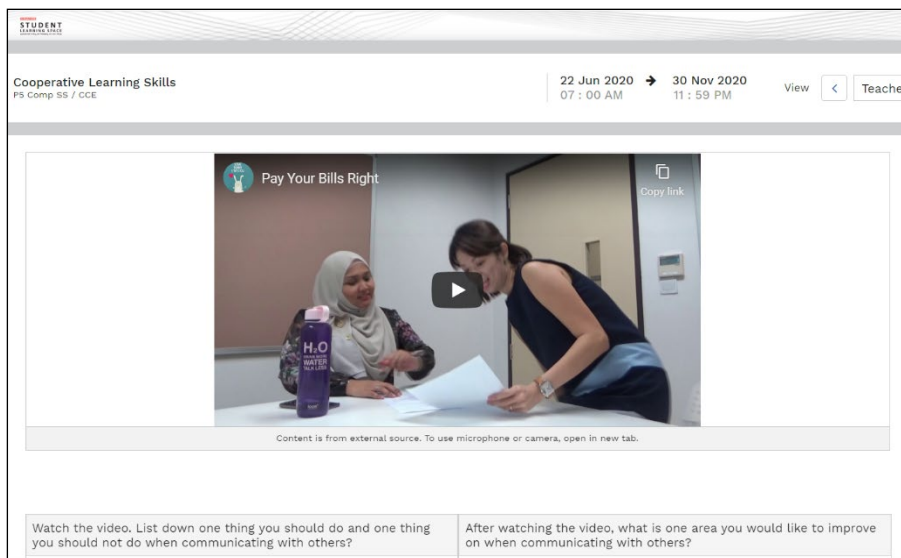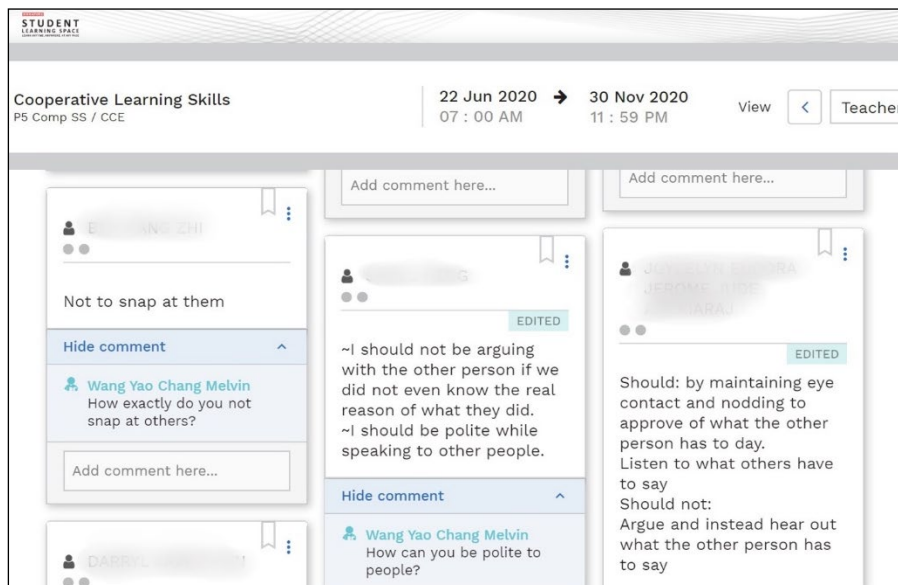

**Figure 2: Students' reflections on the class SLS discussion board**

In the next lesson, both teachers unpacked the concept of a fair society with students using the Freyer Model, a four-square graphic organiser that prompts students to think deeply about a concept. They invited open whole-class discussion by encouraging students to list down some of the key characteristics of a fair society and consider if fairness could be equated to equality, before getting them to pin up what they had uncovered in their research under examples and non-examples. The sheer diversity of artefacts brought in by students (e.g., picture of a Black Lives Matter protest, a newspaper article about the gender pay gap and a handwritten poem about experiencing racism first-hand) reflected both their lived experiences and

what matters to them. Following which, both teachers guided the whole class to create a definition of a fair society, before rounding up the lesson with individual reflections (refer to Figure 3 below). Such activities encouraged students to extensively rationalise what a fair society means to them, preparing them for educative conflict later on.

Figure 3: The Freyer Model is used to unpack the concept of a fair society
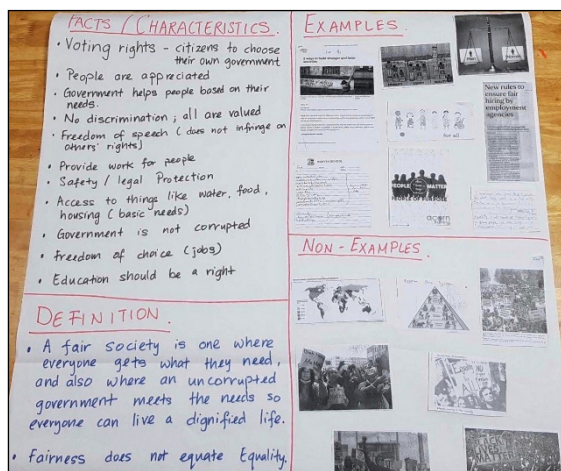
Engaging a Diversity of Conflicting Perspectives

Beyond constructive communication skills and concept clarification, this integrated unit was organised around an adapted version of a short story: *The Kingdom of Sikkal* by Rolf Gollob and Peter Krapf. The fictional story revolves around the key citizenship concepts of governance and social justice presented through different stakeholder perspectives, for instance, an authoritarian ruler, King Sik III, who provides for his people but expects absolute obedience from them even if it means curtailing their personal freedoms or arresting suspected political dissidents. (refer to Figure 4 below).

Figure 4: The Kingdom of Sikkal (Gollob & Krapf, 2008)
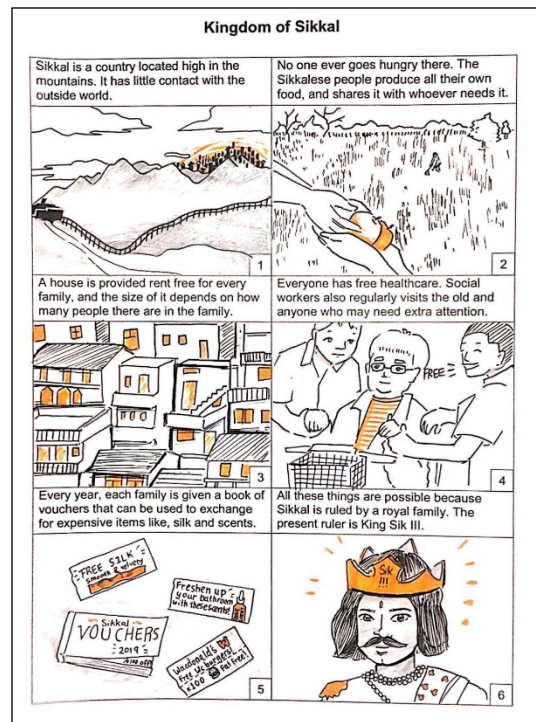
To prepare students to critically analyse the conflict and participate in conflict dialogue, both Ms. Angsana and Ms. Mimosa employed a diversity of

pedagogical tools during this lesson. Students were instructed to form smaller groups to create character sketches, before participating in circle dialogue as stakeholders in the fictional conflict. Throughout this entire process, both teachers explicitly reminded students to keep in mind their definition of a fair society, and to exercise their verbal and non-verbal communication skills when engaging in different viewpoints. When it was time to debrief students, both teachers started a whole-class circle discussion and passed down a talking piece to encourage every student to choose whether to speak or not, while insisting that everyone else listened quietly and attentively without judgement. This strategy shifted the classroom climate from one that was typically dominated by the same few outspoken volunteers, towards a more inclusive and equitable one that carved out space for thoughtfulness and allowed less vocal students to make meaningful contributions to the dialogue. Prompts, such as "Is there anything about Sikkal that you can relate to?" and "Have you ever experienced unfairness? How did it feel?", were also used during the whole-class circle discussion to encourage students to connect the fictional conflict to their own lived experiences.

Although participants pointed out many interesting parallels between their lives and the story, such as academic tracking in primary schools, there was one exchange between students that stood out in particular (names are pseudonyms):

Bert: *I think it's not good that Sikkal provides everything for its citizens. It's like how our Financial Assistance Scheme (FAS) encourages the poor to remain lazy.*

Bob: *My family depends on FAS to get by. We are not lazy. My dad is trying*

very hard to find a job. Even with FAS, my family still struggles to get by. I would not mind living in Sikkal. At least I will not have to worry what is going to happen tomorrow.

Ms. Mimosa: Thank you for sharing, Bob. How are you feeling now?

Bob: *A little sad and misunderstood.*

Ms. Mimosa: Bert, do you have anything to share after hearing from Bob?

Bert: *I didn't know he was an FAS student. I'm sorry for saying things that I don't know much about. I really didn't mean to upset anyone.*

Ms. Mimosa: It's okay. We are all learning. I'm so proud of the both of you!

The above snippet of Ms. Mimosa's interaction with students is reflective of her broader approach across all lessons. Her classroom activities do not focus on students discerning or assigning blame on any characters. Rather, she makes a conscious effort to encourage students to consider different points of view through the skillful use of open-ended questions, like how she navigated the sharing by both Bert and Bob. In doing so, she modeled to her students *how* to build consensus and mutual respect for differences through conflict dialogue.

By the second lesson into this section of the unit, students had evidently taken on a negative view of King Sik III. They described him as "intolerant", having a "split personality" and even compared him to "Kim Jong Un." In comparison, many students felt "sorry" for Andrew for having to be "forcefully drafted" so early into a specialised job at the age of five. To challenge students' assumptions, both Ms.

Angsana and Ms. Mimosa invented new story characters, such as the royal advisor to the King Sik III, Mr. Aadhi. Both teachers invited a male colleague to role-play as Mr. Aadhi to be interviewed by students. Students heard first-hand from Mr. Aadhi that King Sik III had agonised for months before deciding that early job specialisation was a necessary evil if Sikkal, a small, vulnerable country with limited resources, were to survive. This helped re-characterise and re-humanise King Sik III in the eyes of the students. Following the dramatic contestation of students' prior perceptions of characters, both teachers immediately facilitated a second whole-class circle dialogue discussion to debrief them.

Resolving Conflict through Problem-solving and Collective Decision-making

Tapping on their experience teaching Problem Solving (PS) in the Primary Gifted Education Social Studies curriculum, both teachers skilfully designed an activity that required students to work together to participate in creative problem-solving to design solutions to help transform Sikkal in a fairer society. Students were divided into smaller groups where they had to identify one problem in the story and create an action plan containing details of how the solution will be implemented (e.g. Why do you think this will solve the problem? Who is going to carry out the action? When will this action take place?), one possible limitation of their proposed solution, and suggestions on how they might overcome this limitation (refer to Figure 5 below). Both teachers also explicitly reminded students to only propose ethical solutions. Besides teaching students how to collaborate with one another to critically analyse their proposed solutions from multiple perspectives, this activity also made them sharply aware of the inherent problems associated with autocratic

governance. Against this backdrop, many students remarked that as long as power was concentrated in the hands of the king, it would be hard to effect any meaningful policies. By the end of the lesson, most students agreed that transitioning towards a democratically elected government was the best way to forge a more equitable society.

Figure 5: Sample of students' written work
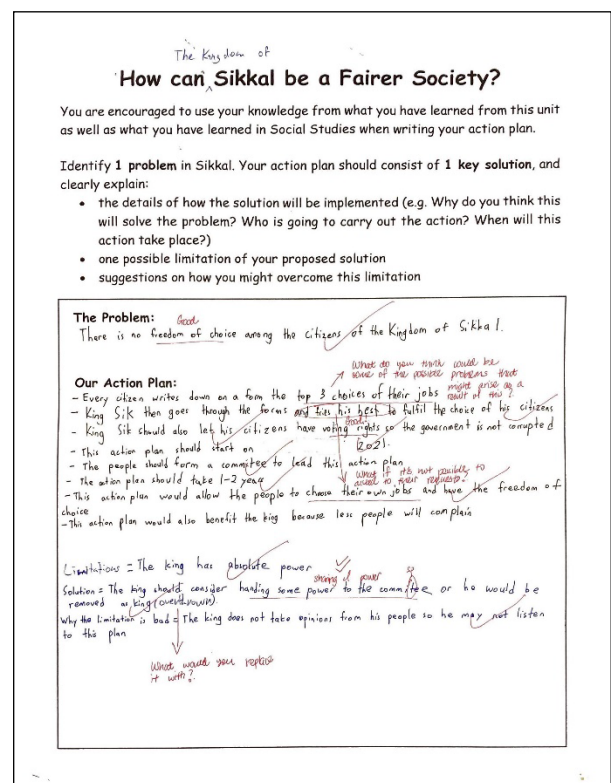
After consolidating the solutions proposed by the different groups on the whiteboard, both teachers implemented a whole-class dialogue circle to engage students in collective decision-making. A talking piece was once again passed down, creating inclusive democratic dialogue space for every student to consider the divergent views of others and voice their own opinions. Some students shared intimate information about their families, for instance, Jasmine shared about how the lack of choice in Sikkal reminded her of the lack of choice many women in her culture

today are still faced with (e.g. arranged marriages). Others questioned the feasibility of some of the solutions proposed. Once everyone had a chance to speak, Ms. Mimosa and Ms. Angsana proceeded to make adjustments to the class action plan based on the concerns and suggestions raised by students.

It is worthwhile, at this juncture, to include one exchange between two students that stood out prominently during the circle dialogue sharing (names are pseudonyms):

Amy: I disagree with the solution where citizens are given three job options to pick from. The king still gets to decide who goes where. Or what if everyone wants to be a doctor or teacher? Who will do the less popular jobs?

Dave: How about we pay people more to do these jobs? Then just let people choose whatever they want to be.

Ms. Angsana: That's not a bad idea! I read this article online that plumbers in the UK are paid well. It's considered a professional job!

Amy: Not in Singapore. Why should we pay more for these types of jobs?

Ms. Angsana: Do we agree that plumbers or cleaners are essential workers in society? When we refuse to pay people in 'these types of jobs' a higher wage, what are we saying?

Dave: They are not worth much in society. They are less important. But wouldn't that go against our definition of a fair society? This is not a dignified life!

Ms. Angsana: True. So are we going to give citizen three job options to pick from or are we going to allow them the freedom to decide for themselves, but pay more to ensure less popular jobs are filled?

Amy: I think we need to ask everyone if they are okay to pay more for such jobs.

It is hardly easy, in the competitive environment of a school, to get students to put aside their differences to collaborate, communicate and make collective decisions in the contexts of conflict. However, Ms. Angsana and Ms. Mimosa have demonstrated that when teachers prepare their students for the circle dialogue process and purposefully infuse conflict conversations in their curricula, even children from different backgrounds have the capacity to participate in passionate, respectful collective decision-making that considers the needs of diverse stakeholders.

Discussion

Ms. Angsana and Ms. Mimosa's unit of lessons have demonstrated the importance of explicitly teaching their young charges constructive conflict communication norms and skills when engaging in conflict talk. They consistently reminded students to listen attentively and speak respectfully by establishing routines and processes, such as passing the talking piece, suspending judgement, turn taking and emphasising openness to alternative viewpoints (Maloch, 2002). Such processes not only equipped students with the skills and knowledge to engage in constructive, open-minded dialogue with divergent viewpoints, but also reshaped the power dynamics within the class, improving the quality and frequency of individual participation in class discussions and providing more

opportunities for positive interactions between dominant students and less dominant ones. Compared to a more adversarial approach which tends to promote competitive habits, such as zero-sum decision-making and the silencing of dissenting views, the use of dialogue pedagogies embodies a constructive, inclusive and equitable approach that better prepares students to engage with divergent perspectives in an increasingly conflictual and polarised world (Bickmore & Parker, 2014).

The recognition of alternative perspectives, especially the perspectives and voices of the silent and marginalised, is an important element in dialogic conflict education. Although Ms. Angsana and Ms. Mimosa could have selected a more visceral story that mirrored complex real-world social tensions, the story that they ended up selecting did explore many important concepts (e.g. social domination, social justice and equity) from the perspective of the marginalised. These are the very concepts that often do not receive sufficient attention and coverage in our Primary Social Studies national curriculum. Beyond the selection of appropriate content, both teachers have also put in place important pedagogical processes, such as framing the story using a contentious question (i.e. Is Sikkal a fair society?) to draw attention to previously discounted voices and engaging students to participate in circle dialogue in the role of stakeholders to elicit powerful classroom conversations about rights and equity. From carefully selecting controversial content that introduced students to marginal voices, to putting in place inclusive and equitable pedagogical processes, both Ms. Angsana and Ms. Mimosa have demonstrated the illuminating role teachers play in awakening critical consciousness of society's oppressive structures (Freire, 1970).

Another significant element observed in this unit of study was the sharing of power in the classroom when engaging in collective problem-solving and decision-making. The respectful communication norms and skills taught were particularly helpful in eroding certain power imbalances within the classroom and encouraging the normally marginalised or less confident students to voice their viewpoints when they were working in small groups to create an action plan to help Sikkal become a fairer society. This deliberate attempt to share power in class surfaced again when both teachers were consolidating the suggestions mooted by the different groups of students. Through the use of the peacemaking circle process and a talking piece, both teachers ensured that every single student had an opportunity to share any deeply held concerns or propose alternative solutions to improve the class action plan. By moving away from a majority-rule approach towards a shared governance approach in decision-making, both teachers empowered students to believe that even the decisions and actions of one citizen is instrumental in building a strong democracy and expanding social justice (Ochoa-Becker, 2007).

Reflection

Although Ms. Angsana and Ms. Mimosa are both extremely experienced primary school teachers who specialise in teaching mainstream and GEP Social Studies, both of them shared that they have traditionally steered clear of controversial issues due to the fear of violating state laws (e.g. Sedition Act and the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act) and breaching out-of-bound (OB) markers. They maintained that it was simply "safer" to self-censor and adhere closely to the prescriptive official curriculum.

However, after designing and carrying

out this unit of study, both teachers expressed approval of teaching controversial social issues through fictional stories. They shared that the fictionalised account made them feel more "confident" to broach sensitive issues as it made no specific reference to "any particular group of people." Yet, it was nuanced in such a way that students were able to "draw parallels to the real world" beyond the classroom walls. They also observed that assigning students to take on a character's perspective other than their own provided "a safe way" for diverse groups of students within class to engage in conflict dialogue without having to risk revealing their own social vulnerabilities. Lastly, both teachers agreed that exploring controversial issues through fiction gave them the flexibility to adapt and customise the story to reflect varying levels of divisiveness and sophistication based on students' learning progress and socio-emotional readiness.

Both Ms. Mimosa and Ms. Angsana also shared that they have always found it challenging to create sufficient opportunities for marginalised students – those who are quieter or less engaged because of the inherent power structures in schooling – to be included in the classroom community. As such, both teachers were initially worried that the cognitive and verbal demands associated with discussing controversial issues would only serve to further alienate these students.

After carrying out this unit of study, however, both teachers found the non-judgmental classroom atmosphere, the consistent use of open-ended questions to elicit links to children's experiences and the guaranteed opportunity to speak in well-facilitated circle discussions seemed to encourage quieter girls and low-status students – those with ideas or identities that are less familiar or welcomed by the dominant majorities – to participate in class.

In particular, Ms. Mimosa reflected that she learnt about "some really private stuff about their families" that she was not aware of prior to the lesson. She also shared that she was really "surprised" by the "good thinking" displayed by the "few quiet girls who opened up and participated" during the various conflict conversations that took place across the different lessons.

On the last point of reflection, both teachers agreed that teaching controversial issues using the conflict dialogue approach shifts the emphasis from covering Social Studies content to developing essential skills and dispositions. They found the lessons especially powerful because they developed skills and values, such as active listening, openness to diverse perspectives, creative problem-solving, collective decision-making, and the ability to communicate on an equity-oriented basis. Both teachers believed that these are important 21st century competencies that will help students to better confront the social injustices that they will inevitably face in their own lives, while deepening their capacities for positive conflict resolution.

Conclusion

The above case study featured in this article illustrates how two Social Studies teachers in a local primary school have adeptly applied peacebuilding pedagogies to prepare their students to make sense of and engage in constructive dialogue over controversial issues raised in a fictitious conflict situation. Although this study did not measure student outcomes, it is clear that when teachers are provided with sufficient time and professional learning support, they are capable of engaging children in constructive, educative conflict dialogue that can extend children's understanding of social issues and provide deeper citizenship learning experiences.

For this to happen, however, teachers should select content that includes divergent perspectives and voices of those who exist on society's margins to challenge students' assumptions and overcome ignorance. But besides carefully selecting appropriate content, it is equally important to put in place inclusive, equitable pedagogical processes – interaction norms and skills and peacebuilding dialogue circles – to facilitate constructive student-centred conflict dialogue.

In short, constructive conflict talk is a key element of democratic citizenship education that primary school students should be exposed to. And more pedagogical research needs be conducted to find out the best way to do so, and ascertain if the knowledge, skills and dispositions acquired through conflict talk in class, will indeed, prepare students to navigate the real world conflicts that they are bound to encounter in their own lives.

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