

Learning about Issues through Discussion in the Primary Social Studies Classroom: A Shared Inquiry Approach

Sim Hwee Hwang

National Institute of Education (Singapore)

Abstract

This article looks at how primary school children can learn about issues in their social studies lessons through discussion. It first spells out the importance of introducing issues in the social studies curriculum for the development of students to be informed, participative and concerned citizens. It focuses on the selection of suitable issues for primary school children and discussion as a pedagogy for shared inquiry to help teachers achieve academic understanding and citizenship outcomes for their learners. The Walsh and Sattes' (2015) framework for quality discussion is described as a useful guide for teacher planning and implementation. Research findings on teacher belief and practice of using discussion of controversial issues and the implications on teacher professional development are also discussed. The article concludes with how to be skilful in the facilitation of discussion of issues for shared inquiry.

Why introduce issues in primary social studies?

Children are constantly bombarded with different issues that are linked to their immediate environment, community, country and the world. An issue is something that is discussed or argued about, and these can be controversial in nature. Wellington (1986) describes a

controversial issue as one which is deemed important by several people and cannot be easily settled based on evidence or facts alone because value judgments are involved. According to Perry (1999), a controversial issue has the following characteristics: the subject is of topical interest and is complex; there are differing values, opinions and priorities; and strong arousal of emotions can occur.

The issues that children encounter in the daily newspapers, television programmes, internet and social media can include environmental pollution, climate change, terrorism, racism, migration, ageism and poverty. They hear about issues in adults' conversations and even discuss them with their peers. They ask questions about issues because their interest is piqued and they care about them. Their questions, however, may not always be answered by adults. Many issues are complex and there are no easy and immediate answers to their resolution. Parents may be reluctant to allow their children to confront serious issues and some elementary teachers even avoid introducing controversial issues in their classrooms (Gross, 1989) as they may deem the issues unsuitable for learners or there is simply no time for discussion. Teachers may think that they lack the necessary knowledge and competency to handle children's queries confidently. Yet research stresses the need for teachers to construct concrete, authentic and relevant

learning activities for their learners (NAEYC, 1989). Issues provide opportunities for teachers to develop authentic and relevant learning experiences for their students. And children will have direct experiences with many issues that can be leveraged for learning in social studies: "To pretend that children's world is bland is false when it is filled with controversies, conflicts and aggression" (Joyce, 1970, p 255).

Social studies is an apt platform for introducing issues to children as the subject is essentially for citizenship education, that is, its primary purpose is to prepare youths so that they possess the knowledge, values and skills needed for active citizenry (Barr, Barth & Shermis, 1977; Engle & Ochoa, 1988; Martorella, Beal & Bolick, 2005; Shaver, 1997; Stanley, 1985). An active citizenry is one that works in concert with the community and government to solve societal problems and issues by taking initiative and being involved to bring about constructive change. It is not one whereby citizens are indifferent or watch others' actions passively on the sideline and doing nothing about the situation.

Social studies teaching becomes meaningful when it is connected to real world issues. Teaching of issues can promote children's interest in current events and social problems, and their understanding of a range of views on a topic, and arguments in their support. It can contribute towards their development of citizenship participatory skills such as critical analysis and evaluation of competing and multiple views, evidence and values, management of conflicts or controversies and thoughtful decision-making based on reliable and valid evidence and value evaluation. It can also inculcate in young learners democratic values and dispositions such as open-

mindedness, perspective taking, respect for diversity, tolerance and equality. The knowledge, skills and dispositions gained are important for children to make sense of the complex world they live in, a world that is often fraught with threats to peace, social justice and progress, and environmental sustainability. They need to learn how to deal with the inevitable differences and controversies in the world outside school without resorting to violence (Claire & Holden, 2007; Evans, Newmann & Saxe, 1996; Ochoa-Becker, 1996). Hence, it makes sense to start children young by introducing them to an in-depth study of issues in their social studies lessons.

Selection of issues for teaching

However, the caveat is that not all issues are suitable for primary school students. Some of them may be too complex for their understanding, too harsh for their emotional maturity and may not be age appropriate. Hence, discretion in issue selection is necessary (Skeel, 1970). Evans (1989) and Shaver (1977) note the importance of linking issues to the social studies curriculum and students' lives, interests and concerns. Engel (1989) suggests that issues should ideally be controversial and promote critical thinking with issues which are more personal as more suitable for young children and abstract issues for upper primary children. Skeel (1996) lists some questions for teachers' consideration in issue selection and these include: Is the issue of real significance? Is it recurring? Will the study of the issue help students be more informed and thoughtful citizens? Massialas (1996) adds to the list by asking whether the study of the issue can produce some action for change in a desirable manner, whether the emerging content from the study is usable and whether the study can promote or hinder reflection on

persistent problems of humankind. Although there are myriad factors for consideration which can make the planning and implementation of issue-centred teaching challenging, one thing is certain – the teaching of issues should be different from the traditional teaching approach (Skeels, 1996). In the former, the teacher's role is to help students inquire by seeking answers to questions about the issue which they are curious and care about and drawing their own conclusions; whereas in the latter, the teacher dispenses a set of right answers to children who learn them passively. One way to engage children in the inquiry of issues is through discussions.

Shared inquiry of issues through discussions

Parker and Hess (2001) define discussion as a shared inquiry which involves listening and talking to others about an issue or a text on hand. The common object of inquiry is the issue or discussion topic in question and the materials used can include a text, an idea, a policy, an artwork, a performance or a speech that have different and even conflicting interpretations. During discussion, individual students voice their views to one another, evaluate claims, evidence and values, make meaning and build into their own understanding other people's interpretations and life experiences. The outcome is that the individual and collective understanding of the issue or topic is deepened, expanded and advanced (Walsh & Sattes, 2015). In other words, shared inquiry leads to shared and enlarged understanding.

Parker and Hess (2001) consider discussion to be a worthwhile endeavour as it contributes to knowledge building within communities of inquiry and community building in a democracy.

Discussion can increase student understanding of important content, develop their skills of critical thought and ability to dialogue across differences, build their tolerance for diversity, and promote positive civic behaviour and engagement (Hess, 2004, 2008). Discussion is most suitable for topics dealing with values, attitudes, feeling and awareness which will provide students practice in formulating and evaluating opinions. It can also be used in lessons where students' opinions will add value to the lesson (Petty, 2009). Parker and Hess (2001) make a distinction between teaching *with* discussion and teaching *for* discussion. The former uses discussion as an instructional strategy to develop student understanding of a text or an issue under scrutiny whereas the latter is a learning outcome as students are expected to acquire discussion skills and dispositions. Such distinctions are useful when ruminating over lesson objectives and they need not be mutually exclusive when planning issue-centred lessons for instruction.

Framework for quality discussion

Walsh and Sattes (2015) believe that quality discussions do not just happen, they need to be carefully prepared by teachers and students. In their book, "*Questioning for Classroom Discussion*", they propose a five-stage discussion process framework to help teachers conduct quality discussion, namely preparing, opening, sustaining, closing and reflecting. The stages are well elaborated in their book and their main ideas will be highlighted in this section.

Preparation

Preparation involves framing the focus questions, determining the kind of discussion skills and dispositions for student development, assigning students

prep work, choosing participation structures and considering organisational issues.

Framing the focus question

Inquiry of issues has to be driven by quality focus questions. When framing the focus question, the issue and the wording and structure of the question need to be carefully considered. The aspects of the issue in question for consideration are: Is the issue related to the curriculum? Does it invite a multitude of views? Is it engaging, meaningful and important to students? What is the extent of students' prior knowledge about the issue? As for the form of the question, the following should be considered: Does the context of the issue provide the focus and activate student thinking? Is the chosen academic vocabulary appropriate? Do the verbs activate the desired depth of student thinking? Is the question structure simple or convoluted? As it can be challenging to ask good questions on the spot, anticipating student responses and planning appropriate teacher moves to sustain the discussion and correct student misconceptions become an essential aspect of framing quality focus questions.

Determining skills and dispositions

Determination of which social or cognitive skill and/or disposition to spotlight is part of preparation. It is a mistake to assume that students have the pre-requisite skills and dispositions for discussion. Explicit teaching of these skills and dispositions through coaching, modelling, scaffolding and feedback is therefore vital and students need practice on how to discuss in order to develop these skills and dispositions.

The discussion skills can be organised into social, cognitive and use of

knowledge skills. All discussions have a social dimension whereby a group of people gathers to exchange ideas and information about the question in focus. The social skills are speaking, listening and collaborating. Different from talking, speaking is intentional and formal and the skills involved are speaking with clarity, speaking audibly, speaking during a discussion opening without hand raising, addressing everyone in the room, and speaking with elaboration to contribute to collective learning. Listening means listening actively to understand the meaning behind someone's words, using silence to think about the discussion and comparing it with one's own thinking, asking questions, paraphrasing correctly, having eye contact with the speaker and giving non-verbal cues that one is listening. Collaborative skills contribute to shared inquiry and understanding when students are able to hitch on and elaborate on others' comments, invite non-participants to the conversation, respond without being defensive, remain open-minded, seek to comprehend and discuss with those with contrary views and backgrounds, and disagree respectfully.

Cognitive skills enable the deepening of understanding, reaching of judgments and creation of new insights and interpretations. It comprises connection making, questioning and creation. In connection making, students are able to make deeper meaning when they can connect their ideas with others by identifying the similarities and differences between the ideas, connect their prior knowledge and experience to the discussion issue and its sources, offer reasons and textual evidence to support their viewpoints, and analyse and evaluate information from varied sources. Questioning refers to asking questions about someone's view to identify his assumptions and meaning, asking

questions about personal perspectives and assumptions, and asking questions about sources. Finally, creation refers to going beyond opinions to new ways of understandings and is achieved by inferring from and synthesising different perspectives and sources, suspending personal judgment while listening, and constructing group solutions.

Use of knowledge skills refer to the student participants' skills in accessing a broad, varied and deep knowledge base which includes text-based knowledge and prior learning and experience. The skills include using disciplinary vocabulary and language, evaluating whether the sources are credible or not, incorporating evidence from varied sources to support one's points of argument, presenting facts accurately, drawing from relevant prior learning and experience, and reflecting on and evaluating personal beliefs or positions on an issue in relation to ideas generated during a discussion.

Disposition is the proclivity to think or act in a certain manner. Dillion (1994 in Walsh & Sattes, 2015, pp 51-52) identifies several dispositions that support productive discussion and these are "reasonableness, peacefulness, orderliness, truthfulness, freedom, equality, respect for others, ... responsiveness, judiciousness, reflectiveness and evidence." Costa and Kallick (2014 in Walsh & Sattes, 2015, p 52) also draw up a list of dispositions, namely, "perseverance, managing impulsivity, questioning, finding wonderment and awe, listening with understanding and empathy, drawing from prior knowledge and applying it to new situations, adventurous, risk taking, creating/imagining and innovating, striving for craftsmanship, using clear language, and metacognition." It is important to focus on one disposition at a time and discuss with students what it

looks and sounds like and make wall charts for display as reminders. It is also important to discuss why such a disposition can contribute to fruitful discussions. With explicit teaching, modelling and periodic self and class reflection, dispositions that promote quality discussion can be developed.

Assigning students prep work

Students need to prepare for participation in discussions and teachers can help them do so by assigning them prep work. These include asking them to do the necessary readings, conduct a research on the discussion topic, think of questions to ask for the discussion, and respond in writing to teacher-initiated question prior to the discussion. It is important to consider the questions posed, student age and development level and discipline when assigning prep work.

Choosing participation structures

Identifying participation structures for activating and sustaining thinking, regaining momentum or focus and increasing participation is part of the preparation for class discussion. To activate student thinking, teachers can ask students to write something related to the discussion topic or talk with their partners to focus their thinking and learn from their friends. Another warm up activity would be the "People Graph" by asking students to reflect individually before getting them to stand on a spot that best reflects their positions regarding a statement posed by the teacher, followed by a mini-discussion based on the graph. Teachers can also use the online platform, paired responses and small groups to facilitate the discussion. To regain momentum of discussion when it starts to wane, structures such as Think-Pair-Share (TPS) or Turn and Talk can be utilized. To refocus student attention on

the discussion, it is helpful to pose a variation of the opening question, one that is connected to the focus question. Finally, to increase participation, it may be necessary to provide a time out for students to consolidate their thoughts and record them and think of a question to ask for the discussion.

Considering organisational issues

Lastly, the size of the discussion group and configuration of classroom furniture need to be considered at the preparation stage. Where size is concerned, the question to consider is whether it is a teacher-led whole class discussion, small group discussions or student-led discussions, or whether it is going to be a fishbowl or inside-outside circles whereby teacher and student discussants sit in the inner circle and the other students sit in the outer circle to listen and take notes with the understanding that they will swap with those in the inner circle during the discussion. Depending on the group size, classroom furniture can be arranged in the form of a large circle, inside-outside circles or a U-shape.

Opening

The opening can determine the success of a discussion. It would include reviewing the norms and guidelines for discussion and student participation, making the targeted skills and dispositions explicit, activating student thinking before the discussion by using the warm-up activities mentioned in the preparation stage, and presenting the focus discussion question to the class.

Sustaining

To ensure that the discussion is on track and students listen and participate in shared inquiry and understanding, teachers

need to focus on three things to sustain the discussion: students listening to understand, scaffolding to overcome challenges associated with sustaining discussion and monitoring to ensure equitable participation.

In listening to understand, two types of pauses should be introduced. They are Think Time 1 (TT1) and Think Time 2 (TT2). TT1 is the pause after a question is asked and TT2 is the pause after a speaker stops speaking but before another intervenes. Honouring these think times help students hone their listening skills of thinking about the speaker's comments and comparing them to their own thinking, asking questions to better understand the speaker's views, paraphrasing of the speaker's words correctly, and looking at the speaker and giving non-verbal cues that one is listening. Teacher modelling of being at ease with silence and the listening skills, and their communication of the value of silence to their class will contribute towards student shared understanding.

Scaffolding can be used to overcome challenges encountered in sustaining discussions. Some of these challenges include extending student thinking and speaking, guiding them in self-assessment, encouraging them to build on others' thinking, keeping them focused on the discussion topic and jumpstarting a stalled discussion.

To extend student thinking and speaking, scaffolding can be made using statements of interest. For instance, stating "You have a fresh idea. Let us hear more about it" is one way to encourage students to share their thinking. Another way is to use phatics which are brief phrases to motivate speaking (Dillion, 1994). Some examples are "Carry on ..." and "We are with you ..." Other methods include using

fillers to let the speaker know that the audience is listening such as “uh-uh”, “mm”, “Oh I see ...” and non-verbal cues like maintaining eye contact and nodding. To guide students in self-assessment, the teacher can model by paraphrasing the students’ comments for the purpose of encouraging the latter’s extended response or asking questions for clarification. To motivate students to build on each other’s thinking, the speaker connection and re-voicing can be used. In the former, the teacher can make a comment which connects one speaker’s point to the previous speaker’s idea. In the latter, the teacher makes a statement that incorporates some of the student’s ideas. To help students focus on the topic, declarative statements such as, “Your point is interesting but in what ways is it linked to the discussion topic?” can be made. Displaying the focus questions and discussion purpose can also help to prevent student digression. To jump start a stalled discussion, use structures such as TPS or Turn and Talk.

Monitoring student participation is essential in ensuring quality discussion. It can be achieved by tracking the pattern and frequency of student participation, being proactive by working with the class to establish participation norms and reminding them of the norms, and using TT2, TPS and asking those who have yet to contribute to do so.

Closing

Student learning outcomes can be influenced by their prior knowledge and experience and proficiency in discussion, amongst other factors. Hence, it is important to get students to reflect individually or collectively in written or oral form to consolidate their learning. Questions to pose for closing can include those which deal with the discussion

content, such as asking students what is the key issue for discussion, what are the varied perspectives and what are the supporting evidence for these perspectives. Students can also reflect on emerging or unanswered questions by asking them what are the outstanding issues that need further discussions and what further questions need to be asked. The reflection can be done in the same lesson or the next lesson.

Reflection

Students can focus their reflection on their personal, group or class skill development. They can reflect on their strengths, weaknesses and areas for improvement. Teachers too can reflect on the five stages of framing a discussion and assess their students’ development. Goal setting by either students or teachers or both should follow after their respective reflections so as to improve teaching and learning.

Teacher belief and practice in discussion

Although Walsh and Sattes’ (2015) Framework for Quality Discussion is useful for guiding teachers in their facilitation of discussion, it is not enough to ensure quality discussion. A critical ingredient is teacher belief in determining whether discussions are implemented successfully in the classroom. Teacher beliefs about control, time and discussion can be barriers to quality discussion (Walsh & Sattes, 2015). Some teachers fear that they have to cede their control to student speakers for the content and the sequence of emerging ideas. They worry about the lack of adequate content coverage when there is much to teach in the first place and whether they have the capacity to handle students’ misconceptions and challenging queries.

Some consider discussion as time consuming and an inefficient way of teaching. Their perceptions of discussion could be influenced by their previous not so positive teaching and learning experiences with discussion.

Diana Hess has done extensive research on teacher belief and practice of the use of discussion of controversial issues as a pedagogy in the US context. Her review of research studies (2009) on teacher beliefs shows that the primary reason for teachers' inclusion of controversial issues is because it is consistent with their understanding of democracy and purpose of schooling. These teachers believe that participation in the discussion of controversial issues promotes active citizenship participation. However, there is less agreement over what is a controversial issue and which issues should be included. She reports that inexperienced teachers will avoid issues which they believe may be offensive to the community and students and issues which are too controversial. And teacher disclosure is uncommon for fear of community backlash in a non-tolerant outside school environment. As for her review of research studies on teacher practice, Hess (2009) has found that the common practices of skilful teachers in discussion include explicit teaching of discussion skills, ensuring adequate student preparation in content, and the creation of a conducive environment for active student participation.

Implications for primary social studies teaching in Singapore

Although the research findings by Hess are based on the US context, they are food for thought for primary social studies teachers in Singapore. First, for discussion to work, there must be an alignment between teacher belief and practice, that is,

teachers must believe in the value of discussion before they will incorporate it into their teaching. Hence, it is crucial to first uncover teachers' beliefs towards discussion of issues, purposes of education and goals of citizenship education (such as what kinds of citizens do we want? What is active citizenry?) during the professional development in the pedagogy of discussion. To change the beliefs of those teachers who are skeptical about its benefits, they need to see actual classroom practices of how discussion can be carried out and the positive impacts on student learning to be convinced of its merits. Teacher professional development should also focus on the selection of issues, facilitation of discussion skills, implementation of discussion models such as Socratic seminar (Parker, 2008), structured academic controversy (Johnson & Johnson, 1999) and town meeting model (Hess, 2009) and sharing of strategies of how to handle challenges arising from discussions. Teachers should also be given the opportunity to learn by doing, that is, they should be encouraged to create and implement their own issue-based instructional packages through action research. Such an opportunity would help teachers develop a deepened understanding and appreciation of issue-centred instructional design and teaching. The teachers in Hess' research reviews teach in middle or high schools. These teachers are specialists in their subjects whereas the primary school teachers in Singapore are mostly subject generalists and for them to utilize discussion as a pedagogy to inquire about issues could be a challenge due to their lack of subject matter knowledge. Hence, in addition to the professional development in the pedagogy itself, teachers should be encouraged to develop their personal knowledge of controversial issues and the ensuing competing perspectives through self-study. They can also learn by keeping abreast with the

latest developments in current affairs through reading the newspapers. Even though there is no dearth of available resources because of the proliferation of information in various formats on the Internet and social platforms, the challenge for teachers is the selection of appropriate resources that are age appropriate for their learners. In such a situation, it may serve teachers well to form communities of practice in their schools or school clusters for the sharing of resources and expertise. Such communities can provide the necessary professional support and mentoring to teachers who are interested in the pedagogy or who want to develop pedagogical mastery.

Conclusion

Although Parker and Hess (2001, p 273) consider discussion to be “an incredibly difficult pedagogical feat”, it is not an impossible feat for teachers to be skilful in discussion over time. Hess (2004) recommends that teachers study discussion. This can be achieved by watching relevant teaching videos or observing skilful teachers in practice. Another suggestion is to experiment with discussion in teaching. Getting one’s hands and feet dirty is one of the fastest ways to learn. She also suggests reflecting on lessons with discussion as a follow up, getting feedback from students and colleagues and planning the curriculum around discussion. Using discussion to inquire about an issue is a worthwhile teaching approach that can reap many benefits for learners especially in enhancing understanding through shared inquiry and developing citizenship education goals. Hence, teachers should consider it as a viable option to enable teaching and learning to be meaningful and impactful.

References

Barr, R., Barth, J. & Shermis, S. (1977). *Defining the social studies*. Bulletin 51. Washington D. C.: National Council for the Social Studies.

Claire, H. & Holden, C. (Eds.) (2007). *The challenge of teaching controversial issues*. United Kingdom: Trentham Books.

Costa, A. L. & Kellick, B. (2014). *Dispositions: Reframing teaching and learning*. California: Corwin.

Dillion, J. T. (1994). *Using discussion in the classroom*. United Kingdom: Open University Press.

Engle, S. H. & Ochoa, A. S. (1988). *Education for democratic citizenship: Decision making in the social studies*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Evans, R. W. (1989). A societal-problems approach and teaching of history. *Social Education*, 80, 50-52, 69.

Evans, R. W., Newmann, F. M. & Saxe, D. W. (1996). Defining issue-centred education. In R.W. Evans & D. W. Saxe (Eds.). *Handbook on teaching social issues*, NCSS Bulletin 93 (pp. 2-5). New York: National Council of the Social Studies.

Gross, R. (1989). Reason for the limited acceptance of the problems approach. *Social Studies*, 80, 185-186.

Hess, D. E. (2004). Discussion in social studies: Is it worth the trouble? *Social Education*, 68(2), 51-55.

Hess, D. E. (2008). Controversial issues and democratic discourse. In L. S. Levstik & C. A. Tyson (Eds.). *Handbook of research in social studies education* (pp. 124-136). New York: Routledge.

Hess, D. E. (2009). *Controversy in the classroom: The democratic power of discussion*. New York: Routledge.

Johnson, D. W. & Johnson, R. T. (1999). Structured academic controversy. In S. Sharan (Ed.). *Handbook of cooperative learning* (pp. 66-81). Westport, Connecticut: Praeger.

Joyce, B. R. (1970). Social actions for primary schools. *Children Education*, 46, 254-258.

Masslaia, B. G. (1996). Criteria for issues-centred content selection. In R.W. Evans & D. W. Saxe (Eds.). *Handbook on teaching social issues*, NCSS Bulletin 93 (pp. 44-50). New York: National Council of the Social Studies.

Martorella, P., Beal, C. & Bolick, C. M. (2005). *Teaching social studies in middle and secondary schools* (4th ed.). Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Merrill/Prentice-Hall.

National Association for the Education of Young Children (1989). Position statement on developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood programmes serving children from birth through age 8. *Young Children*, 4-19.

Ochoa-Becker, A. S. (1996). Part one: Definition and rationale. In R.W. Evans & D. W. Saxe (Eds.). *Handbook on teaching social issues*, NCSS Bulletin 93 (p 1). New York: National Council of the Social Studies.

Parker, W. C. (2008). *Notes for inquiry workshop A: Socratic seminar*. Singapore.

Parker, W. C. & Hess, D. (2001). Teaching with and for discussion. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 17, 273-289.

Perry, W. G. (1999). *Forms of intellectual and ethical development in the college years: A scheme*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Petty, G. (2009). *Teaching today: A practical guide* (4th ed). United Kingdom: Nelson Thomas.

Shaver, J. P. (Ed.) (1977). *Building rationale for citizenship education*. Bulletin 52. Washington, D. C.: National Council for the Social Studies.

Shaver, J. P. (1997). The past and future of social studies as citizenship education and research on social studies. *Theory and Research in Social Education*, 25(2), 210-215.

Skeel, D. J. (1970). *The challenge of teaching issues in the elementary school*. California: Goodyear.

Skeel, D. J. (1996). An issue-centred elementary curriculum. In R.W. Evans & D. W. Saxe (Eds.). *Handbook on teaching social issues*, NCSS Bulletin 93 (pp. 230-236). New York: National Council of the Social Studies.

Stanley, W. B. (Ed.). (1985). Recent research in the foundation of social education: 1976-1983. In W. B. Stanley (Ed.), *Review of research in social studies education* (pp. 65-121). Washington, D. C.: National Council of Social Studies.

Walsh, J. A. & Sattes, B. D. (2015). *Questioning for classroom discussion*. Virginia: Association for the Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Wellington, J. (Ed.) (1986), *Controversial issues in the curriculum*. Oxford: Blackwell.