

THE IMPORTANCE OF CONTEXT FOR TEACHING CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES IN INTERNATIONAL SETTINGS

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the underlying and epiphenomenal manifestations of milieus and contexts that serve to control and undermine, or provide pathways to, the discussion of controversial issues in classrooms. Given the importance of teaching and discussing controversial issues, as an essential lever for democratic citizenship education, I draw on two empirical case studies in Korea and Latvia. These cases suggest a variety of implications for teacher education programs and education policy makers, both domestically and abroad, including the need for teachers to develop a clear rationale for teaching controversial issues; understand their role as mediator of the larger normative mandate of citizenship education in their school and the reality of their particular context; and reflect upon their pivotal role as curricularist, gatekeeper, and professional within context and, in some cases, change the epistemological cultures of their classrooms and schools to foster free expression of ideas within an open and inviting classroom climate.

INTRODUCTION

The primary objective of this article is to explore the underlying and epiphenomenal manifestations of milieus and context that serve to control and undermine, or provide pathways to, the discussion of controversial issues in classrooms. Controversial issues are integral to democratic education (Camicia, 2008; Engle, 1960; Engle & Ochoa, 1988; Graseck, 2009; Hahn, 1991; Harwood & Hahn, 1990; Hess, 2008; 2009; Hunt & Metcalf, 1968; Lee, 2004; Ochoa-Becker, 2007; Oliver & Shaver, 1966). Controversies constitute a normative anchor within citizenship education curriculum, and the degree to which controversial issues are subjected to reflection has profound implications for the vibrancy of a democracy. If we think of democracy

not in terms of governmental structures but in Dewey's (1916) "mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience" (p. 87), citizenship is predicated on foundational ideas of free participation and communication.

Engaging controversial issues pays a democratic dividend for student-citizens by increasing civic participation, critical thinking skills, interpersonal skills, content understanding, and political activity. These judgments also elevate interest in current events, social studies, and social issues, and increase the development of tolerance. Students tend to develop democratic values such as open-mindedness, dissent, skepticism, and embracing diversity. (Curtis & Shaver, 1980; Goldensen, 1978; Harwood & Hahn, 1990; Hess & Ganzler, 2006; Hess & Posselt, 2002; Hess, 2009; Misco, 2010a, 2011; Remy, 1972; Torney-Purta et al., 2002).

Students who engage in discussions involving controversial issues are well-positioned to become agents of change and to recognize, celebrate, and embrace diversity among and within groups, as well as to expand content knowledge through the consideration of other perspectives and to develop understandings of justice and the common good (Crossa, 2005; King, 2009; Young, 1996). In addition, opening heretofore taboo subjects and entering into polemical discussions help to make political issues become meaningful and relevant for students (McGowan, McGowan, & Lombard, 1994). Challenging assumptions and addressing prejudices (Gaughan, 2001) fit within the aims of prejudice reduction, democratic citizenship education, and reflective pedagogy, where "right" answers are not sought (Graseck, 2009; Hunt & Metcalf, 1968).

Ideally, schooling should challenge local traditions (Hlebowitsh, 2005), and unearthing controversies can help shift student focus from authoritative narratives and perspectives to heterogeneous micronarratives that draw on and challenge local and individual knowledge (Levinson, 2008). Discussions of controversial topics can help widen and enlarge student experiences in terms of both the normativity of topics and also the multiple perspectives entertained among teachers and peers to establish understandings and formulate solutions without succumbing to the tyranny of forced meaning (Giroux, 1983) and the often seductive appeal of prevailing belief and opinion. Discussing controversial issues can overlap with ideological battles outside the school, or within it, but it trumps those given the essential mandate for students to deliberate about the common good, take a stand on issues, and look at issues with multiple sources and perspectives (Hess, 2004; Marcus & Stoddard, 2009).

The context of controversial issues matters to a degree that is "not always obvious in other Western nations," and we need to be wary of "too-facile application of policies and ideas that are well-suited for other contexts" (Barton & McCully, 2007, p. 127). There are no nomothetic prescriptions for addressing controversial issues independent of context and certainly no "easy answers" for devising their enactment within learning experiences (Barton & McCully, 2007, p. 127). Sometimes a critical obstacle hinges on the "social and political winds" that blow through the school and "grab hold of the curriculum in a way that limits the range of expression that can emerge" (Hlebowitsh, 2005, p. 222). Yet, decontextualized fidelity approaches

to curriculum implementation have enjoyed resurgence within a measurement and high-stakes era of teaching, whereby context, or milieu, can overpower other commonplaces to stymie the discussion of controversial issues (Misco, 2010b). When teachers subscribe to a fidelity model, controversies are often no longer important or are rendered independent of social context and milieu which also risks enactment. In addition, pushing too far into the discomfort zone can often invite rejection of enactment (McCully, 2006; Patrick, 2005). Given these hazards, the sociohistorical location of the teacher and the teacher's negotiation of context is critical for the normative decision about what should be done about an issue, which is typically underpinned by the differences in "key beliefs or understandings about the issue held by the protagonists" (Oulton, Dillon, & Grace, 2004, p. 411).

THE CONTEXTUAL MILIEUS

Schwab (1973) distilled educational phenomena into four *commonplaces*, in which someone is teaching something to someone, somewhere (teacher, subject matter, learner, and milieu), all of which demand coordination when we focus on the ultimate goal of doing what is best for the learner as a human being, child, and citizen. It is the final commonplace, which Schwab referred to as "the milieu," that include the school, classroom, and relationships of students to each other. The relationships of students to subgroups, students to structures of authority, teachers to educational leaders, as well as student to student, teacher to student, and teacher to teacher all help shape not only what is taught, but also how it is taught. Other relevant milieus include the "family, community, the particular groupings of religious, class or ethnic genus" (p. 367) and the aspirations of these groups. Milieus also include the relations of groups and individuals within town, city, country, and locale as "represented in miniature" by the students of each genus (p. 367). Many of these milieus--in the form of school structure, community members, and parents who want students to reflect parental views--undermine a marketplace of ideas and act as barriers to discussion of controversy (Hess, 2009).

Schwab (1973) suggests that connected to these milieus are what teachers know, the degree of flexibility they bring to teaching and learning new techniques, as well as the "biases they bring" (p. 367). When considering controversial issues within overlapping milieus, Schwab emphasizes whether learning experiences will not only lead to the improvement of the community, but also if they will be acceptable to the community and if not, what steps can be taken to facilitate acceptance. Teacher preparation, student relations, and the juxtaposition of multiple layers of incommensurable values suggest that these milieus are of paramount consideration for designing learning experiences that address controversial issues. Even with a provocative curriculum, eager students, and well-prepared teachers poised to confront controversy, the milieus act as pathways and obstacles to opening and discussing closed areas. Controversial issues span both societal and educational knowledge domains, and learning about these issues is a negotiation between individuals and

their social milieu (Barnett & Hodson, 2001).

Context and the milieus are therefore of paramount concern for teaching controversial issues as they influence and act in conjunction with prior knowledge to influence reticence (Ersoy, 2010; Leib, 1998). Employing Pedagogical Context Knowledge (PCK) (Barnett & Hodson, 2001) is instructive here as it focuses our attention on the knowledge of learners' understanding, knowledge of effective teaching strategies for particular content, alternative methods of presenting the subject matter, and curricular saliency. Part and parcel of saliency is teacher judgment of matters of depth and treatment because a "teacher's classroom decisions are located in, and contingent upon, a specific social, cultural, and educational context" (Barnett & Hodson, 2001, p. 433).

Because controversies 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 *controversial* because they ultimately speak to normative value judgments, which individuals frame within their ethical principles (Oulton, Dillon, & Grace, 2004), but also within historical, social, political, and ethnic contexts. Often, it is not the issue itself that prompts the type or degree of treatment in a classroom but rather the dynamics as shaped through the attitudes and experiences of participants (McCully, 2006). It is not the teaching controversy which raises concerns typically, but the moral, social, and political substructure and the ways by which schools handle these issues that provoke resistance and brings about teacher protection-oriented postures (Bridges, 1986; Byford, Lennon, & Russell, 2009). For example, Taiwanese curricula focuses on social and cultural issues instead of controversial political ones (Meihui, 2004), and only the top schools in Singapore provide students with the opportunity to debate controversial issues (Gopinathan & Sharpe, 2004). Conflicting beliefs about issues reflect "contested terrain supported by deeply embedded cultural values" (Evans, Avery, & Pederson, 2000, p. 298), and these can be both recondite and readily apparent. Ultimately there are "multiple tensions" and "conflicting demands" that inform classroom life, including school policies directly relating to the treatment of controversial issues (Barnett & Hodson, 2001, p. 434).

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: student perception of peers can have a profound influence leading to self-censure (Hess, 2002; King, 2009). School environmental factors--context and milieu--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” (Hess, 2002, p. 14).

BRIEF CASE STUDIES OF CONTEXT

Given the critical role of context and the importance of unique characteristics of the milieus in different cultures, the explications of two brief cases highlight the ways in which context can serve as a pathway or as an obstacle to the discussion of controversial issues. Rather than analyze the details of one case, this article explores multiple cases which illustrate the similarities and differences of context as rooted in culture and explores the possible ways in which we might consider working in other contexts to breathe life into controversial issues discussions within classrooms. In Latvia, I conducted multiple process-oriented studies concerning teacher attitudes about new curricular, documentation of a curriculum-making process, and longitudinal inquiry in the nature of implementation five years later. In Korea, my research is nascent, with formal interviews taking place during the winter of 2011-2012. In both cases, I was clearly an outsider, known to the respondents as a researcher keenly interested in the challenges and pathways to broaching controversial issues in unique contexts. Finally, as a researcher I recognize both my positionality as a Westerner and a personal perspective informed by life within the United States. Yet, the sum total of my international experiences and research has allowed me to be conscious of that limitation and assume a more transnational and global perspective on controversial issue instruction.

South Korea

For the past 35 years, moral education has existed as an independent and compulsory core subject in South Korea, serving as a foundation for all education and enjoying 1-2 hours per week of class-time in secondary schools (Jung, 2010). Within this course, great emphasis is placed on the necessity for children to respect cultural traditions and authorities through “appropriate role behavior” (Baek, 2002), not unlike the morality of custom Dewey outlined decades ago (Dewey, 1908/1960). As one of the most Confucian countries in the world (Koh, 1996), in which filial piety and respect for elders are regarded as the most important virtues, South Korean culture positions students to view the self as interdependent and irrevocably connected to others (Jeong, 2005; Jung, 2010; Shweder et al., 1998). This *gemeinschaft* cultural orientation, reinforced in social education classes, influences individuals to refrain from “pursuing and advocating one’s own desires, interests, and rights” (Jeong, 2005, p. 80). This orientation benefits student agility to take on multiple perspectives (Jeong, 2005) but can ultimately undermine reason (Choi & Choi, 1990) and create a more conforming, authoritarian, and status-oriented culture (Baek, 2002). Within this cultural paradigm, individuals become defined in reference to their relationships with others (Poole, 1991), and Confucian hierarchy serves as a conduit for the transmission of tradi-

tional values (Joh, 2002).

The tension of the individual versus the group as the unit for decision-making about controversial issues is highlighted in moral education classes. Since 1993, the social studies curriculum of South Korea has sought to promote “democratic values and attitudes” and “decision-making processes” in order to cultivate independent and creative thinkers who respect human rights and are able to make autonomous decisions about social issues (South Korean Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development, 2001). This curriculum calls for open classrooms so that students can explore differences in terms of multiple perspectives and issues and feel comfortable expressing opinions (Choi, 2010). Traditionally, families have taken on the main responsibility of moral education, but due to a lack of time to devote to education, concerns about harmful surroundings and moral pressures in society, parents now prefer schools to serve as the main moral educator (Jung, 2010). Some of these pressures include the growing fear of Americanization, which is perceived as corrupting traditional values as found in popular culture and individualistic, amoral expressions (Joh, 2002). Western educational systems began to influence South Korea following liberation (Chu, Park, & Hoge, 2002), and globalization has exacerbated issues of minority rights, meritocracy, class disparities, sexual orientation, distributive justice, and social welfare (Jung, 2010). In particular, the increased heterogeneity of South Korea, after centuries of homogeneity, has led to calls for a more substantive multicultural education in order to develop tolerant and inclusive attitudes (Lee, 2008). As it stands, treatment of multiculturalism is often “one-way,” focusing on the adjustment of foreigners to dominant cultural expectations (Choi, 2010, p. 176).

Multiculturalism and other controversial issues face a variety of obstacles to free discussion and deliberation within moral education classrooms. Cultural inhibitions related to controversy are connected to pre-1993 governmental structures that undermined free expression of opinion and participation in society (Choi, 2010). Korean teachers had once led students to *one* idea that was socially acceptable. Students now find divergent questions with multiple answers, however, many classroom cultures have not shifted to a climate that allows student reflection and judgment, and many students base moral reasoning within the parameters of authority and punishment avoidance (Baek, 2002; Choi, 2010). Moral education textbooks are provided by the Ministry of Education, a policy leading to a uniform national curriculum that easily avoids controversy and advances pro-governmental beliefs (Chu, Park, & Hoge, 2002; Moon, 1995). As recent as 2002, moral education classrooms were still very much teacher-oriented and used traditional methods, including inculcation and heavy textbook reliance (Chu, Park, & Hoge, 2002). Because classes typically have 30-50 students and Korean teachers have little freedom to interpret textbooks (Kang, 2002), lessons too often have little interest or relevance for students (Chu, Park, & Hoge, 2002; Jung, 2010). Lack of relevance is reinforced by teachers who pay little attention to moral education and, instead, favor subject areas that are included in the high-stakes national ex-

ams (Jeong, 2005; Joh, 2002; Jung, 2010).

Decision-making about controversial moral issues is highly contextual. In South Korea, traditional and modern conceptions of the individual contribute to a moral confusion whereby teachers find difficulty in talking about human rights and democratic dispositions (Kang, 2002). Moral reasoning differs within and between cultures, to be sure (Baek, 2002), but the morality of custom and institutional structures are presently undermining attention to meaningful, relevant, and socially significant topics that, through their full release and attention, provide an effective democratic citizenship education and develop student-citizens who are able to make informed and reasoned decisions. South Korea contains a deeply-embedded Confucian culture and tradition that—through textbooks, curriculum, and teacher decisions—ultimately creates a singularity of normativity that confounds reflective thinking about controversial issues and instead gives saliency to customary and prevailing beliefs.

Latvia

In the case of Latvia, the Holocaust *as it occurred* in Latvia, the overlapping historical contexts of dual occupation, Latvian collaboration, decades of Soviet occupation, and nascent democracy collectively informed different forces within the milieu. Within schools located in geographic areas where murders and other atrocities occurred, there are very small instructional time allocations. For example, one teacher in rural Western Latvia taught the entire topic of the Holocaust in Latvia in one 40 minute period (Misco, 2010b). In the 9th grade the national exam covers Latvian history but does not refer to the Holocaust. When teachers follow the Ministry of Education's interpretation that the Holocaust in Latvia is really not part of Latvian history but rather world history, the Holocaust receives little or no attention (Misco, 2010b). Some students are exposed to a richer treatment in the 12th grade but only after the state exam. One respondent remarked that "those in charge of development say each teacher can develop [their] own program. But guidelines don't fit with the evaluation. The guideline is they have to know "what is the Holocaust?" and when it took place. What goes into that is up to the teacher." Teacher decisions to utilize their autonomy and to teach outside of the curriculum and test standards often rest upon a sense of academic freedom and a bit of subversive action, to be sure, but also an efficient use of their time to select materials. As one respondent stated,

I think it's more important to talk about the Holocaust as a part of life; one part of life, looking at individuals. And if we speak about it as a part of human life, it's not a heavy thing to talk about, just a part of life. There are no contradictions with Ministry demands. There can't be any contradictions--I have to speak about human life before and after the war and I do.

Viewing standards broadly and actively finding ways for the topic to fit represents

a key implementation lever in terms of external forces constraining teachers.

Even though teachers are equipped with “six inches of curriculum for a topic we teach once a year,” there is an instructive syllogism as to the primary external factor limiting implementation: “the situation is that in the exams, there are no questions about this. To prepare students for the exam, we have to teach other things. The Ministry of Education designs the exam.” The Ministry purposefully omitted any reference to the Holocaust on the exams, and privileged other topics, in spite of “so many stereotypes concerning Jews” and the general lack of understanding students have on the topic. In this sense, because the Holocaust remains a largely forbidden area, it has therefore become a controversial topic.

Although controversies are a critical curricular component in social education, teachers have to broach them and the potential benefits attached to their release in a public school environment. Most of the Latvian teachers interviewed associated the lack of coverage of controversies as a “good” or “ideal” circumstance of their school. This is in contrast to the literature suggesting the general need to address controversial issues for citizenship education, but that teachers fail to initiate this in practice. In a number of Latvian classrooms, teachers reported that there are *no controversies*, historical or contemporary, within their subject area. This finding is significant, given the rationale for teaching about controversy and its central place in social studies education within other countries, in contrast to a history-education focus in Latvia. In general, most of the respondents I interviewed choose not to pursue controversy (Misco, 2010b).

Some teachers had a more inviting perspective of controversies but found that the Holocaust was in fact *not* controversial for their students because of their lack of knowledge about it. It is no doubt difficult to be controversial if the topic is not known in any depth because it has been forbidden by fiat. Respondents suggested that no real silencing force exists in schools as “nobody says don’t talk about it . . . all depends on the teacher . . . a lot of students don’t have an idea about what the Holocaust was . . . if the teachers have an interest, they will find a way to do it.” One respondent recognized the waning hold the controversy has within Latvian society. She indicated that “the farther we move away, each generation gets less knowledge about it. Those memories were so alive—this life was not ancient, but now people know less about it.” When asked what controversies do appear with regularity in history classes, respondents cited the lack of complicated questions because they “have such little time to investigate” these sorts of issues (Misco, 2010).

Yet, other teachers suggested the Holocaust was very much a live and contested controversial issue but not as the Holocaust—instead, simply a topic connected to WWII. For example, one teacher in Riga reported a lack of controversy in her school, “except for whatever concerns WWII, and then this is very controversial.” Others suggested that the Holocaust is controversial but only for “older people; it’s not a problem for students” and that whether it is situated in a class as a controversy or connected to a larger society issue that is unresolved “depends

on the teacher.” The teacher therefore acts as the true fulcrum for the way students encounter and construct their past, and this difference is also part of the tension resulting within the larger milieu of the school and ethnicity. The teacher holds the power to respond to this problem: “Soviet occupation and the Holocaust are often not connected in the minds of children.” In addition, depending on whether a student is in Russian or Latvian schools, they will view some topics of the past differently (Makarov, 2009).

One respondent recalled how there is a great deal of “discussion about [the Holocaust] and different events to commemorate.” Some students say “Why focus on Jews? Why not focus on Roma, Latvians, or Russians?” Another respondent recalled students asking, “Why are we talking about Jews? There people of other nations who were killed, why aren’t we talking about them?” Teachers often view these remarks in terms of the “child’s opinion,” one which is fairly irrevocable as the family serves to counter what students learn in class. One respondent suggested that some students with more extreme views “are afraid to discuss their opinion in front of class. Some are smiling—you know they don’t agree with you—they express their opinions in essays with paper and pen.” Occasionally students remark that “Jews are to be blamed themselves and they provoked it,” an apocryphal interpretation perpetuated through propaganda published by Nazi Germany in Latvia (*Bagais Gads*), but these are rare. Students are discussing “whether the Holocaust took place” and a growing “tendency to evaluate Hitler highly, to call him a great beast,” resulting in one respondent’s reaction to not “press on those students but I do give them new information that will hopefully modify their thinking.”

Although the Holocaust appeared to be a controversial issue a priori from an outsider’s perspective, in reality an overlooked corner of the milieus in the Latvian context is the linguistic orientation of schools which creates a de facto segregation of ethnic Latvian and Russian students. Acrimony towards Russians is sometimes voiced in Latvian-speaking schools with comments including “Why are there so many Russians? Why should we study Russian?” One respondent felt the controversy at the “level of speaking” whereby friction is rarely exhibited outside of class discussions. Yet, the nature of the comments concerning Russians in Latvia seemed fairly wide-ranging and complicated. One student complained that “those with more Russian background are against anything good attached to a Latvian leader.” Another felt that Russians “blame Latvians for everything.”

In Russian-speaking schools, I found the Holocaust as not an uncomfortable topic, but rather the relationship of the Soviet Union and Latvia prior to and following WWII—this is “what makes people uncomfortable; this is the emotional topic nobody wants to cover.” There is also a “tender topic” concerning discrimination in Latvia today. Some students advance discussions about Russians in Latvia in terms of treatment, discrimination, job opportunities, and equal rights. There appears to be a decoupling among Russian students, whereby they “don’t care about Latvia.” Some respondents indicated that some Russian students voice

a sense of discrimination, and some remarked on how their students “know about politics, which they get from their parents” and now there is “so much negativity when this is covered in schools, especially with the crisis now . . . they don’t see this country as home—there are no opportunities and they see they want to leave.” One teacher cited the only controversy as the “economic crises and discrimination of Russians. My task is to help students learn how to have beliefs and not offend others.” Occasionally beliefs appeared in more inflammatory ways, such as one student’s suggestion that “Latvia should pay Russia for all the buildings built during occupation” and “another boy’s father told him that he wasn’t learning correct history in school—he said that occupation didn’t happen and that Latvia entered the Soviet Union on its own will.” Other students point to popular media and the television show *The Hour*, which recently determined that “yes, one nation is responsible for that [recent economic crisis]—they point it out who is responsible—the Jews are responsible.” As one respondent concluded, some students have anti-Semitic views “they come from their home—it’s in them.” Other respondents suggest there is no real controversy on Latvian and Russian acrimony, except for “the language issue which really separates the people.” As for the Holocaust, it is in some ways purely a historical controversy, not a current and contested one. As one teacher noted, this is “not a controversy—it happened, it’s accepted, and that’s how it was over. Perhaps there is a difference in terms of education with those who know more having fewer stereotypes” (Misco, 2010b).

After the role of teachers, the milieus had the greatest influence on teachers’ decision making regarding implementation of a new Holocaust curriculum. The Ministry of Education’s construction of standards and exams do not privilege controversial issues as requiring considerable time or energy. Moreover, the structure of the macrocurriculum affords little instructional time to history classes generally. Finally, the Ministry promotes a focus on history, as opposed to an integrated social studies approach, which is primarily focused on preparing democratic citizens. These three factors do a great deal to undermine any motivation or realization of teachers addressing a topic of this kind. The extreme paucity of time, which acts as insufficient support resulting from the Ministry, presents a formidable challenge to any curricular change (Carless, 1988).

The findings revealed that, although the Holocaust in Latvia may at times be controversial among some students, the majority of students do not know enough about the history to feel the same level of controversy that the prior generation may have encountered. Instead, more prominent and palpable historical controversies are those tied to present conditions, specifically the relationship of Latvians and Russians in an economic, political, and historical context. Teachers cited the fact that the lack of curricular materials on this topic and future projects, at least in Latvia, may benefit from squarely addressing this issue as it relates to present challenges and the deportations of 1940.

CONTEXTUAL IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES

Each of these two cases contains underlying and epiphenomenal manifestations of milieus reaching into classrooms to control and undermine the discussion of controversial issues. In South Korea, Confucian culture permeates the milieu with teachers and Ministry of Education's curriculum closely adhering to a morality of custom (Dewey, 1908/1960) on matters of controversy. In Latvia, the Ministry also undermines the treatment of controversies, both overtly in the curriculum and through the lack of attention to these issues on national exams. In addition, the case of Latvia highlights the importance of *false controversies*, which can deflect attention from the actual controversies felt by community members and students. In both cases, teachers lack a strong rationale or urgency in discussing controversial issues.

These are two cases in a larger universe of unique contexts and cultures grappling with controversial issue instruction. Advocates of grounded theory claim that universality is situated within social interaction, but, as Glaser (2002) recently suggested, data does not exist "waiting to be collected" (p. 323). Rather, we generate data based on interactions with others within a specific place and time. Quite significantly, Glaser went on to underscore that we can never again generate this data, but that it is possible to create description and interpretation from this data. In short, he criticizes those who are unwilling or incapable of conceptualizing from description, which is on par with reader generalizability. Yet, because grounded theory is an abstraction of the particular, it produces conceptualizations that are "timeless in their applicability" (p. 319). Therefore, the schism between descriptive data and transcendental abstractions exposes a gap in the literature of external validity and transferability. The process of arriving at grounded understandings is similar to the work of grounded theory, with the important exception of stopping short of claiming conceptualizations and theory that are dislocated from the particular. Instead, grounded understandings are tentative apprehensions of the importance or significance of phenomena, which conceptualize to the point of producing meaning and explanatory power. This process aids in producing associated understandings based on additional unique cases and contexts, but it is only embryonic and nascent, not ready to pull apart from its umbilical ties to the particular (Misco, 2007).

When we really want to know "what is happening here" (Erickson, 1986, p. 121) as part of making "the familiar strange," it is precisely about generative reflection based on localized meanings. The need for a "comparative understanding of different social settings" beyond the circumstances of the local or unique setting need not be oriented toward a potential reader, but rather future researchers and curriculum writers. Grounded understandings, in this sense, are not that far removed from "concrete universals" (Erickson, 1986, p. 130) that we arrive at by "studying a specific case in great detail and then comparing it with other cases

studied in equally great detail,” even if those cases have yet to arise. Because each case contains unique particularities and non-recurring localized meanings, it is not necessary, as Geertz (1973) suggested, “to know everything in order to understand something” (p. 20). Even though few methods can rival ethnography for developing understandings of social knowledge and how social attitudes are constructed (Palonsky, 1987), many times these are simply understandings that have not developed into formal theory. Understanding, in the sense that Dewey (1933) proposed, pertains to parts of information as grasped *in their relations to each other*, which comes about through reflection upon the meaning of what is studied (Misco, 2007).

ADDITIONAL IMPLICATIONS

This article ultimately provides a point of departure and framework for country-specific case studies that reveal how controversies are determined, the ways in which educational systems broach or avoid those issues, and the extent to which educational commonplaces shape their instructional use. Collectively, these case studies can provide a unified understanding of currently divergent research efforts on teaching controversial issues. The synthesis of these international perspectives and grounded theoretical propositions provides a multi-voiced and post-positivistic direction for policy makers and curriculum developers who are interested in cultivating democratic dispositions and habits of mind through controversial issues, as well as for inservice and preservice teacher training.

These two cases suggest a variety of implications for teacher education programs and education policy makers, both domestically and abroad. Given the rather unassailable benefits of controversial issue instruction and the complicated, as well as nuanced, challenges of the milieu for their treatment in classrooms, teachers need to develop a clear rationale for addressing these issues. Teachers should develop this rationale in both preservice and inservice experiences, given their role as mediator of the larger normative mandate of citizenship education in their school and the reality of their particular context. Teachers also need to realize their pivotal role as curriculum writers, gatekeepers, and professionals within context and in some cases change the epistemological cultures of their classrooms and schools to foster free expression of ideas within an open and inviting climate. Teachers need to recognize their charge to, in some cases, be subversive in reaction to the pressures of exams, standards, parents, and limited instructional time. Ultimately teachers will choose on a daily basis whether to succumb to the pressures of the milieu or negotiate within it and afford students the opportunity to grapple with normative and moral issues.

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