

Teaching controversial issues in Japan: An exploration of contextual gatekeeping

Thomas Misco

Miami University, US, miscotj@miamioh.edu

Toshinori Kuwabara

Okayama University, Japan: kuwabara@okayama-u.ac.jp

Masato Ogawa

International Pacific University, Japan: m.ogawa@ipu-japan.ac.jp

Abby Lyons

Mindfulness and Social-Emotional Learning Teacher, US: abby.lyons@theelephanttree.org

This qualitative case study sought to understand the extent to which Japanese high school social studies teachers grapple with controversial issues in their classrooms. Situated within a curricular-instructional gatekeeping framework, we conducted semi-structured interviews with eight respondents of varying backgrounds and schools in Okayama, Japan. The findings indicated that although the respondents believe they can teach controversial issues in their classrooms they generally do not because of specific contextual forces. Although we found controversial issues instruction to be generally moribund, one respondent provided a rationale that reconceptualized exam preparation curriculum and instruction.

Keywords: controversial issues; curricular-instructional gatekeeping; Japan; social studies education

INTRODUCTION

Controversial issues education is integral to democratic citizenship education (Camicia, 2008; Engle & Ochoa, 1988; Hahn, 1991; Harwood & Hahn, 1990; Hess, 2008, 2009; Hunt & Metcalf, 1968; Misco & De Groof, 2014; Ochoa-Becker, 2007; Oliver & Shaver, 1966; Parker, 2012). 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. Addressing controversial issues can help shift student focus from authoritative narratives and perspectives to heterogeneous micronarratives that draw on and challenge local and individual forms of knowledge (Levinson, 2008). Controversial issues widen and enlarge students' experiences through grappling with the normativity of topics and the multiple perspectives entertained among their teachers and peers as they work 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 or within the school but it supersedes those battles given that the essential mandate of schools is to encourage students to deliberate on issues from multiple sources and perspectives (Misco, 2011; Hess, 2004; Marcus & Stoddard, 2009).

Context is a critical lever for how an issue is filtered, rendered, or avoided because what are considered controversial changes over time and personal narratives are interpreted and mediated with local knowledge to create new knowledge (Levinson, 2008). Controversial issues are *controversial* because they ultimately speak to normative value judgements, which individuals frame within their ethical principles (Oulton, Dillon, & Grace, 2004), and 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 the dynamics as shaped through the attitudes and experiences of participants (McCully, 2006). Typically, it is not the teaching of controversy that raises concerns but the moral, social, and political substructure and the ways that schools handle these issues that provokes resistance and brings about teacher protection-oriented postures (Bridges, 1986; Byford, Lennon, & Russell, 2009).

School environmental factors, pointing to context and milieu, are significant variables where the “wider cultural milieu also mediates the effects of classroom climate” (Hahn & Tocci, 1990, p. 358) as are an intractable web of “social, cultural, and historical relations in which students themselves are situated” (King, 2009, p. 240). In some communities, issues simply become more controversial 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).

The extent to which controversial issues enjoy treatment in classrooms has profound implications for the kind of citizen Japan seeks to prepare. Westheimer and Kahne’s (2004) continuum of three orientations of citizen is instructive here. The Personally Responsible citizen “acts responsibly in his/her community” (p. 241) and focuses on values such as honesty, integrity, and volunteerism. Such citizens work at the local food drive, donate blood, and vote. The Participatory citizen builds upon the qualities of the Personally Responsible citizen by actively participating in the “civic affairs and the social life of the community at local, state, and national levels” (p. 241). Such citizens not only volunteer at the local food drive, they organize one. They not only vote but may also run for office. The justice-oriented citizen has all the characteristics of the other two but adds informed criticism and problem solving such that they are focused on “responding to social problems and to structural critique” (p. 242). These citizens might not only volunteer for and organize the food drive but also question policies that create class differences and poverty (Patterson, Doppin, & Misco, 2012).

After World War II, social studies in Japan started as a core subject in the citizenship education curriculum (Ikeno, et al., 2011) with the purpose of the subject widely believed to develop children’s citizenship capacities. Citizenship education in Japan, as in other democratic countries, is concerned with the development of responsible citizens who will contribute to their respective communities. There are various beliefs about citizenship in Japan, including the perspective that citizenship comprises pluralistic aims (Moriwake, 2001) and is the unity of knowledge, skills, and attitudes that are not able to be divided (Ikeno, 2009). Today, the latter belief is the more popular one and teachers and scholars have come to support the opinion that social studies should not only raise the knowledge

base of students, but also broaden their skills and attitudes. Therefore, discussion of controversial issues is being introduced in schools at both the elementary and high school levels. However, controversial issues are raised as problems without an absolute rule of “how I should decide to act?”, leaving this question up to each person’s judgement. In reality few teachers raise discussion of controversial issues in their classes, and those who do are generally engaged in researching controversial issues education. The question is why is it apparently difficult for most teachers to discuss controversial issues (Kuwabara, 2000)?

The school curriculum in Japan is determined by the government and detailed in textbooks. Therefore, teachers’ discretion in what they can teach is limited. The attitude of both students and their parents centres on the importance of entrance examinations rather than sources of knowledge and thus they tend to support common lessons in line with what is contained in the textbook. Although it is difficult for teachers to deal with controversial issues in social studies classes in Japan, the danger of doing so is not as high as it might be in other Asian countries. That is, in Japan, teachers can teach controversial issues if they teach in line with the content in textbooks and there is no pressure on teachers to do otherwise.

There are few substantial studies on the topic of teaching controversial subjects in Japan and many teachers and students regard social studies as learning by rote. Nevertheless, able and earnest teachers are willing to try various new teaching methods in order to improve social studies teaching and learning (Murai, 2014) as evidenced by an increasing number of qualitative studies of such teachers (Iwasaki, 2016; Okajima, 2018). Increasing studies, however, do not mean that the number of such teachers are also increasing.

Given the problems surrounding the teaching of controversial issues in Japan, the research questions framing this study are:

1. To what extent do social studies education teachers in Japan find value in broaching controversial issues? If they do, what is their rationale for doing so?
2. To what extent do teachers use, manipulate, or subvert the official curriculum in order to teach controversial issues? What pathways and challenges do they encounter when doing so?

Because these research questions ultimately focus upon teachers and the decisions they make about treatment of controversial issues, we decided to employ the theoretical lens of curricular-instructional gatekeeping as located within a particular context.

METHODOLOGY

As a preliminary examination of controversial issues instruction in Japanese social studies classes, this study employed qualitative methods, primarily because such research methods are well-suited for addressing research problems concerning norms, structures, conditions, and processes (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The research questions also contain normative elements and assume a constructivist ontology, which undergirds qualitative methods and asserts that there is not one reality but rather multiple interpretations and renderings of the world (Merriam, 2001). The primary source of data for this study was teacher interview responses.

We conducted semi-structured interviews with eight high school social studies teachers. All respondents teach within Okayama, Japan. We selected Okayama as a site of our study because two of the authors teach at universities in Okayama and because the authors have professional relationships with classroom teachers. As a form of member checking, we often repeated answers to respondents to approach a sense of verisimilitude of responses. One shortcoming of this study was the lack of long-term rapport building with respondents; as a result, some respondents may have been reluctant to explicate a full range of responses to the questions. We employed a purposive sampling technique because we sought out typical cases through a snowball method, which also involved key informants (Patton, 1990). Purposeful sampling lacks a rigid formula and instead relies upon criteria, such as accessibility, representability, and interest (Toma, 2006). We chose to conduct qualitative case studies given the dynamic nature of the research problem, the interpretivist research questions, and the bounded cultural context of Japan that houses controversial issues (Miles & Huberman, 1994; LeCompte & Schensul, 1999). A case study approach, when thickly described, is well-suited for understanding educational problems, processes, and discovery rather than confirmation, as they typically “reveal something about a phenomenon, knowledge we would not otherwise have access to” (Merriam, 2001, p. 33).

Data analysis

Rather than apply analytical tools *a priori*, analysis involved data induction to form theoretical categories and tentative relationships (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Employing an inductive-generative-constructive approach, we sought to understand relationships of data (i.e. generate hypotheses) through initial observation, refinement, and comparison to emergent category coding, whereby collection and processing of data was simultaneous (Goetz & LeCompte, 1981; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Tentative typologies informed data reduction and organization by recurring themes that fit within the established research questions, while attempting to retain conceptuality and not dilute thick description into thin description (Steiner-Khamsi, Torney-Purta, & Schwille, 2002). By employing a cross-case synthesis approach (Yin, 2009) we were able to construct cross-case patterns which strengthen the credibility of findings. We adhered to Yin’s (2009) caveats for case study analysis because we attended to all evidence, addressed all major rival interpretations, explored most significant aspects of cases, and employed our own prior knowledge of this topic and context. Although findings in this context are not necessarily applicable to another context, they have the potential to generate hypotheses for other current or future contexts and can inform policy and practice implications not only for the context under study but for similar contexts as well (Hahn & Alviar-Martin, 2008; Schofield, 1990).

FINDINGS

Goals of social studies

Teachers noted common goals of social studies in Japanese classrooms. At 28, Kasumi has taught high school for five years in a rural community outside of Okayama. She teaches Japanese history and contemporary society and holds a Bachelor of Arts (B.A.) in history and an M.Ed. in social studies education. Contemporary society provides an introduction to politics, ethics, and economics. Kasumi suggested that social studies

should be taught for “knowledge and skills for the society to go into the society” and that the goal of social studies education is “encouraging students to obtain knowledge and skills as a member of society” and should develop a love for learning. Her expressed rationale for students learning controversial issues was described as a “desire for students to understand different opinions and perspectives.”

Takashi is a 54-year-old high school teacher with 29 years of teaching experience. He currently teaches contemporary society and local culture and history. He believes that social studies education should “... teach more citizenship qualities so that students understand the systems of the country and the relationship of nation and local communities.” Ultimately, he hopes to prepare students “to take action” in harmony with others since “we cannot live alone, we can live with other member of the community.”

The other participants also indicated goals related to developing students’ perspectives and abilities to make change and be socially active and engaged. At 30 years old, Juro has six years teacher experience and currently instructs in courses on world history, politics, and economics. Juro asserted that social studies is “the study of us and the something around us, which includes humans—social studies is about humans.” He felt the primary purpose within this aim is the improvement of student judgement, in particular about historical views, neighbouring countries and, after graduation, students “could make a judgement about their own historical perspectives; this could improve skills about judgement.”

At 34, Shirou has been teaching for 11 years. He holds an M.A. in social studies education and a B.A. in law. Shirou suggested there are various purposes for social studies education, but his primary expectation is that students use the content knowledge of the social studies affiliated disciplines after high school. He stated his goal as “students knowing about the past things, some of which could be related to our lives, such as current issues, that they could take action to change the world or not change the world.”

At 25, Tomo has less than two years teaching experience. She holds B.A. and M.A. degrees in education and teaches high school world history, politics, and economics. She suggested that the goal of social studies education “varies in different schools” whereby “students should understand their own lives and their roots. They should understand something surrounding them and the main goal is that they should explain what they learned to others in the classroom—those who do not understand some topics and events.” Tomo indicated that social studies teachers should teach some controversial topics because the purpose of social studies is related to society, whereby students should understand society as well as social issues.

At 28, Taki has six years of teaching experience and currently teaches world history and geography in the City of Okayama. Taki views the primary goal of social studies education as the development of “judgement using their knowledge that they learned in high school.” Judgements, from Taki’s perspective, need to be made about the proposed change to Article 9 of the Constitution, understanding the media critically, and any topic they face. Taki suggested that “the role of social studies is to teach thinking, but most of the time I teach the content—about three or four times per year I give an opportunity for students to develop their thinking.”

Ichikawa teaches at one of Okayama's best high schools. At 29, he has eight years teaching experience, most recently in Japanese history and contemporary society. Ichikawa believes that social studies is the "connection between students and society where the goal is citizenship." Students who will graduate from high school should also "know the rules to survive and live—if they don't know the rules, they can't do anything." In addition to learning about different viewpoints, perspectives, and understandings, students should "learn the social system that controls over different opinions and regarding citizenship, the student should learn how to make judgements." Ichikawa expects students to make judgements based on evidence and data.

At 35, Miyagi has ten years teaching experience at Okayama's top high school. He holds B.A. and M.A. degrees in Law, as well as social studies education certification obtained during his M.A. As a current teacher of contemporary society, he felt social studies education should "improve of skills and problem solving and help students to make judgements based on the right content knowledge." Miyagi indicated that social studies could also help students to improve their thinking skills and make judgements, so "we have to address controversial topics for students."

Contextual forces/challenges

Respondents cited many reasons for choosing not to teach controversial issues: 1) controversial issues were not a part of the explicit teacher education curriculum, 2) time constraints, 3) curricular constraints, 4) feeling the need to remain or seem neutral on issues, and 5) standardization of content which keeps teachers from changing the content.

Kasumi said, "I want the student to discuss more, if I have time. But the reality is I don't have time." Kasumi cited a "need to follow this curriculum" as resulting in a lack of time. Although "we are fortunate to teach contemporary society to these students, teachers need to focus on the college entrance exams, and the student needs to prepare; not enough time to teach or discuss."

If the high stakes exams weren't in place, Kasumi felt parents, administrators, and the school board would support teaching controversial issues. Also, she suggested, if the college entrance exam questions could be changed to open response items, then there could be cascading effects on approaches to teaching and teaching controversial issues. Kasumi indicated that "the image of social studies could be changed. Many students think [that in] social studies [class] they should memorize everything then they could pass the entrance exam; student should know more basic information on the topics for controversial issues, but nowadays student don't want to learn, but only memorize. So now is the challenge to change student thinking about social studies from memorization to more thinking."

Juro indicated that "in world history classes I don't ask such questions to students. In contemporary society class, three years ago I did. But not in world history and politics." He suggested that in world history there is "not enough time and also no time to ask questions to students." Moreover, in the politics class, "there is too much to cover and it is harder to ask in this class, which has so many students in it." As a result, controversial issues are located in elective courses.

Juro also suggested that textbooks, exams, his own passions, and too many students in classes undermine the treatment of controversial issues, but he indicated general support

from administrators and parents should he choose to engage in their treatment. The history curriculum generally “has too much information” and Juro felt “some figures should not be taught. The important ones, yes, but students should understand more of the whole picture, not the detailed information. The students need to see the bigger picture.”

Takashi suggested that there are many controversial issues, including territorial disputes and labour conditions for the young and working poor, but the most important one is the change of the Constitution. Takashi felt “the discussion should be about the future of that.” Constitutional Article 9, including the Japanese renunciation of war and military use, as well as the civil defense force, is hotly contested.

Shirou indicated that his rationale for teaching controversial issues was not developed in teacher education, since it was not covered, but he “did see this being taught which is helpful for now.” Although “professors didn’t provide anything about controversial issues instruction... they would ask questions at the beginning to think about. Students then thought about the topics sometimes together and summarized the topics and thought about questions for the rest of the classroom and students discussed and criticized the ideas.” Ultimately the school curriculum and study guides furnished by the Ministry drive what is taught “which doesn’t include many controversies.”

Tomo “wants to teach some controversial topics but I want to take some balance—I don’t want to promote any parties or religions. Some other teachers want to avoid controversial issues and only teach superficial information to the students.” Tomo indicated comfort women and the Holocaust in Germany as controversial issues, but “teachers don’t have to teach about comfort women—textbooks do address this. I don’t teach about comfort women because I don’t have enough time to teach. That could be in Japanese history, so maybe they teach that in that class. But I don’t think most people want to teach about that because the issue is too political.”

Tomo felt she could teach controversial issues in the rest of the school year, including about comfort women, nuclear weapons, the economic gap, women in society, and raising children. But when “I talk about controversial issues I might not be neutral so I could provide more materials to students. But I don’t do that. I am not ready—I’m busy preparing for the teaching license exam. I have no time to answer student questions but I’m encouraging them to ask questions, but most students are shy, so they don’t ask in the classroom. I encourage them to write down things; I’m listing all questions and trying to answer all questions in the next term.”

Tomo felt the greatest challenge to effective social studies education in Japan is the gap between research and practice. Teachers “try to use lesson plans but sometimes they are not working.” Also, many teachers with teaching experience “don’t want to read long research papers. They just want quick lessons. I want to introduce more research to the rest of the teachers and open more lesson plans to other teachers and reduce the gap between research and practice.”

Taki desired more time for discussion of issues but admitted that students still need to take the test and exam, as well as the college entrance exams. He indicated that “covering the content in textbooks is his main responsibility” and “students don’t know much about basic information, like the political process.” Without basic content knowledge, “they can’t think about whether we should change things like Article 9. It is impossible unless

we have more knowledge about these topics. Students need to know more about the basic content first.” Taki, therefore, suggested that the greatest challenge to successful social studies education in Japan is “discussion and the use of discussion. Japanese kids are shy, and they don’t want to share their opinions and they are not taught how to make comments in the classroom.” If students say something “then the rest of the class might say something negative—so many students don’t want to make comments in the classroom setting.”

Ichikawa said, “I don’t provide many opportunities to make judgements, usually once or twice a year.” Because his school “is one of the best in the prefecture, with so many students going to the universities and colleges, the teacher should cover the content of the textbooks and so there is not enough time.” In addition, the contemporary issues course meets two hours per week, so there is “not enough time for such opportunities.”

Also, because of the nature of the school with many students entering the university, he felt time limitations contributed to not “teaching these topics well.” In reality, “I don’t teach these controversial issues (Nanjing and comfort women) but I do teach other issues. It could be hard to find controversial topics in Japanese history, but in civics, I could.” When asked why he did not want to talk about it, he suggested he had “no desire to talk about them because of time issues. There is not enough time. There are important issues to discuss, but I don’t because of the time issue.” Ichikawa stated that he “covers the content and teaches the knowledge to students to take entrance exam. Practically, the entrance exam only checks content knowledge, not student thinking and I need to teach the content so they can take the exam.”

Miyagi pointed to time as a core contextual issue as well, “I want to teach more and spend more time on this, but the time pressure so I try to finish it in one or two periods.” He contended that students do need to know the content knowledge, but that the exam requires students to think about some topics.

Reasons to teach controversial issues

Despite the aforementioned reasons for not teaching controversial issues, some respondents do try to incorporate the issues in their curriculum. Kasumi indicated she teaches some of these topics, but they “are not the centre of the classroom. I don’t choose any particular topics for each class, but I show multiple perspectives for these topics.” She also asks “students to use newspapers to see views of different perspectives. I want the student to discuss more, if I have time.”

Takashi indicated that social studies educators should address controversial issues primarily “because Japanese people didn’t use to address these topics as a society [but] in this global society Japanese people should introduce and talk more about these openly so students can improve their communication skills and critical thinking skills and views and cultural differences and local issues.” He primarily focuses on teaching topics students are interested in, even if they are not within the Ministry of Education guidelines. He feels he “can choose any topics to teach. I think about how to raise the topic for students, thinking about the exam but mostly about their background, not having any practice with discussion and debate.”

Juro asserted that the death penalty, nuclear power, and territorial issues, including those with China, Korea, and Russia are controversial issues. When asked if students really

cared about territorial disputes with Russia, he indicated that students “think this is part of Japan. But when I explain about the territory from another perspective, that most are Russians, then students see this another way. I teach both ways.” When studying the death penalty, he asks students to read documents, write essays, then read their essays to the rest of the class, and share their opinions with classmates.

Shirou is able to address controversial issues in the current events class as there are only four students enrolled. First, he distributes materials, then summarizes what was learned, and engages in “questions and answers.” By “teaching the materials,” he indicated, “... most of the students are visual learners, I show the PowerPoint and maps and pictures and chronological events.” Shirou noted that he tries to “speak about controversial issues every time, but the reality is I do not. It would be hard to do.”

Tomo indicated that “in my classroom, I ask about the presence of nuclear weapons and some student said we don’t have to have them and other said even if we don’t have them, someone could produce them. Some students say they don’t know why the nuclear weapons should be eradicated. They don’t know the answers and they don’t know how to disarm nuclear weapons in the world.” As a graduate student, she recalled hearing about a conference about controversial issues instruction and she “knows how to use them in classrooms” such as the “lesson plan made by the other teacher for discussing nuclear weapons.” As already noted, she “tries to be neutral, but if I give information about one side more, they could be influenced more by this side. So, I found it is hard to keep the neutral position when talking about controversial issues in the classroom

Taki tries to provide opportunities for students to “speak out but I don’t want to share my own opinions with these students because now they seem passive and they could be influenced by my perspectives. I’m scared of sharing my ideas with the students. So that’s why I don’t share.” But, because his new school is more technically-oriented and many students don’t want to go to higher education, he indicated that he “can teach many topics that aren’t related to the college exam.” He asserted that it is important for students to address controversial issues because “through discussion and debate they could understand different ideas and perspectives and ideas could be changed or influenced by the ideas of others. They could understand better through this method.” In total, he teaches a course for 50 hours, or two hours per week, five of which he uses to address these sorts of issues.

Ichikawa felt students should confront controversial issues. Once they graduate from high school and “go into society and they will experience these, so in high school they could be trained to tackle these issues.” Ichikawa teaches these topics in Japanese history, but he felt he “doesn’t teach well about both events—just superficial information.” He regarded both events as “hard to teach without rich information and a balance of both sides. Some think differently about these and they are sensitive to many people.” When asked to give an example, he explains that when he teaches about the death penalty, he addresses how it is done in other countries. He “teaches the information to the students but I don’t ask questions of the students. I don’t have any intention of having them engage in discussion. I taught this topic and then moved on.” When asked why he did not want to talk about it, he said he had “no desire to talk about it because of time issues. There is not enough time. There are important issues to discuss, but I don’t because of the time issue.” After Ichikawa started teaching at this school, he found he had to teach to the test.

He “covers the content and teaches the knowledge to students to take entrance exam. Practically, the entrance exam only checks content knowledge, not student thinking and I need to teach the content so they can take the exam.”

Miyagi addresses these issues by first teaching content knowledge to students, including different perspectives. On the topic of nuclear weapons, he asks students to research nuclear issues and “find some problems about nuclear weapons and identify questions about the issues and some resolutions about what to do about nuclear weapons.” He also takes this approach to voting, asking students to think about the meaning of voting, identify questions, and find solutions for what to do.”

In order to teach these issues effectively, he “use[s] various ways of teaching—giving basic information and a summary of ideas and topics and then students think about their topics. I ask questions of the students. I also use debates and simulations.” Miyagi suggested that teaching controversial issues is difficult because of the structure of the textbook, which “mainly only cover theories—they don’t describe particular things. At the schools where most students don’t go to the universities, they are more actively centered.” Miyagi felt many social studies educators “misunderstand the subject—they think content knowledge is best—but I think students can answer the exam questions better with thinking skills.” Because of this, Miyagi indicated that most other social studies teachers focus on memorization for exam preparation.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Although Japanese social studies education is uniquely related in aims and goals with social studies education in the US, most respondents did not indicate that controversial issues education is part of their teacher preparation program. The absence of pervasiveness in terms of rationale is an immediate undermining force for gatekeeping decisions to teach about controversial issues (Thornton, 1991; 2001; 2006). Yet, respondents outlined a wide variety of social studies education goals in Japan, many of which are consistent with National Council for Social Studies (NCSS) goals (NCSS, 2010). Respondents suggested that having students grapple with multiple points of view is a primary goal because they construct beliefs about society and social issues.

In settings such as Japan, the extent to which teachers can “open the curricular-instructional gate; for whom, when, and which gates to what they open” (Thornton, 2006, p. 418) hinges upon the contextual features as found in the material, size, and weight of the gate, as well as the fence, in addition to the prevailing elements beyond the control and ken of the gate and fence. The surfeit of controversial issues respondents identified rarely enjoy exploration in social studies classrooms because the obstacles and barriers to controversial issues instruction in Japan are numerous and pervasive. The nature of the social studies subject matter, in the form of detailed Ministry of Education content directives, textbooks that avoid controversial issues, and the importance of the national exam all serve to direct teachers and students to testable declarative content knowledge not related to the aforementioned controversial issues. Pedagogical approaches are primarily of a direct instruction ilk, which further undermines opportunities for discussion or deliberation about controversial issues. In total, this instructional leitmotif points to a personally responsible paradigm of citizenship education (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004).

Respondents cited student and teacher habituation to this instructional paradigm, lack of time, few classes, student lack of knowledge for discussion, teacher lack of knowledge, and a general cursory approach to the content as reasons for not engaging in discussions. Respondents also described a debate paradigm within Japan, rather than discussion or deliberation, and the need for equal time and balance of both sides of an issue, which they either had scant time to provide or not enough perceived knowledge to structure. Respondents were also concerned that their beliefs might influence student beliefs or that their instruction might seem too political in nature. In addition, respondents did not want to engage in issues that lacked consensus and were not yet resolved, including “comfort women” and Nanjing.

In spite of these perceived barriers to controversial issues instruction, respondents did cite a number of pathways and possible entry points for other teachers to engage in these issues. For example, elective courses enjoy a great deal of opportunity for exploring controversial issues, primarily because there is no connection to the national exam and parents and administrators generally endow teachers with a great deal of autonomy and flexibility. All of the respondents indicated that under the right conditions, parents and administrators would be supportive, or at least not obstructive to, the teaching of controversial topics. Schools that are not academically high-performing are also better positioned to allow for controversial issue instruction given the comparatively less onerous effect of the national exam on teaching and learning.

Although a book series of teaching controversial issues was published in Japan and some respondents recognized the importance of teaching controversial issues, they also indicated that this was not part of their teacher education training and, in some cases, they had never considered the concept of a controversial issue. The controversial issues respondents cited were quite distinct from those Nishikawa (2005) advanced, and the status of controversial issues as inchoate or nebulous, rather than containing a “right” answer, served to thwart the interest of respondents in teaching about them.

The result of this research provides three points for improving social studies teaching and learning. First, teachers who actively make every effort to include controversial issues have a clear perspective of social studies education and clarity about what kind of controversial issues should be picked up. Secondly, in Japan, there are two categories of controversial issues that teachers select for their classes. One is the problem that occurs in a local community, for example, community planning. Another is the state scale problem, such as revising the Constitution and military defense. In Japan, the problems of religion and gender are hardly treated as familiar as they are in the US. Third, the selecting criterion of the highest priority is whether the problem is familiar to students. Teachers tend to regard student interest in learning as the most important point. Therefore, teachers often select the problems of the local community and avoid the issues of revising the Constitution and military defense. In the future, it is important to develop student understanding of state-scale problems.

Respondents’ perspectives also suggest that the role of the textbook, while important, is not as singularly important as the literature would suggest. Rather, teachers and their attitudes about controversial issues are much more germane for understanding the extent to which issues are broached in classrooms. We did not find pervasive war guilt because respondents indicated that topics related to the war were either lacking consensus, not

known to students, too complicated, or too political. Respondents never mentioned the Yasukuni Shrine as a controversial issue nor did the “love of homeland” figure into avoiding sensitive historical topics.

We contend that controversial issue instruction within Japanese social studies classrooms is potentially moribund and more studies are needed to determine the extent to which controversial issues instruction occurs and find exemplars who negotiate variables and forces working in opposition. Miyagi highlighted the need for teachers to rethink how they teach for exams and the ways in which addressing controversial issues through discussion and inquiry is responsive to this aim, which we underscore as a policy recommendation. We suggest an expanded inquiry into his approach of confronting controversial issues, as well as case studies of other teachers who are finding successes negotiating contextual forces. In addition, we contend that social studies teacher education in Japan should revisit the rationale for teaching controversial issues and help future teachers develop their rationales. Without fully understanding the salubrious potency of this central concern of social studies education, teachers would find little reason to modify current instructional, curricular, and structural approaches to citizenship education within the social studies.

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