



Teaching Controversial Issues and Social Problems from an Integrated Perspective

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Abstract

The purpose of working on social problems in education is based on the need to critically understand reality, to apply the concept of social justice, and to learn and teach how to participate actively, committedly and responsibly in the construction of answers or alternatives to a naturally problematic reality. Dealing with social problems appears to be linked to the development of critical social thinking, to the acquisition of social competences and, consequently, to education for a participatory democratic culture. Educating for social intervention therefore requires the curricular incorporation of relevant social problems, controversial issues or socially live issues from an integrated transdisciplinary perspective, and the acquisition of the competences to teach in and for a democratic, inclusive and truly egalitarian citizenship.

We find ourselves in a world with growing economic, political, environmental and social problems, which justify the educational need to teach controversial issues and social problems.¹ The teaching of controversial issues, defined as opposing view-

¹ Considering its natural relational and conceptual interdependence, in this introduction we use the terms “controversial issue” and “social problem” equivalently. However, we refer to one or the other term depending on the contextual specificities that require, necessarily, their explicitness.

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points that generate rational disagreements, aims to increase critical awareness of social problems and to develop the civic competences necessary to address them. Indeed, curricular problematisation or the didactic treatment of social problems favours the comprehensive deepening of social reality, the contrast of argued perspectives in the critical analysis of sources, the elective rationality for decision-making in problematic contexts and social commitment as an inherent part of the democratic process.

This educational problematisation or controversial ‘thematisation’ of the curriculum incorporates conflict in its definition and refers to social problems of diverse nature and interest for society as a whole, and is constructed through the confrontation of opposing beliefs, values or interests. It is therefore an indispensable element for anticipating, intervening and solving social problems peacefully. Indeed, Meral et al. [19], based on Dewhurst [9] and the National Council for Social Studies (NCSS), conclude that

The topic of controversial issues is an effective tool for learners to think about real-life problems, evaluate different perspectives, produce versatile solutions to problems, and put forward their own ideas with justifications. In addition, discussing over controversial issues helps develop students' attitudes and skills such as learning about social problems, critical thinking, and willingness to compromise. [21, p. 144]

The educational inclusion of social problems and controversial issues represents, consequently, one of the most relevant axes for the education of a committed, responsible and truly democratic citizenship. The scientific literature has shown that the teaching of controversial issues is one of the most powerful tools for the promotion of active citizenship, and for the development and acquisition of critical-reflective thinking skills [20]. This type of content, inherent to increasingly heterogeneous societies, has been and continues to be part of the body of concerns of educational research from a multidisciplinary perspective [31].

However, the complexities, risks and interference of emotional reactions to learning about sensitive, controversial or contentious historical, geographical or social issues have also been highlighted [14, 16, 28, 29]. In this regard, there is frequent research evidencing the difficulties both in including controversial issues and social problems in schools [5] and in teachers' teaching plans [7]. These obstacles, explained by the most recent international scientific literature because of its multifaceted and multifactorial nature (personal, socio-political, cultural, historical and identity) [6], tend to be reinforced and therefore prevent curricular problematisation or the explicit inclusion of social problems and controversial issues in education.

We agree with [22, 25] and Aynuz [3] in affirming the widespread avoidance of this type of content during teaching, and the methodological and self-efficacy shortcomings of teachers in teaching it. In this regard, research by Pollak et al. [27] identified the existence of Israeli teaching positions aimed at avoiding social controversy; a position also identified by Ortega-Sánchez and Pagès [23] in Spanish Secondary School Social Sciences teachers, and by Kello [17] in Estonian and Latvian History teachers. In the latter study, the concealment or avoidance of

controversial topics in the classroom was one of the approaches observed, along with others aimed at finding common ground and enhancing heterogeneity, similar to those also recognised by Pollak et al. [27] and Ortega-Sánchez and Pagès [23].

There seems to be clear agreement that the development of communicative (dialogical and argumentative) and deliberative skills is at the core of the most appropriate teaching strategies when discussing problematic or controversial content [2]. In this line, recent studies have advanced in the analysis of the strategies employed by teacher educators in teaching controversial topics [22, 24], and in their curricular decisions on this teaching [15]. These developments confirm the desirability of working on deliberative skills, based on conversational learning, for the didactic treatment of controversial issues.

The promotion of discussion around specific social justice issues [12] has also been addressed through the use of controversial or documentary images in teacher education contexts, in order to question what is happening or has happened in present and past societies [13]. Other pedagogical approaches using forum theatre are also beginning to be proposed, based on the theoretical principles of critical, artistic and theatrical pedagogy [11]. These approaches are based on the concept of critical education, which “works theoretically and practically toward social change”. [18, p. 143]

In contemporary broadly multicultural democratic societies, the acquisition of communicative competence on controversial cultural issues also emerges as a key training element for future teachers. As [8] study of South Korean primary school teachers' experiences explores, teachers' critical cultural awareness conditions their professional judgement in teaching these controversial cultural issues.

The promotion of the teaching of controversial and sensitive topics, which is prominently recognised in Anglo-American societies, aims to contribute to education for active citizenship, based on democratic and therefore inclusive values. To this end, we agree with [1] on the need to consider students' experiences and interests in the selection of a controversial topic, to prepare them before dealing with it by means of appropriate information and argument resources, to encourage equal participation and multiperspective in its discussion, and to promote an assessment based on the use of arguments that justify and define the rationality of the positions-decisions adopted.

We agree with [30] in considering the affective dimension of teaching controversial or sensitive topics with historical content. This dimension derives from the need to work on students' representations of the past, particularly influenced by contemporary political polarisation, to reflect on the potential imbalance between rationality and emotion that sustains them, and to redirect the purpose of teaching towards the acquisition of skills in democratic culture.

Educating to intervene in local and global social problems requires a transdisciplinary didactic approach. In this sense, integrated STEAM education favours the development and acquisition of competences for the intervention and resolution of contemporary problems (Fig. 1.1). Indeed, “while STEM can offer some solutions, it is the critical thinking, problem-solving, and socially conscious based approaches that make these solutions a reality. Social studies, and the goals of social studies

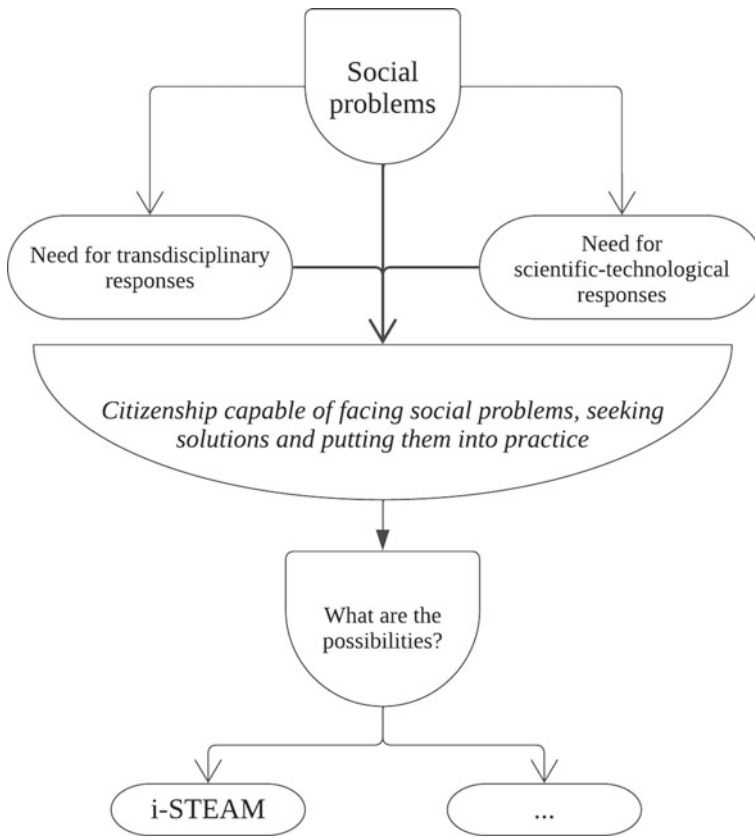


Fig. 1.1 Source own preparation based on Greca [10]

education, can bridge the gap between the technical aspects and the human requirements" [26, p. 37].

From an integrated science education perspective, Meral et al. [19],

Science plays a major role in finding solutions to many issues that are considered controversial in all societies. Regarding the solution process, despite the clear impact of controversial issues in the field of social sciences and socio-scientific issues including both scientific and social issues in the field of science, they are often avoided while teaching. (p. 143)

From this approach, and in order to guide the teaching of controversial topics, Pace et al. [25] has proposed a framework for action for curriculum design and the promotion of reflective practice. Underlying this catalogue of guidelines for teaching controversial topics is argumentation [4, 19] as a basic didactic procedure:

1. Cultivate a supportive environment through community building, norms, openness to dissent, individual affirmation, and humour.

2. Prepare thoroughly with attention to student identity and development, teaching contexts, subject matter, purposes, and methods.
3. Think through teacher stance including pedagogical roles, positions on issues, and pros and cons of disclosing teacher views.
4. Communicate proactively with students, parents, colleagues, and administrators about issues that will be studied.
5. Select authentic issues and frame questions to promote student engagement and inquiry, progressing from cooler to hotter issues.
6. Choose resources and pedagogies that challenge assumptions, include diverse voices and perspectives, and foster participation.
7. Guide discussion with tools for analysing sources, exchanging ideas, moving from small groups to whole group, and attending to equity.
8. Address emotions by creating space for processing them, using de-escalation moves as needed, and developing self-awareness.

In this context, the general aims of this monographic volume are, on the one hand, to understand teachers' discourses and decision-making on social problems and controversial issues in transdisciplinary educational contexts. On the other hand, it aims to offer studies focusing on the analysis of the levels of coherence between teachers' attitudes, stances and practices for teaching and learning about social problems and controversial issues from an integrated disciplinary perspective.

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