

The Views of Omani Social Studies Teachers About the Inclusion of Controversial Issues in the Social Studies Curriculum

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Abstract. The aim of the study is to investigate the views of Omani social studies teachers about the inclusion of controversial issues in the social studies curriculum. Data was gathered through a questionnaire consisting of 25 items divided into 5 areas: political, social, environmental, cultural and commercial. The validity of the questionnaire was tested by a panel of judges and its reliability was obtained by conducting it with 32 social studies teachers. The Alpha Cronbach scale was used and the score was .87.

Data was collected from 201 social studies teachers, 94 male and 107 female. The results showed that Omani social studies teachers support the inclusion in the social studies curriculum of the controversial political, social, environmental, cultural and economic issues listed.

1. Introduction

We are living in a world where different groups of people have different views about many political, economic, social, cultural, religious, environmental, and scientific events, ideas and products that we encounter. The differences in these views arise from the variety of people's backgrounds, beliefs, values, attitudes and religious tenets and may cause tension, ill-will or conflict within a society, within an organization or between countries.

A topic which causes this difference in views is often called a "controversial issue". This term was defined by Stradling [1] as "those issues on which our society is clearly divided and significant groups within society advocate conflicting explanations or solutions, which are based on alternate values"(9). Marach [2] defines them as "unresolved issues that emerge from events or may be a result of some action" (133). Oxfam [3] states: "issues that are likely to be sensitive or controversial are those that have a political, social or personal impact and arouse feeling and/or deal with questions of value or belief" (2). All these definitions agree that - regardless of their cause - controversial issues can divide a society and create conflict. In this study we will define controversial issues as events, ideas or products about which people have divided views due to differences in their political, social, cultural, economic, religious or scientific beliefs or backgrounds. Such issues frequently arouse negative attitudes or cause actual conflict.

Given such a definition, it is evident that controversial issues can have more or less serious consequences because they are able to divide society and cause silent or open political or economic

conflict. Both history and current events have taught us that these issues have even led to war in a number of countries. From an educational point of view, we have to consider how best to equip students with the knowledge and skills which will enable them to deal with these issues, which are part of our life and cannot be avoided. Indeed, we face them whenever we educate students about such topics as the conservation of their culture, organic food products, freedom, the generation gap and political and economic policies.

It is essential, then, that we should concern ourselves with how the school curriculum can develop students' knowledge and critical thinking about these issues, as well as their attitudes to them, and their behavior in situations where they are a factor. Malikow [4] believes that the ability to deal with such issues is an important life skill which education should impart. Werner [5] states that "some issues are so intrinsically important to our individual and collective experience that they are worth studying for their own sake" (7). National Council For Social Studies [6] advocates that we address these issues in the school curriculum in order to develop the skills that students need to deal with them, such as analyzing problems, gathering and organizing facts, discriminating between facts and opinion, discussing different points of view, and drawing tentative conclusions. Addressing these issues directly will also develop students' attitudes and political practice [7], as well as correct misconceptions about the issues [8].

The social studies curriculum has the potential to address the controversial issues in society because its content covers the areas related to these issues, such as historical and current events, and social, political, economic, cultural and environmental issues, as well as tourism, natural resources, disasters and development. Parker [9] argues that "there is no doubt that the social studies teacher has responsibility to include controversial issues in the current events and social studies curriculum" (187). Kahne and Westheimer [10] believe that social studies education should definitely include such controversial issues as poverty, race, gender discrimination and environmental degradation, while Oulton et al [11] explain that, as each historical event is interpreted differently by different people; teachers have to clarify the facts related to these events and discuss them with their students.

According to the studies above, the social studies curriculum can make a difference in addressing controversial issues. However, there are a number of obstacles to this, one being teachers' views about teaching these topics. The literature shows that many teachers are afraid to teach these issues because of curriculum barriers [11] difficulties in obtaining information [12] political pressure [13], possible criticism from parents [11] and the potentially negative impact on student behavior [14]. These fears may be due to worry about which controversial issues will be selected; not all issues are suitable for the classroom and we cannot force teachers to teach those that will lead to negative reactions.

We therefore need to take into consideration the views of social studies teachers about which controversial topics should be included in the social studies curriculum, and which should be omitted. The teachers' involvement in the selection of the issues will ease their fears and encourage them to consider it part of their educational mission to develop students' knowledge of such issues, their attitudes to them and the life skills they need to deal with them. The need to include social studies teachers in the selection of these issues is supported by the literature, which also shows that teachers generally do support the teaching of controversial issues [15, 16,17, 18]. Their fear of teaching them, then, comes mainly from fear that they will have to teach unsuitable topics, and that they have no control over the selection.

A number of studies have investigated the views of social studies educators in various countries about the inclusion of controversial topics in the curriculum. Karam [18] found that social studies

supervisors in Kuwait support the inclusion of topics related to human rights, drugs, citizenship, democracy and genetic engineering. Nqoloba [19] found that teachers in South Africa support the inclusion of sexuality and related topics while MacDonald [20] found that teachers in Canada support the inclusion of nationalism, globalization, ideology, the political spectrum, mutual respect, the classroom climate, tolerance, and most commonly, multiple perspectives in social studies.

This study aims at investigating the views of Omani social studies teachers about the inclusion of controversial issues in the curriculum. The reasons for conducting this study are twofold: firstly, a shortage of studies which evaluate such views. Most of the previous studies are concerned with teachers' attitudes toward teaching controversial issues rather than to which should be in the curriculum. Secondly, this study will provide an opportunity for social studies teachers to contribute to the development of the social studies curriculum in Oman, being as we are at a point where the Ministry of Education feels that it is time to make major curriculum changes in response to society's demands for changes to both the curriculum and wider government policy on the education system.

2. Research questions

This study aims at investigating the views of Omani social studies teachers about the inclusion of controversial issues in the Omani social studies curriculum. The main focus of this study is:

What are the views of Omani social studies teachers about the inclusion of controversial issues in the Omani social studies curriculum?

3. Aims of the study

Investigate the views of Omani social studies teachers about the inclusion of controversial issues in the Omani social studies curriculum.

4. Importance of this study

- It provides information about the views of Omani social studies teachers about the inclusion of controversial issues in the Omani social studies curriculum.
- It will help in developing the Omani social studies curriculum by taking into consideration teachers' views about the inclusion of controversial issues.
- It enriches the literature about controversial issues in the social studies curriculum.

5. Methodology

5.1 Participants

Data was collected from 201 Omani social studies teachers, 94 male and 107 female. Four hundred questionnaires were sent out in an attempt to reach more informants, but the shortage of completion time allowed meant that the return was only around 50%.

5.2 Instrument

A questionnaire was used to gather data from social studies teachers. The questionnaire was developed by the researcher based on a review of the literature, of Omani education policy, and of the objectives of the Omani social studies curriculum. The questionnaire consisted of 25 items divided into 5 areas: political, social, environmental, cultural and economic. Religious considerations were taken into account in the selection of issues to be researched, so that things forbidden in Islam, such as abortion and gay relationships, were eliminated from the selection, as

these are not up for discussion. The questionnaire was validated by a panel of judges and reliability was examined by using Alpha Cronbach (.87).

6. Results

What are the views of Omani social studies teachers about the inclusion of controversial issues in the Omani social studies curriculum?

Table 1 shows the mean and standard deviations of the Omani social studies teachers' views about the inclusion of specific controversial issues in the Omani social studies curriculum.

Table 1. mean and standard deviations of social studies teachers' attitudes

Items	Content of item	Mean	Std. Deviation
1	Political pluralism	4.16	.890
2	Illegal immigration	4.17	.920
3	Human rights	4.15	1.08
4	Freedom of opinion	4.17	1.01
5	Minorities	3.92	1.06
Political		4.07	.790
5	Drugs	3.87	1.18
6	Overseas development assistance	3.82	1.15
7	Old Age Home	4.10	1.02
8	Women's employment	3.93	1.23
9	Women's empowerment	4.19	.942
10	Social welfare	4.16	1.02
Social		4.01	.793
11	Genetically modified food products	4.04	1.18
12	Climate change	4.01	1.18
13	Pollution	3.91	.965
14	Environmental organizations	3.95	1.16
Environmental		3.97	.968
15	Freedom of media	3.73	1.24
16	Behavior Freedom	3.81	1.25
17	Cultural change	4.06	1.12
18	Multiculturalism	3.84	1.24
19	Tourism	3.99	1.16
Cultural		3.87	.995
20	Protection of personal information	3.43	1.03
21	Consumers' right to know product ingredients	3.42	.993
22	Investment in natural resources	3.36	1.12
23	Freedom of commercial advertising	3.16	1.20
24	Privatization	2.87	1.25
Economic		3.23	.931
General average		3.83	.697

The results show that Omani social studies teachers generally support the inclusion of controversial issues from the fields of politics, the environment, and social, cultural and commercial topics. The results also reveal that the inclusion of all the political issues received the highest concern from these teachers while the inclusion of the economic issues received only average approval.

7. Discussion

The results showed that Omani social studies teachers support the inclusion of some controversial issues. There are a number of possible reasons for this: the fact that teachers are aware, firstly, of the seriousness of ignoring these issues in social studies teaching and secondly, that they see a need to develop students' knowledge of these issues, their attitudes to them and the skills needed to cope with these issues as they arise in their daily lives. The teachers' support could also be due to the current instability of the Middle East area and its social and economic development; these factors are viewed differently by different groups of people, each of whom has effectively used the media to spread their ideas and beliefs. In this environment, the social studies curriculum has the power to address these issues in a logical way, to take all views into consideration and to develop students' ability to evaluate these views and come up with conclusions.

The results also showed that the Omani social studies teachers are deeply concerned about the inclusion of political topics. This may be because the Middle East region has been facing a lot of political problems over the last few decades, and these problems have divided societies and aroused negative attitudes through the use of the media for political campaigning. The so-called Arab Spring is another possible factor, as it also has bitterly divided societies into those who support it and those who oppose it.

The social studies teachers also support the inclusion of social, environmental and cultural topics. This may be because of Oman's economic development and its effects on the social, cultural and environmental aspects of life in the nation, especially as this development has divided opinions. On one hand are social, cultural and environmental conservatives, and on the other are those who support development and changed argue that it will bring welfare. The results also revealed that these social studies teachers do not strongly support the inclusion of economic issues, nor are they strongly opposed to them. This could be because controversial economic issues generally receive less media attention than other topics, and are also under-emphasised in the curriculum and even at public events. If this is the case, their merely average approval of their inclusion could be a result not of actual disapproval, but of lack of knowledge about them.

The results of this study are in line with the results of previous studies on the topic in other countries; these all showed that social studies teachers are generally in favour of the teaching of controversial issues [15, 16, 17,18],and also support the inclusion of a variety of controversial issues [20, 19, 18]. This point of view could be a result of teachers' awareness of the need to develop students' knowledge about controversial topics, to give them a more informed attitude to these topics, and to develop their ability to deal with such issues in their own lives.

The results also show that Omani social studies teachers believe that the social studies curriculum has the potential to address these issues. Such a belief is consistent with the literature, which shows that the social studies curriculum does have the ability to address these issues [4, 10, 11,8,7,9, 6, 5].

8. Summary and recommendations

The study shows that Omani social studies teachers support the inclusion in the curriculum of a number of controversial topics related to political, social, environmental, cultural and commercial issues. They also believe that the social studies curriculum in Oman has the potential to introduce these issues to students.

The research recommends that further studies related to the introduction of controversial issues into the school curriculum be conducted; and that these should investigate the views of school and university students as well as of parents.

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