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## Handling Controversial Topics in Social Sciences Classes: Evidence from Focus Group Discussions with Grade 6 Teachers

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**Abstract.** Using evidence from focus group discussions, this study examines how teachers handle controversial topics in Social Sciences lessons in primary schools. Controversial topics are contentious as they arise from diverse beliefs and views. These topics may be provocative, can arouse emotions and even cause confrontation among learners and teachers. This empirical study adopts a qualitative approach underpinned by critical social theory as the illuminating lens to report on how teachers taught constantly evolving controversial topics in Social Sciences classes. Data were collected using Focus Group Discussions with five Grade 6 Social Science teachers who were teaching controversial topics. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling to ensure the insights gathered were comprehensive and diverse. Data was analyzed using thematic analysis. Grade 6 Social Sciences teachers were selected because this grade marks the culmination of the Intermediate Phase, during which learners are expected to attain a certain level of cognitive and emotional competence before progressing to the Senior Phase. Findings indicate that, when teaching controversial topics, teachers employ a variety of strategies to create inclusive classrooms that open discussions and promote respect for divergent opinions. These methods enhance learner engagement, critical thinking, empathy, and social skills, preparing learners for confident participation in diverse communities. The study also established that it is critical for teachers to set ground rules when teaching controversial topics. The study recommends incorporating diverse perspectives and using culturally responsive teaching-learning strategies. This encourages peer-to-peer trust among learners and nurturing classrooms as safe spaces for discussing contentious topics.

**Keywords:** controversial topics; critical social theory; focus group discussions; Social Sciences

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## 1. Introduction

Controversial topics challenge and stimulate debate because they involve no universally held or fixed point of view (Pace, 2021). Controversy arises from different beliefs, views, or values on contentious issues such as gender roles, the treatment of marginalized groups, the holocaust, or war guilty clauses. Hammer (2023) is of the view that learners need to learn controversial topics like racism, ethnicity, slavery, apartheid and colonialism so that they develop the necessary skills and knowledge to debate these issues knowledgeably, sensibly, morally and tolerantly.

Despite the recognized significance of teaching controversial subjects within Social Sciences (SS), to cultivate critical thinking and promote democratic citizenship, a considerable research gap exists on how Grade 6 teachers in South Africa manage these issues as part of the Intermediate Phase SS curriculum. While prior studies (Goldberg & Savenije, 2018; Flensner, 2020) have highlighted policy guidelines and teacher experiences when teaching controversial topics in Western countries, there remains a paucity of empirical data on the experiences, biases, and teaching methods employed by South African teachers when handling contentious issues like colonialism, apartheid, racial discrimination, and human rights. This paper aims to fill this gap by utilizing Focus Group Discussions with Grade 6 SS teachers, thereby providing region-specific evidence on the teaching of controversial topics in the classroom.

A controversial topic must be addressed through reasoned reflection and evaluation. Woolley (2020) points out that South Africa's Education Act of 1996 ensures that learners are not presented with just one side of a controversial topic by teachers. It may not be possible for teachers to present an unbiased view on certain matters such as those pertaining to human rights. Consequently, it is important for teachers of Social Sciences (SS) to identify and explain the reasons for any bias so that learners understand how a topic is being approached and the reasons for the approach taken. Iordanou and Rapanta (2021) argue that developing reasoned arguments based on evidence is a key part of exploring controversial topics and providing an essential life skill for learners.

Existing literature shows that teachers manage controversial topics in different ways (Palmer, Matsick, Stevens & Kuehrmann, 2022; Pace, 2021). Some deny the existence of controversy and teach as if there are correct and wrong answers to complex moral and social issues (Alvén, 2024). For instance, topics on race, ethnicity, identity, slavery, colonialism and post-colonial dispensations can spark debate, and at times conflict in the classroom. But conservative teachers may avoid these topics because they feel that they are too sensitive or messy to handle. However, some progressive teachers recognize the different opinions controversial topics can offer and accept that these are complex problems that have different perspectives and multilayered answers (Singh & Mukeredzi, 2024; Damoah, Khalo & Adu, 2024). Such teachers view these topics as real opportunities for generating new knowledge by allowing learners to voice their different opinions.

The departure point for the current paper is that it juxtaposes whether Social Sciences (SS) teachers are promoting equity and democracy in an open and unopinionated manner or are suppressing learners' voices by stifling conflicting viewpoints when teaching controversial topics. The aim of the current study, therefore, is to examine how Grade 6 Social Sciences (SS) teachers handle controversial topics in their lessons. Grade 6 SS teachers were selected for their wealth of knowledge and invaluable insights into the intricacies of teaching of contentious issues. Their willingness to share personal narratives on the instructional challenges they face when teaching controversial topics adds novel contributions to the handling of sensitive issues in classroom settings. The question driving the paper, therefore, is: How do Grade 6 Social Sciences teachers handle evolving controversial topics in their classrooms?

## **2. Literature Review**

Social Sciences (SS), also known as Social Studies, depending on the country context, combines a broad range of themes borrowed from history, geography, sociology, cultural and contemporary studies (Kardas, 2025; Mensah, 2020). These themes often involve controversial issues like racial segregation, gender inequality, social stratification, ethnicity, migration, abortion, pollution, global warming and many other past and current injustices and challenges.

### **2.1 Educational Imperative for Controversial Issues**

The Crick Report of 2010 emphasized that teachers in Scotland and Wales must discuss controversial topics in Social Science and History classes to empower learners with skills to respond to changing societal demographics and challenges. Teachers play a key role in supporting children to develop the skills necessary to face multiple challenges that affect their preconceptions and worldviews. The Crick Report argues that neglecting controversial topics in education leaves a significant gap in young people's educational experience and fails to prepare them for adult life (Jones & Davison, 2021). Tadjibaeva (2025) also points out that passionate responses to controversial topics can also spark learner participation, increasing their likelihood of learning from each other.

### **2.2 Human Rights Education: Fostering Democratic Values and Critical Thinking**

Amnesty International argues that human rights, including equality, dignity, and respect, are non-negotiable principles (Adami, 2025) which every education system must teach. These principles, though controversial, are crucial in education for democracy as they foster independent thinking, intercultural dialogue, tolerance and conflict resolution without violence. Debating human rights and analyzing why and how they are violated is essential for developing democratic citizenship competencies such as open-mindedness, tolerance, and respectful debate skills (Göregen & Cornelissen, 2020). Schools must provide a balanced presentation of these controversial topics, because the media often presents them in biased and misleading ways, depending on who owns and funds the media house, notes Karamanoli (2023).

Teaching and learning controversial topics require critical thinking and analytical skills, allowing young people to weigh evidence, detect bias, and make judgments based on reason and evidence (Chatfield, 2022). Controversial topics positively contribute to young people's personal and emotional development, helping them understand their emotions, clarify their values, become better learners and more confident individuals (Crespo Lopes & Persson, 2023). However, teachers face challenges associated with national identity, sovereignty, and ethnicity when teaching contentious issues in the classroom.

### **2.3 Pedagogical Realities and Possibilities: Navigating Controversial Topics in African Schools**

African countries like Burkina Faso, the Ivory Coast, and Senegal have imposed control over their education systems, limiting teachers' ability to address sensitive topics (Sanfo, Soubeiga & Ogawa, 2024). This is due to religion, ethnic conflicts, and colonial history, as well as resource constraints. Balancing critical thinking with cultural, political, and social sensitivities is a complex challenge (Mlambo, 2024). In Ghana, concerns include neglect of indigenous values, marginalization of Ghanaian languages, and poor teacher quality (Moisob, 2024). Religion's influence on education also poses challenges (Saaka, 2024).

In Ghana, learners' attitudes towards Social Sciences (SS) are influenced by factors such as teachers' lack of interest in controversial topics, inadequate assistance, and inadequate materials (Mensah, 2020). Unqualified, inexperienced, and out-of-field teachers often occur in schools due to managerial decisions or governmental recruitment procedures (Kwakyee Apau, 2022). Teachers adapt by developing certain teaching characteristics but become uncertain followers rather than motivated leaders (Bugyei, 2022). Teaching and learning Social Sciences (SS) in Ghana faces challenges such as poor preparation, support, and a balanced approach (Osei, 2017). Out-of-field teaching can lead to poor-quality practices and inequity of teacher resources, professional competence, including general pedagogical knowledge, content knowledge, and pedagogical content knowledge, is crucial for learners' development (Osei, 2021).

Teaching controversial topics in Social Sciences (SS) poses significant challenges at the primary school level, primarily because teachers lack confidence, training, and resources. Teachers report that many avoid these sensitive subjects due to insufficient preparation, limited support from their institutions, and fears of potential conflicts or backlash from the community. This avoidance hinders learners' development of critical thinking, democratic values, and informed civic participation, which are essential components of the Social Sciences curriculum. Osei (2021) highlights the urgent need for targeted professional development, strong school leadership, and context-sensitive pedagogical strategies that empower teachers to conduct open, balanced, and age-appropriate discussions on controversial topics in their classrooms.

### **2.4 The Complexity of Controversial Issues in South African Classrooms**

In South Africa, topics like slavery, colonialism and apartheid remain controversial, more than 30 years after democracy. Furthermore, discussing sensitive topics like immigration, religion, sexual orientation, and race can be

challenging due to polarized opinions and potential tensions. Teachers may face resistance from parents, learners, or the community, which can hinder effective teaching (Jacobs, 2024). Moreover, teachers may have different beliefs and cultural backgrounds from learners and their parents, which can lead to confusion and emotional clouding during lessons (Sepadi, 2025). The Schools Act, which foregrounds human rights and equality, prohibits discrimination (Blessed-Sayah & Griffiths, 2024). History textbooks in classrooms have been criticized for their biased approach to topics like colonial expansion, leading to learners bringing their different worldviews into the classroom. Controversial topics can evoke strong emotions and create tensions, making it challenging for teachers to handle learners' emotions and channel them into constructive outcomes (Lawrence, 2024).

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1 Research approach and design

This study utilised a qualitative research approach and a case study research design (Usman, Al-Hendawi & Bulut, 2025) to understand how controversial topics were handled by primary school Social Science teachers in Grade 6 classes.

#### 3.2 Sampling

This study focused on five Intermediate Phase Social Sciences (SS) teachers from five schools in Thabo Mofutsanyana district. One Grade 6 Social Sciences teacher was purposively sampled from each school. The sampling criteria were a minimum of a Bachelor of Education degree in Intermediate Phase teaching and five years of teaching experience.

**Table 1: Key Characteristics of Participants**

Focus Group Discussion Participants	Age	Gender	Qualification	Teaching Grade	Teaching Experience
P1	30	F	Master of Education	Gr. 4-6	6 years
P2	28	M	B-Ed (Hons)	Gr. 4-6	6 years
P3	35	M	B- Ed	Gr. 4-6	11 years
P4	29	F	B - Ed	Gr. 4-6	5 years
P5	28	M	B-Ed	Gr.6	5 years

#### 3.3 Data collection instrument

Data was collected through a Focus Group Discussion (FGD) with five primary school Social Science (SS) teachers. The FGD was audio-recorded and later transcribed into a Word document for content and thematic analysis. The discussions helped the researcher to understand teachers' knowledge of controversial topics, identify biases, and compare teaching methods across schools, enabling comparable information on Social Science teaching approaches.

Researchers ensured that participants were free from judgment during discussions on sensitive issues like ideology and power dynamics. The process unfolded in three sequential stages: Stage 1 (Orientation) focused on creating a safe space for teachers to share without fear of professional repercussions. Stage 2 (Narrative Sharing) encouraged recounting "critical incidents" or challenging moments faced while teaching controversial topics. Phase 3 (Thematic Deep Dive) engaged collective problem-solving, particularly around balancing neutrality with the disclosure of personal views. The FGD session lasted 60 minutes.

### **3.4 Data analysis**

The study used thematic analysis to analyze qualitative data on handling constantly evolving controversial topics (Buetow, 2025). The seven-step method involved coding, familiarization, generating themes, reviewing themes, describing and naming themes, and writing up. The findings were categorized and discussed based on themes, providing support for teachers in teaching controversial topics in Social Sciences (SS). The results of the study were categorized and elaborated upon based on the identified themes, ultimately offering valuable support for educators in the realm of teaching controversial issues within Social Sciences (SS).

### **3.5 Data processing**

Data was processed using thematic analysis, which enabled the detection and interpretation of patterns in teachers' narratives, providing deeper insights into their attitudes, beliefs, motivations, and lived experiences within their teaching contexts.

### **3.6 Trustworthiness**

In this qualitative study, credibility was crucial for accurately interpreting participants' opinions and ensuring the findings reflect the original data collected. To mitigate biases, techniques such as thick description, member checking (Motulsky, 2021), and prolonged engagement were employed. Confirmability involved demonstrating findings are free from researchers' biases, supported by an audit trail of the analysis process and member checking to validate participant responses. Transferability refers to the applicability of results to similar contexts (Stalmeijer, Brown & O'Brien, 2024). This was achieved by providing a detailed description of the study population, sampling criteria and the inclusion criteria.

### **3.7 Ethical clearance**

Permission to conduct this study was granted by the University of the Free State ethical committee under Ethics Clearance Number **UFS-HSD2023/1915**, to access the five selected schools, permission was sought from the Free State Department of Education and principals of the respective schools. The five Intermediate Phase Social Sciences (SS) teachers were recruited through voluntary participation and informed consent. Pseudonyms were used for the five schools and the five teachers to ensure anonymity and confidentiality.

## 4. Results and Findings

To generate insights on how Grade 6 Social Sciences (SS) teachers were handling controversial topics in their lessons, data from Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with five teachers is presented in this section. Four themes that emerged from the analysis of the FGDs guide this presentation.

### 4.1 Creating a safe and inclusive environment

In the FGD, the five participants, P1, P2, P3, P4, and P5, explained how they established a safe and inclusive classroom environment. P5 narrated that:

*"I create a safe and inclusive environment in the classroom, setting ground rules, providing diverse learning materials, facilitating open discussions, using case studies and real-life examples, and promoting learner engagement. Moreover, I provide diverse learning materials."*

P5 emphasized creating a safe, inclusive classroom environment for effective learning when teaching controversial topics. Strategies include setting ground rules, providing diverse materials, facilitating open discussions, integrating case studies, and promoting learner engagement. These strategies foster respect, encourage open discussions, and develop analytical skills in Social Sciences (SS) education. P5's holistic approach aligns with social justice and equity, empowering learners to critically engage with challenging content.

P4 also chipped in: *"I ensure a supportive environment that values respect, kindness, and trust, fostering a culture of openness and mutual respect among learners"*. P4's approach emphasizes values like respect, kindness, and trust. This fosters a culture of openness and mutual respect among learners, promoting dignity and trust. Openness encourages learners to share their perspectives freely, enriching classroom discussions and enabling exploration of diverse viewpoints. Mutual respect creates an environment where all learners feel valued and heard, encouraging participation from all learners, particularly those who may feel marginalized. P4's holistic approach to creating an inclusive classroom reflects a deep understanding of emotional and social dynamics fostering learner engagement.

In a similar vein, P2 said that: *"I foster respect for individual opinions by establishing clear ground rules, encouraging active listening, and modelling respectful behavior"*. These rules guide learner interactions and expectations, fostering a sense of ownership and accountability. Active listening fosters empathy and understanding, while modelling respectful behavior. Teachers play a crucial role in demonstrating how to engage with differing opinions respectfully, empowering learners to share their thoughts without fear of judgment.

P1 added her voice: *"I teach with a commitment to fairness and openness, creating an environment that encourages respect. I carefully select authentic and relevant topics that are connected to the curriculum to engage learners effectively"*. P1's approach emphasizes fairness, openness, and respect. She selects authentic and relevant topics that align with the curriculum, making learning more meaningful.

P3 took a complementary approach by explaining that: *“I foster a culture of trust and safety, provide opportunities for learners to practice effective communication skills, encourage self-reflection and identify learners’ biases and assumptions”*. In P3’s class, learners can express themselves freely while interacting with peers from different backgrounds in a welcoming atmosphere. Establishing a sense of community by discussing delicate requires trust and psychological safety.

#### **4.2 Sensitive topics and learner engagement**

This theme explores how teachers taught controversial topics in the classroom and identifies learners mixed emotional responses and the challenges they faced.

P3 remarked that:

*“Learners who are taught about gender roles and stereotypes and discrimination question their preconceived notions about gender. They learn to challenge presumptions and prejudices that underpin gender roles and stereotypes by looking at the historical and cultural background of these concepts. Children sometimes respond well when I teach these sensitive topics.”*

P3 emphasized the transformative power of teaching learners about gender roles and discrimination. He highlighted how education can challenge societal norms and encourage critical thinking. Key aspects of this process include questioning preconceived notions, challenging assumptions, and fostering positive responses to sensitive topics. This approach encourages learners to reflect on their beliefs, consider alternative perspectives, and develop a nuanced understanding of complex social topics.

P5 highlighted the challenges learners face when addressing xenophobia: *“learners rarely respond and avoid being honest about xenophobia when they share their opinions. They think they will be taken as perpetrators or instigators of violence against those who come outside of South Africa”*. P5 revealed a significant barrier to open dialogue about xenophobia among learners, highlighting the fear and apprehension they face when discussing sensitive topics like discrimination and violence against immigrants. This avoidance of honest discourse can stifle critical discussions and limit learners' ability to engage meaningfully with complex social topics. The fear of being labelled as perpetrators or instigators of violence also contributes to the tension surrounding discussions about xenophobia. Discussing this sensitive issue can lead to social ostracism or conflict with peers, further discouraging open dialogue.

Following P5’s contribution on xenophobia, P2 provided insight into how learners engage with other sensitive subjects in the classroom. He remarked:

*“Learners typically respond to controversial topics during lessons with a mixture of curious engagement and sometimes discomfort. Some learners feel challenged by the complexity of the topics and struggle to articulate their thoughts, while others may feel passionate and energized by the opportunity to express their views.”*

P2 revealed that learners often respond with a combination of curiosity and discomfort, reflecting the emotional landscape of these discussions. This dual

nature of engagement is crucial in facilitating meaningful discussions. Curiosity can stimulate critical thinking and encourage exploration of diverse perspectives. Engaged learners are more likely to participate actively in discussions and ask questions. Discomfort often arises from the emotional weight of the topics. This discomfort can lead to frustration and withdrawal from discussions, hindering the achievement of desired learning outcomes.

P1 added that:

*“Some learners exhibit curiosity and participate fully in class discussions, while others may feel doubtful or perplexed. Other learners show significant signs of reluctance or uneasiness because of their own beliefs or their lack of exposure to these kinds of topics.”*

P1 highlighted the importance of understanding the spectrum of engagement in education, including curiosity, doubt, reluctance, and uneasiness. Doubt and perplexity can arise from lack of prior knowledge or exposure to controversial topics, leading to hesitation in participation. Reluctance, often influenced by personal beliefs or cultural backgrounds, can create barriers to open dialogue and hinder learners' engagement.

#### **4.3 Empowering learners through balanced perspectives and critical enquiry**

This theme focuses on teachers' perspectives on how they can empower learners through critical enquiry and balanced perspectives on controversial topics. P5 asserted that:

*“Controversial topics such as tribal discrimination and gender roles require a comprehensive understanding of their nature, a safe and inclusive classroom environment, and a variety of teaching strategies. I foster a respectful and open-minded learning environment by selecting relevant topics, encouraging learners to express opinions, provide balanced information, and critically evaluate presented arguments.”*

P5 stressed the importance of developing learners' critical thinking skills and promoting balanced perspectives when engaging in controversial topics. Encouraging learners to critically evaluate presented arguments fosters analytical skills and intellectual independence, essential for understanding controversial topics like tribal discrimination and gender stereotyping. The commitment to provide balanced information exposes learners to diverse perspectives, reducing bias and fostering informed opinions. Active engagement and dialogue promote communicative competence and deepens critical thinking.

P1 added:

*“I emphasize the importance of democratic education in teaching controversial topics, based on my expertise and learners' abilities. I also provide multiple learning materials that can raise learners' levels of social awareness”.*

P1 emphasized democratic education as a framework for addressing controversial topics. She believes in fostering participatory and intellectually captivating learning environments where learners engage critically with societal topics. P1

emphasized critical dialogue that encourages learners to co-construct knowledge, debate ideas respectfully, and recognize diverse perspectives.

P2 also added that:

*"I should be aware of my biases and assumptions and establish a procedure for examining controversial topics. As a teacher, I should be prepared for learners' reactions and manage tension and conflict. Strategies should be based on learners' confidence, ages, and skills, and should consider different perspectives and sources."*

P2 emphasized the importance of self-awareness in teaching controversial topics, preventing the reinforcement of prejudice and promoting critical self-reflection. Teachers should anticipate tension and be able to manage learner reactions and conflict to create a warm classroom environment. Differentiated strategies based on learners' confidence, developmental levels, and skills, incorporating multiple perspectives and sources, are also recommended.

P3 was of the opinion that:

*"To address controversial topics like "local history" in Social Sciences (SS) classrooms is essential to understand the topic's sensitivity. Lastly, fostering learner inquiry and exploration through activities like research projects and oral history interviews can further enhance the learning experience."*

P3 emphasized the importance of engaging learners through inquiry-based learning and connecting them to their local history to deepen understanding of sensitive historical topics. Recognizing the sensitivity of local history topics is crucial in Social Sciences (SS) because these topics often involve contested narratives and diverse perspectives. P3 advocated for learner-driven inquiry, such as research projects and oral history interviews, which encourage critical engagement with historical narratives. These methods connect learners with community members, making history tangible and coming alive which brings marginalized voices into the classroom. P4 also explained that:

*"As a teacher, I use various teaching approaches, establish procedures for learners to examine fresh information, and adopt strategies based on their experience, ages and skills. These strategies can help maintain balance, increase productivity, and avoid bias when discussing contentious topics."*

P4's statement emphasizes the importance of differentiated instruction in managing controversial topics in the classroom. The strategy involves tailoring teaching methods and procedures to meet the diverse needs of learners, ensuring balanced perspectives that can be free from bias. Differentiated instruction helps create equitable learning opportunities by adjusting content to suit learner readiness and interests.

#### **4.4 Evolving nature of controversial topics**

During the FGD, teachers emphasized that controversial topics are constantly changing over time.

P4 remarked that:

*"I'd like to think that gender roles and tribal discrimination are subject to change over time as a result of advocacy, legislative changes, cultural transformations, and evolving societal standards".*

P4 emphasized the dynamic nature of social issues, particularly gender roles, tribal identity and discrimination. He acknowledged that these constructs are not static but evolve over time, reflecting historical and cultural dynamics. P4 also highlighted the importance of legal reforms in social transformation, as they can institutionalize new standards of equality and justice. He also highlighted the influence of evolving cultural values and collective beliefs on redefining acceptable societal norms.

P3 also added that,

*"Definitely, xenophobia and colonialism are complex and interconnected issues that have evolved over time. Media plays a significant role in shaping attitudes towards foreigners and contributing to xenophobia".*

P3 emphasized the connection between colonial history and xenophobia in South Africa, arguing that both are deeply intertwined and have evolved over time. The teacher identified colonialism as the root cause because it created systemic racial hierarchies and exclusionary practices that continue to influence social relations today. Research shows that xenophobia is often a manifestation of structural racism rooted in colonial legacies, where foreign Black Africans are racialized and positioned as outsiders or threats (see Alven, 2024; Blessed-Sayah & Griffiths, 2024, for instance).

Both xenophobia and colonialism are shaped by historical developments and ongoing societal changes. The media also plays a significant role in shaping public opinion about foreigners, amplifying negative stereotypes, fears, and misinformation, contributing to xenophobic sentiments and sometimes violence. Studies (Adami, 2025; Alven, 2024; Blessed-Sayah & Griffiths, 2024) have found that media narratives often frame African immigrants as economic threats or criminals, reinforcing xenophobic discourse and social exclusion.

P2 extended the discussion by adding that:

*"Political issues, bullying, social media, gender issues, and sexual orientations are controversial topics that can change over time. Factors contributing to these changes include societal attitudes, the rise of social media and technology, and advocacy groups and policymakers' efforts. Political discourse has increased polarization, leading to online harassment and bullying, particularly in South Africa."*

P2 stressed the evolving nature of controversial social issues, highlighting the role of social media and political discourse in shaping public attitudes and interactions. He pointed out that topics like contemporary political issues, bullying, gender, and sexual orientation are not static but evolve alongside societal attitudes and cultural norms. The rise of social media and digital technologies has accelerated change, creating spaces for misinformation, polarization, and harassment. Online spaces have become battlegrounds for

competing narratives, intensifying social divisions and conflict. Political discourse has become more polarized, contributing to increased tensions and incidents of online bullying and harassment. Despite backlash and resistance, advocacy groups and policymakers continue to play a vital role in promoting awareness on social changes and new legal reforms.

P5 also contributed to the conversation:

*“Topics I teach such as sexual orientation, ethnic prejudice, and religious diversity evolve throughout time. These changes are a result of social progress, historical changes, media impact, education, evolving laws, and globalization.”*

P5’s contribution highlighted the dynamic nature of sensitive social topics, such as sexual orientation, ethnic prejudice, religious diversity, and the complex interplay of factors that drive their evolution over time. Historical legacies like apartheid and colonialism still deeply influence ethnic relations and social norms in South Africa. Traditional media (like television and radio), as well as technology based social media, also play crucial roles in shaping public discourse and awareness, challenging and reinforcing stereotypes. Legal reforms and globalization also facilitate the exchange of ideas and cultural influences, further contributing to changing perceptions and norms.

Data presented from the FGDs show that when teachers handle controversial topics in Social Sciences (SS) classrooms, the starting point is to create a safe classroom environment in which learners can open up and talk about sensitive issues like gender discrimination, apartheid and xenophobia. A psychologically safe and inclusive classroom setting can foster respect for divergent perspectives and reduce learner anxiety to discuss contentious issues which families and the community may avoid (Yeganeh et al., 2025). A safe and inclusive classroom allows learners to share their perspectives and diverse opinions on sensitive topics like gender discrimination, ethnic identity and xenophobia. The five Grade 6 Social Sciences (SS) teachers’ opinions align with Davis’ (2025) views that trust and mutual respect are important in the classroom context because they foster psychological safety and enable learners to explore controversial topics without fear of judgment.

The current study has also shown that when teachers use culturally responsive pedagogy and connect the learning of contentious topics to learners lived experiences, this can enhance learner engagement and participation in Social Sciences (SS) lessons. These findings suggest that learner discomfort with controversial topics may stem from deeply ingrained (but socially constructed) cultural or personal beliefs rather than unfamiliarity with topics. This aligns with Taylor’s (2025) argument that learners are not inherently uncomfortable to discuss contentious issues in class. Shying away from controversial topics is a behavior which learners learn from their social environment - the family, the wider community, or both. Given the opportunity, learners’ verbal engagements with controversial issues during lessons can stimulate their critical thinking and self-reflection skills, helping them to empathize and challenge existing assumptions about race, ethnicity, gender or any other issues that can generate multiple realities and controversy.

P3's focus on self-reflection over external interventions highlights the importance of internal processes, such as recognizing personal biases, which are less frequently explored in literature. Additionally, kindness and trust are highlighted as foundational elements of inclusivity, which are often overlooked in existing research (Paula da Silva & Bachkirov, 2024; Miller, 2024). The complexity of learner engagement is also highlighted, going beyond participation metrics. This suggests that engagement involves deeper cognitive and emotional processes, such as reconciling biases.

P3's perspective emphasized the transformative power of teaching about gender roles and stereotypes, which aligns with existing literature on challenging societal norms and fostering critical thinking (Akahome & Skubis, 2025). Research shows that examining historical and cultural contexts allows learners to question preconceived notions and develop nuanced perspectives on social topics (Vakulik, Sheviakov, Slavskaja & Vakulik, 2024). This approach mirrors strategies that promote critical thinking and social awareness, as supported by inclusive and reflective pedagogy in Social Sciences (SS) classrooms. P5's perspective highlighted the emotional barriers learners face when discussing sensitive topics, highlighting the importance of creating safe spaces for open dialogue (Arao & Clemens, 2013).

P2's insight into learners' dual responses to controversial topics, curiosity and discomfort is also captured in existing research (Griggs, 2023; Mahama, Edoh-Torgah, Miezah, Ammah & Amponsah, 2024). This duality highlights the need for teachers to balance emotional safety with intellectual challenge. P1's perspective stressed diverse learner responses, ranging from curiosity to reluctance, aligning with research advocating for inclusive teaching practices that respect varied perspectives (Miller, 2024). Addressing learners' doubts and uneasiness through contextualization and empathy fosters meaningful dialogue and enhances learning outcomes.

P5 revealed that learners often hesitatingly address xenophobia, a topic that is often avoided in discussions. This suggests that traditional methods of creating safe spaces may not fully address the underlying fears of social ostracism or ethnic stereotyping. This highlights the need for more nuanced strategies to address emotionally loaded topics. Emotional barriers also stifle critical thinking, contrasting with research suggesting that structured classroom environments promote critical thinking (Fajrin, Kamaruddin & Torro, 2025). This suggests that even well-structured environments may fail to offer emotional safety, making learners reluctant to discuss controversial topics.

Some learners' reluctance may stem from personal beliefs or lack of exposure, challenging the assumption that discomfort primarily arises from unfamiliarity with contentious topics. This suggests the need for more culturally responsive teaching methods that allow learners to engage in controversial issues at a deeper level without fear of repercussions. The findings highlight the significance of learners' lived experiences in fostering engagement, aligning with Etchu's (2024) view that discomfort arises from social learning. Effective teaching strategies

include self-reflection, bias recognition, balanced perspectives, and promoting democratic education, supporting Eden, Chisom & Adeniyi (2024)'s insights on the importance of diversity in educational materials.

The research critiques existing pedagogical frameworks for their lack of emotional and cultural responsiveness, noting that traditional approaches may not address students' emotional fears, particularly regarding discussions on xenophobia, which are often influenced by media and globalization. The findings call for refined methodologies that emphasize internal self-reflection to address the deeper emotional concerns that underpin students' discomfort, highlighting the complex relationship between curiosity and discomfort in learning environments.

## **5. Key contributions**

The study posits that for sensitive or controversial topics, such as race, gender, and politics, small-group discussions are more effective than direct instruction. This approach encourages critical thinking, allows for varied perspectives, and deepens the understanding of complex social issues. It also points out that teachers often shy away from addressing controversial subjects due to fear of conflict, insufficient training, or societal pressures.

Additionally, the selection of controversial topics is significantly influenced by cultural contexts, especially in diverse or urban environments, where issues such as xenophobia, migration, and tribal discrimination may be more prominent. Teachers often leverage "eliciting empathy" as a strategy to approach sensitive issues indirectly, focusing on managing classroom emotions rather than confronting controversies head-on.

The study further highlights that while small-group discussions foster dialogue, they can also lead to divisions among learners, with some downplaying controversies and others emphasizing them, necessitating careful facilitation by educators. The application of critical social theory in the study aims to address discrimination in education by advocating active participation in democratic discourse within the classroom.

## **6. Recommendations**

### **6.1 Embed safe, culturally responsive routines in Social Sciences teaching**

The findings indicate that Grade 6 teachers who cultivate safe and inclusive classroom environments—established through ground rules, mutual respect, active listening, and trust—promote open dialogue about sensitive topics such as xenophobia, gender roles, and tribal discrimination. To achieve this, teachers are advised to create recurring classroom structures, including opening rituals, discussion protocols, and reflection journals that encourage respectful disagreement, self-reflection, and bias awareness as normative practices. By tying controversial subjects to learners' personal experiences and cultural backgrounds, teachers can help alleviate discomfort stemming from social conditioning, transforming it into constructive curiosity and critical thinking. In the South African Intermediate Phase, this involves selecting Social Sciences (SS) content relevant to apartheid, colonialism, xenophobia, and gender roles, while

employing differentiated strategies like anonymous responses, small-group dialogues, and case studies to ensure emotional safety for vulnerable or marginalized learners. Furthermore, school leadership and teacher education programs should support these practices with policies, professional development, and classroom observation frameworks that prioritize emotional safety and critical civic engagement as essential goals in Social Sciences (SS) instruction.

### **6.2 Adopt evolving, inquiry-based approaches to controversial topics**

Teachers highlighted that issues such as xenophobia, gender roles, sexual orientation, and tribal discrimination are dynamic, influenced by advocacy, legislation, media narratives, and globalization. To address this, Social Sciences (SS) teachers should implement ongoing, inquiry-driven units on controversial topics, allowing learners to regularly revisit and adjust their understandings in light of current events, laws, and media reports. Classroom projects may include media analysis comparing representations of foreign migrants across different platforms, exploring community attitudes through oral histories, or staging mock public hearings on topics like gender or environmental justice, supported by balanced sources and critical-thinking questions.

This method enhances learners' historical and sociological knowledge while also enabling them to challenge stereotypes and misinformation, particularly regarding xenophobia and colonial histories often exacerbated by negative media portrayals of African immigrants. Furthermore, curricula and teacher education programs should develop adaptable Social Sciences (SS) modules that change annually or termly, bolstered by teacher networks and digital platforms, allowing Grade 6 teachers to collaboratively update materials, share reflections, and co-create pedagogies that frame controversial topics as evolving discussions rather than static lessons.

### **6.3 Limitations**

Limitations of this paper include reliance on qualitative method such Focus Group Discussion, which restricts generalizability and may introduce subjectivity. Findings are affected by small sample sizes and context dependency, suggesting they may not represent all school contexts in South Africa. Methodological limitations arise from self-reporting by teachers, which may reveal perceived rather than actual teaching practices. Additionally, the absence of direct classroom observation means the study often depends on teacher narratives. Time and resource constraints hindered teachers' preparation for sensitive topics, impacting the study's focus on ideal classroom settings. Furthermore, gaps in teacher training are identified as a factor that reduces confidence and consequently the depth of findings regarding pedagogical methods.

## **7. Conclusion**

The current study established that it is important to keep inclusive classroom principles, such as ground rules and respectful communication in creating a supportive learning environment. It emphasizes the role of teachers in creating psychological safety and selecting authentic, curriculum-aligned topics.

Discomfort is identified as a product of deeply ingrained cultural or personal beliefs, challenging the notion that it is inherently problematic. Self-reflection over external interventions is also highlighted as it is critical for fostering empathy and critical thinking.

Kindness and trust are essential for inclusivity, helping marginalized learners feel valued. Engagement is not just about participation but also involves deep cognitive and emotional processes. Teaching sensitive subjects provides opportunities for nuanced perspectives but requires balancing emotional safety with intellectual challenge. Teachers often fear social ostracism, emphasizing the need for culturally responsive strategies. This reluctance, sometimes rooted in personal beliefs or lack of exposure, highlights that discomfort can arise from various sources, necessitating inclusive practices that respect diverse perspectives. The study underscores the importance of addressing biases and discomfort in social science education when engaging with sensitive topics.

The study recommends strengthening inclusive classroom practices, addressing discomfort and biases, while prioritizing kindness and trust, and balancing emotional safety and intellectual challenge in lessons that involve contentious Issues. Prioritizing teacher training on culturally responsive teaching may ensure that teachers model respectful behaviour when integrating diverse perspectives into curricula to reflect learners' diverse backgrounds and experiences. It is also important to create safe spaces where marginalized learners feel valued and heard, reducing fear of judgment or social ostracism. These recommendations stress the need for teachers to adopt culturally responsive, empathetic, and reflective approaches to create inclusive classrooms when engaging with controversial topics.

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## 9. Declaration on AI use

The authors of this article declare that they used four AI tools to assist in generating ideas to respond to the six reviewers' comments. The four AI tools used are Elicit AI, Perplexity, Grammarly & QuillBot. The ideas generated from these AI tools were then reworked to respond to the specific concerns of the reviewers in the context of how Grade 6 Social Sciences teachers taught controversial issues in their classes.

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