

# How to Create a Safe Space When Teaching Controversial Issues in China

Zhixuan Wang<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> University College London (UCL), London, UK

Correspondence: Zhixuan Wang, University College London (UCL) London, UK.

Received: August 18, 2022

Accepted: September 16, 2022

Online Published: September 20, 2022

doi:10.20849/jed.v6i4.1289

URL: <https://doi.org/10.20849/jed.v6i4.1289>

## Abstract

In order to make students adapt to democratic life, educators have a responsibility and obligation to bring controversial topics into the classroom. A safe space is needed for the discussion of controversial topics in the classroom without any intrusion. However, the author of this article found that the concept of safe space is rarely mentioned in China. Therefore, this essay critically analyses five national and regional studies on safe spaces to suggest how safe spaces could be achieved in Chinese classrooms for teachers and students.

**Keywords:** controversial issues, safe space, Chinese classroom

## 1. Introduction

Controversial issues are an essential and integral part of democratic citizenship education (Hess, 2008). Controversial issues usually refer to issues based on many people arguing based on personal moral and ethical principles and which have not reached a conclusion (Oulton, Dillon & Grace, 2004). A variety of perspectives should exist in democratic life, and educators have a duty and responsibility to bring controversial issues into the classroom so that students can have a better chance of adapting to democratic life (Hess, 2009). When teaching controversial issues, it makes perfect sense to maintain a safe space. Creating a classroom climate based on the principles of social justice is central to our core values of social justice, the dignity of the individual, and the importance of human relationships (National Association of Social Workers, 2008). Lerner and Fulambarker (2018) also state that social justice classrooms rely on the ability of educators to create a space free of microaggressions. In China, however, the concept of safe spaces is rarely mentioned. Because Chinese classrooms are highly structured and monolithic (Fouts et al., 1993), the teacher is an authoritative presence in the Chinese classroom. Chinese students do not have many opportunities to speak, and there is a high tendency for Chinese students to remain silent and not participate in the classroom (Tang et al., 2020). However, this hurts the students' right to participate in the classroom. So this article will offer some suggestions for Chinese teachers and students on how to teach controversial issues while maintaining a safe space. This paper will first use previous articles to introduce the concepts of controversial issues, safe spaces, and the situation in Chinese classrooms. This will be followed by an introduction to how some other countries and regions have taught controversial issues while maintaining safe spaces. It will conclude with a few suggestions for teaching in China based on these examples.

## 2. My Position

As a Chinese student who has studied in the UK for three years, I have deeply experienced the difference between the Chinese and British classrooms during these three years. I took part in the two plus two programmes at my university, which meant that I could study for two years of university in China and then continue my studies in the UK for two more years to complete my degree. After two years of university in China and two years in the UK, I found the difference between the two countries' education very interesting, so I chose to continue my postgraduate life in the UK to continue experiencing the exciting aspects of a British education. It was not until I took Teaching Controversial Issues that I suddenly realised that perhaps one of the most significant differences between the two countries is the discussion of controversial topics in the classroom and the establishment of a safe space. In China, it is primarily a teacher-centred classroom where the teacher is the authority in the classroom (Chen, 2015). This is also my experience; in Chinese classrooms, the teacher is the authority and students will just sit and listen to the teacher and rarely have the opportunity to speak; and if they do, students will rarely take the initiative to speak, and it will be in the form of the teacher asking questions. So it

is challenging to create a safe space in such a classroom. However, in my experience in the UK, most students do not regard the teacher as an absolute authority, and students are allowed to raise their hands at any time, whether in a lecture or seminar, and the teacher does not mind being interrupted. In Teaching controversial issues, there are often sensitive topics, but they are discussed calmly and comfortably in the classroom. So I would like to explore how Western education maintains a safe space while teaching controversial issues, and by summarising these methods, I would like to make some suggestions for teaching in China. Following this, I will summarise the literature on what constitutes controversial issues and safe spaces. I will also use the previous literature to introduce the characteristics of Chinese classrooms and students.

### 3. Literature Review

#### 3.1 *What Is a Controversial Issue*

What is a controversial issue is itself a controversial issue. To date, there is no single clear definition. Lynch and McKenna (1990) argue that from birth, we see the world in our particular mode and worldview, and this is our response to the world and social and cultural interactions, so different people will see different reasons for what is happening and come up with different solutions. However, Wellington's (1986) explanation of controversial issues is generally accepted (Berg et al., 2003). Wellington (1986) refers to a controversial issue as one that involves a value judgement so that the issue cannot be resolved solely by facts, evidence or experimentation and that the issue is considered to be of considerable importance by a certain number of people. Claire and Holden (2007) then present a working definition of a controversial classroom issue, the subject of which is a current hot topic and has conflicting values and perspectives and conflicting priorities and material interests. Moreover, emotions are powerfully evoked when the issue is mentioned. Finally, the subject area of the issue is complex. It was also mentioned that tricky issues are not necessarily controversial, but when they arise in the classroom, the issue becomes controversial (Alexakos et al., 2016). Similarly, meaningful points have also been made. Ideas like evolution that have reached a scientific consensus can still be controversial in the classroom, a controversy that Zimmerman and Robertson (2017) call a fake argument. However, these definitions are also controversial; for example, Wellington's (1986) definition does not mention what value judgements are, what number of people a significant number of people are, and who these people are. In Claire and Holden's (2007) definition, there is also no mention of who has conflicting priorities. These questions and answers influence teachers. Furthermore, these controversial issues will come up unannounced in class. If this is the case, the controversial issues are not part of the teacher's lesson plan, and there is a risk that the teacher will avoid them (Cassar et al., 2021). In particular, Lynch and McKenna (1990) emphasise the importance of explicitly considering the nature of the following six issues in teaching about controversial issues in science. 1. They are seen differently by different segments of society. 2. Groups establish their opinions based on distinct sets of information or their interpretations of the same piece of information. 3. The interpretations may arise due to the various ways in which people or groups comprehend or see the world (i.e. their worldview). 4. Divergent worldviews may exist due to people adhering to disparate value systems. 5. Controversial subjects are not always amenable to resolution by reason, logic, or experimentation. 6. As new information becomes available, contentious problems may be settled. Controversial issues are an area of the curriculum where teachers can engage students in honest discussion and sharing (Hand & Levinson, 2012). These insights into controversial issues show that the definition of controversial issues has also been controversy over the years. Students encounter many issues that make them feel uncomfortable as they learn and grow (Rom, 1998). Therefore, a safe space does not mean a comfortable space. However, students risk confessing themselves when they struggle, for example, by fearing ridicule or being given a lower grade by the teacher, so the point of creating safe spaces is to reduce the punishment these students receive for stating their true thoughts (Holley & Steiner, 2013).

#### 3.2 *What Is Safe Space*

Safe space is a contested idea. The concept of safe spaces first emerged in the women's movement in the late 20th century, which has since evolved into education. This concept's appearance in schools, workplaces, and community centres indicates that gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex persons may feel secure in such places. Safe space has been connected with keeping oppressed groups safe from violence and harassment in feminist, LGBT, and civil rights movements. This safe environment also fosters certain freedom to talk and act freely, build collective strength, and develop resistance methods (Kenney, 2001). A safe space is a metaphor for the classroom and refers to a space where students feel safe enough to express their views honestly and at their own risk. Safety in a safe classroom does not mean physical safety in the usual sense but means protecting students from psychological or emotional harm. A safe space in a classroom is one in which students can openly express their individuality, even if that expression differs significantly from the norm (Holley & Steiner, 2005). Numerous educators have embraced this notion and intentionally created safe spaces in their classrooms to allow

all students - especially those with marginalised identities - to unpack, build, and reconstruct knowledge (Stengel & Weems, 2010). This is why creating a classroom atmosphere that encourages openness and self-expression - a safe space in the classroom - allows students to realise that they will not be punished too much for being honest. According to Rom's (1998: 400) summary of four examples, he argues that safe spaces should have the following characteristics: "1 We are all isolated; 2 Our isolation is both physical and psychic; 3 We can become less isolated by expressing our diverse individuality, and 4 Students thrive in a classroom in which individuality is freely expressed." People fear isolation, so safe space is a hopeful response.

However, can safe spaces be made safe for all and are they free from disadvantages? Many scholars also doubt this. After analysing the four characteristics of a safe space and the indication that a safe space allows students to grow well, Rom (1998) raised concerns. Safe spaces can undermine students' ability to think and react critically as students may avoid criticism and feel unable to challenge the group. Rom (1998) makes a similar point when he suggests that students may interpret the concept of safe spaces as a general prohibition on critiquing the work of others, and Barrett's (2010) four criticisms of safe spaces include that they may not be conducive to the development of critical thinking skills. The remaining three points are 1 Racially, socially and economically marginalised students may not be safe, and perhaps classrooms may be more detrimental to these students while becoming a world of uninhibited free expression. 2 Because assessment of students is a critical act, and students do not believe such assessment and safe spaces should coexist. 3 Because of the vagueness of the definition of safe spaces, it is difficult for teachers to know whether safe spaces have been created successfully. Flensner and Von Der Lippe (2019) point out through two examples that safe spaces do not allow everyone to feel safe. The first example shows that when a student uses offensive language, and there is much opposition, the offended student does not dare or want to voice his or her opposition, which is not safe for the offended student. The second example shows that some students have very different views about what the classroom should be like, and sometimes these views are not politically correct, and other students prefer to remain silent. Safe spaces have generated much controversy, but Callan (2016) suggests that a distinction can be made between 'dignity safety', to which everyone has a right, and 'intellectual safety', which contradicts a worthwhile education. "Intellectual safety" can only be achieved at the cost of closed minds, whereas "dignity safety" means that students' dignity is safeguarded without compromising their freedom. To expect dignity and security is to expect to be perceived as basically equal to others, to be able to trust that others respect us and accept fair treatment.

In contrast, "Intellectual security" may cause students to lose their ability to think critically. Therefore, it might be appropriate to maintain "dignified safety" in the classroom while also ensuring appropriate "intellectual danger". A safe space can perhaps be seen as an environment that creates an insecure, intellectual safety while safeguarding the safety of dignity. Flensner and Von Der Lippe (2019) argue that perhaps a 'classroom of disagreement' is a more appropriate metaphor rather than a 'safe space' which can give students the wrong impression. "Students need to be safe because they should be respected as individuals, but the classroom should not be 'intellectually safe' because this would affect the students' ability to improve.

In summary, safe spaces in the classroom are open spaces where students are guaranteed the freedom to speak without fear of taking risks. Nevertheless, safe spaces are also controversial and not safe for everyone. So perhaps distinguishing between dignity and intellectual safety is a good practice for teachers to create safe spaces.

### 3.3 Chinese Classroom

The Chinese classroom is severe and full of many rules and conditions. In the Chinese classroom, teachers teach a lot in one lesson, so students have little time to discuss and express their displeasure at students who take up class time to ask what they consider boring questions. Students' individual opinions are often not respected because teachers only want to get a standard and correct answer in class (Ha and Li, 2014). The reasons for Chinese students' silence in the classroom have been the subject of much research. Due to the influence received from Confucianism, young people are expected to respect older people (Wu, 2009). Therefore, the teacher has always been authoritative in the Chinese classroom (Tan, 2017), and few students question their teachers. Moreover, Confucianism refers to the need to be self-effacing, requiring each individual to achieve a sense of humility and balance according to their position. This ideology may also inhibit Chinese students from questioning their peers in the classroom (Flowerdew, 1998). This may be one of the reasons for the silence in the classroom. According to Jackson (2002), Chinese students have fewer opportunities to speak in class and are used to passive rather than active learning. Foreign scholars are not the only ones who think this way; local Chinese scholars such as Liu (2002) and Wu (2015) also believe that Chinese students' silence in the classroom is due to habit. However, in Tang et al.'s (2020) study, it was shown that students who remain silent in class often choose to do so because they fear negative feedback such as embarrassment, fear or humiliation. It can also be

due to teachers abusing their authority; for example, students may be afraid of being criticised by the teacher, so they give up speaking. They may also choose to remain silent because of a collective silence for fear of being perceived by their peers as showing off if they actively speak. So students will remain silent in class. In other words, Chinese students may rarely feel safe in the classroom. Fouts et al.'s (1993) investigation of the classroom environment in Guangdong, China, found that Chinese classrooms are highly structured and have little diversity. Teachers were characterised as didactic and authoritative in the classroom. This was also found in Misco's (2013) survey of Chinese high schools.

Authority has a significant impact on Chinese classrooms. Controversial issues are rarely discussed in Chinese classrooms, negative things are always avoided in class, and teachers do not spend much time on such issues. The reason for students' silence may be due to the influence of the face-saving culture; Bond (1991) showed that in Asia, face-saving issues have a significant impact on social interactions, and Littlewood (1999) also speculated that East Asian students tend to be concerned with group harmony and therefore avoid arguments. In Wu's (2009) case study, the impact of a face on classroom interactions was explored. Students would avoid speaking with uncertainty, fearing losing face and receiving negative comments from classmates. Students would also forgo evaluating other students and asking questions of the teacher because of the need to consider the face of other students and the face of the group. As well as, students refrain from challenging the teacher's authority in the classroom because of the traditional Chinese culture of respect and order.

It is clear from previous scholarly literature and research that Chinese classrooms rarely have safe spaces due to traditional culture, curriculum and teachers. This paper will then present some examples of countries and regions that have dealt with controversial issues correctly and created a classroom environment with a safe space for students.

However, maybe silence is just a stereotype for Chinese students. In a study by Shi et al. (2021), it was found that. When teachers gave Chinese students more opportunities to engage in open discussion and debate. Chinese students started to debate a lot, and most were very active participants. So perhaps Chinese students are capable of presenting counterarguments but need the time and platform from their teachers.

#### **4. Several Examples of Countries and Regions That Remain the Safe Space When Teaching Controversial Issues**

##### *4.1 Northern Ireland, England and the United States*

Pace (2019) did a cross-national study of teachers in Northern Ireland, England and the USA. The following is Pace's (2019) description of teachers' classroom teaching methods in the three regions during the qualitative survey. Northern Ireland is still a divided society. The Northern Ireland teachers in the experiment felt they should use good resources to introduce controversial topics, such as a play or a documentary, and encourage students to participate in the discussion. Teachers respect their views and respect silence in the discussion. If a student does not want to discuss the issue, the teacher will not hesitate to leave. He is also influential in supporting minority voices and tries to use humour to challenge students' views, which may build a trusting relationship with them. This teacher believes that group discussion may need more of an approach as many voices may be ignored in a simple group discussion.

In England, there are many controversial issues arising from Brexit. The English teacher allowed the students to choose their perspectives on provocative issues as he led them through the museum. He raised these pointed questions implicitly and asked the students to rethink the answers to these questions as they visited the museum in the face of new evidence.

In the United States, ongoing controversies exist over issues such as immigration, race and gun control. The American teacher offers several suggestions for teachers who would like to teach academic content in conjunction with civic education and should be familiar with all the resources available for teaching. Finally, she suggested that perhaps there should be fewer student-led discussions and that the UK should allow more experienced people to facilitate them.

These teachers in Pace's (2019) study had several common characteristics. Firstly small groups are essential, but the focus of the classroom is not on group discussion. Secondly, all teachers tended to create a supportive environment; humour was essential in this environment; humour brings the students closer together. Also, teachers mentioned the importance of questioning, as this promotes thinking and increases student engagement. Finally, the teachers set some classroom norms to prevent conflict.

##### *4.2 Cyprus and Greek-Cypriot*

Cyprus has been a deeply divided society due to the protracted political conflict between Greek Cypriots and

Turkish Cypriots over the past 50 years (Bekerman and Zembylas, 2012). Therefore, when teaching Greek Cypriots about historical issues, it is difficult to avoid that controversial issues will be covered in the classroom. According to Zembylas and Kambani's (2011) study of local primary school history teachers, although it is difficult to avoid bringing up controversial issues in class, local teachers develop students' debating skills to make them understand that all situations are not black and white. Students were asked which arguments were well-founded. Furthermore, teachers use a step-by-step approach so that students gradually understand the controversial issues. Finally, the teacher acknowledges the importance of vocabulary in teaching controversial issues. The teacher cannot convey vocabulary that has a position to the students. The teachers also felt it was essential to build trust and open relationships between teachers and students.

#### *4.3 Taiwan and Hong Kong*

Hong Kong and Taiwan are similar in that the relationship between these two regions and China has been a controversial topic in the international community due to historical legacies. Hung's (2019) survey of Taiwanese teachers found that an increasing number of Taiwanese teachers advocate a flipped-classroom approach to change the classroom into a student-centred one. Students' critical thinking skills are developed. Moreover, when teaching controversial topics, teachers are used to combining their personal experiences with controversial issues. In this way, students seem to be able to integrate controversial issues and historical life. Although teachers in Hong Kong support the presence of controversial issues in the classroom, the situation is still different from that in Taiwan. In Chong et al.'s (2021) mixed study of teachers in Hong Kong, it was found that most teachers in Hong Kong encouraged students to tolerate different perspectives and to think and speak freely from different points of view. However, when teaching controversial topics, teachers simply let students learn about the topic without discussing it in depth. Students are deprived of the opportunity to discuss.

#### *4.4 Israel*

Paul-Binyamin and Hayosh (2021) point out that the relationship between religious and secular groups, right-wing and left-wing groups, Jews and Arabs, and other groups in a divided and volatile Israeli society is characterised by mutual negation and a lack of This relationship affects the education system. The relationship between This relationship affects the education system, which is one of the primary means of strengthening hegemonic culture, collective spirit and national unity (Bar-Tal & Halperin, 2011). This is why education in Israel often involves controversial issues. Paul-Binyamin and Hayosh (2021) studied Israeli teachers' approaches to the classroom. The study revealed that some Israeli teachers use a human-centred approach and will ignore the government's theme because it is controversial. Some teachers would focus more on non-political topics. In general, most teachers tend not to talk about controversial topics. Teachers prefer to implement classroom structures in their own 'safe spaces. This safe space is not the same as the safe space mentioned earlier. It is a safe space that is personal to the teacher. It is not for the classroom participants as a whole. Students lose their opportunity to learn controversial knowledge.

#### *4.5 South Korea*

Like the Israeli teachers mentioned above, Korean teachers also teach non-controversial topics in the classroom. Like the Israeli teachers mentioned above, Korean teachers also teach non-controversial topics in the classroom. When Misco (2016) asked South Korean teachers about their views on controversial issues, the teachers responded that in South Korea, courses are prepared for coming exams, that the focus of such courses is on memorisation, and that the classroom does not provide time for students to discuss for controversial topics. Furthermore, teachers were reluctant to mention controversial topics when in class. The teachers demand a neutral stance on some issues because they do not want students to think they are biased. As in Israel, students lose the opportunity to talk about controversial issues.

### **5. Recommendations for Teachers and Students in China**

The above summarises the approach taken by several countries and regions when teaching controversial issues. Some teachers modelled well in creating a safe space, but others were not willing to talk about controversial issues, let alone create a safe space when talking about controversial issues. This article will then go on to offer some suggestions for teachers and students in the context of the Chinese classroom.

#### *5.1 For Teachers*

##### *5.1.1 Not Avoiding Controversial Issues*

As mentioned in the examples of Israel and Korea, teachers avoid discussing controversial topics. Nevertheless, the students are thus deprived of the right to know about controversial topics in the classroom. This does not qualify as a safe space. It is only the teacher's personal safe space. A safe space is where students feel safe

enough to take risks in expressing their views and exploring their knowledge (Holley and Steiner, 2005). Controversial issues are worth being discussed. Exploring controversial issues can help students acknowledge and understand intergroup diversity and extend the merits of what they have learned with diverse perspectives (Crossa, 2005; King, 2009). Therefore it is not feasible to drop controversial issues outright. Chinese teachers may be able to set aside a portion of class time for students to understand and reflect on these controversial issues. This would not interfere with the regular class and allow student discussion time.

#### 5.1.2 Group Discussion

As previously stated, the teaching and learning structure in Chinese classrooms is homogeneous and teacher-centred, with lessons generally taking the form of the teacher speaking and students listening. (Fouts et al., 1993). However, in such a classroom, students are not engaged. Chinese teachers may be able to use group discussion when talking about controversial issues to make students feel more engaged. However, all four teachers in Pace's (2019) study mentioned that a single group discussion format might not make students feel safe. Perhaps a round-robin brainstorming session or a walking debate could take place. These would get students more engaged. Moreover, it would be easy for the teacher to take control of the situation and not make the discussion "dangerous."

#### 5.1.3 Make Good Use of Resources

As the Northern Ireland teachers in Pace's (2019) study did, teachers could provide some light-hearted resources such as a documentary, some interviews, or even take students on a museum tour. Of course, these resources should not carry a pronounced point of view or should not allow students to guess the teacher's inclinations through these resources. Using these resources will allow students to learn more about what is going on behind the scenes of this controversial issue. Doing so will allow them to discuss it after having a more in-depth understanding. According to Wong (2016), using a classroom response system like a remote control can significantly increase Chinese students' classroom participation, and students fall in love with speaking because of the remote control. Perhaps Chinese teachers could also use such classroom technology to break the traditional silence of Chinese students.

#### 5.1.4 Use of Classroom Language

Teachers should remain humble and enter the classroom with an open and inclusive attitude. The teacher should know that the protagonists of this classroom are the students and not themselves. In a study by Tang et al. (2020), it was mentioned that Chinese students gave up speaking and participating in a class for fear of being harshly criticised by their teachers or receiving very negative feedback. So encouragement from teachers seems to be essential for Chinese students. In all the previously mentioned examples, teachers in all countries and regions mentioned the need to encourage students to think and create a positive and warm atmosphere. So teachers should use more words of encouragement and positivity. It is essential not to be prejudiced against some students. Moreover, when discussing controversial issues, teachers should use more leading words and avoid expressing their own opinions. Nevertheless, teachers should also be optimistic about issues that involve social justice. Actively guide students to think in the right direction. As previously explained in the introduction to what a safe space is, safe spaces are not safe for everyone. The difference between safety with dignity and safety with knowledge was introduced (Callan, 2016), so in controversial issues, teachers should take care to guide students who can think critically as well as disagree with the views of others, but with respect. Teachers should stop students when they know they may be causing 'danger' to others and explain why to the student who has been stopped.

#### 5.1.5 Development of Teacher Competence and Quality

The term teacher quality is repeatedly mentioned in the examples of Israel, Korea and Hong Kong. Some teachers felt that they could not control the classroom nor know how to answer the questions mentioned by students when referring to controversial issues. Teachers should therefore improve their quality in their area of expertise to professionally respond to students' questions when asked. As well as this, teachers should learn during their preservice training how to control the classroom, for example, how to control the situation if students argue over different points of view during a discussion.

### 5.2 For Students

#### 5.2.1 Silence May Be Appropriate

According to previous presentations on Chinese students, Chinese students tend to be silent in class (Tang et al., 2020). Although silence can reduce engagement. However, if the student feels that silence is comfortable for him, then the student is entitled to remain silent. There is no need to feel guilty about being silent. However, if a

student chooses to speak up in class, do not ridicule or assume that the student is upsetting the collective balance. This is also a good time to remain silent. As Hess (2009:14) has mentioned, expression can be encouraged, but participation is not mandatory.

### 5.2.2 Careful Wording When Expressing Views

You should be careful about the words you use when discussing controversial issues in small groups or when making concluding remarks in front of classmates. Do not be verbally aggressive towards other students. As mentioned by Tang et al. (2020), students may choose not to speak up for fear of ridicule from their peers. This is why the comments of the surrounding students are so important. So do not disregard the feelings of others when they are speaking positively or when making comments.

### 5.2.3 Maintain Critical Thinking

As Callan (2016) says to keep dignity safe and knowledge dangerous. Creating a safe space or respecting fellow students does not mean that students are no longer allowed to judge the speaker's point of view. Actively responding to speakers is also characteristic of a safe space. Students are expected to maintain their ability to think critically. It is just important to respect others while thinking critically.

## 6. Conclusion and Limitations

In summary, creating safe spaces while teaching controversial topics in China is challenging for Chinese teachers. However, it is possible to combine the situation in Chinese classrooms with the experiences of teaching in other countries and regions. The methods will be tried out and extended to the whole country. However, it must be said that there are limitations to this article, such as the small number of examples of countries and regions cited and the fact that some examples do not make it evident that these methods have succeeded in constructing a safe space. Furthermore, safe spaces themselves are a controversial subject, as it is impossible to make them safe for everyone in the classroom. It is just done to be as safe as possible. Nevertheless, there is a need for safe spaces to exist in China. This is because, based on previous knowledge of Chinese classrooms, there is a lack of safe spaces in Chinese classrooms, whether they teach controversial issues or not. As Bell (2013) says, in the classroom, these strategies are not exhaustive but rather lay the groundwork for the future, as social justice is a goal, so teachers should keep updating and improving these recommendations to create a classroom that truly allows for the safe and equal participation of all students.

## References

- Alexakos, K., et al. (2016). Mindfulness and discussing "thorny" issues in the classroom. *Cultural Studies of Science Education*, 11(3), 741-769.
- Barrett, B. J. (2010). Is "Safety" Dangerous? A Critical Examination of the Classroom as Safe Space. *Canadian Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, 1(1), 9.
- Bar-Tal, D. E., & Halperin, E. (2011). Socio-psychological barriers to conflict resolution.
- Bekerman, Z., & Zembylas, M. (2011). *Teaching Contested Narratives: Identity, Memory and Reconciliation in Peace Education and Beyond*. Cambridge University Press.
- Bell, L. (2013). Theoretical foundations. In M. Adams, W. Blumenfeld, C. Castañeda, H. Hackman, M. Peters, & X. Zuñiga (Eds.), *Readings for diversity and social justice* (3rd ed., pp. 21-26). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Berg, W., et al. (2003). *Teaching controversial issues: A European perspective*. Children's Identity and Citizenship in Europe, CiCe.
- Bond, M. H. (1991). *Beyond the Chinese face: Insights from psychology*. Oxford University Press, USA.
- Callan, E. (2016). Education in safe and unsafe spaces. *Philosophical Inquiry in Education*, 24(1), 64-78.
- Cassar, C., et al. (2021). The classroom in turmoil: teachers' perspective on unplanned controversial issues in the classroom. *Teachers and Teaching*, 1-16.
- Chen, J. (2015). Teachers' Conceptions of Approaches to Teaching: A Chinese Perspective. *The Asia-Pacific Education Researcher*, 24(2), 341-351.
- Chong, E. K.-M., et al. (2021). Hong Kong secondary school teachers' pedagogical approaches to controversial issues at a time of social and political turmoil. *Teacher Development*, 1-21.
- Claire, H., & Holden, C. (2007). *The challenge of teaching controversial issues*. Trentham Books Limited.
- Crossa, V. (2005). Converting the "small stories" into "big" ones: A response to Susan Smith's "States, markets and an ethic of care". *Political Geography*, 24(1), 29-34.

- Flensner, K. K., & Von Der Lippe, M. (2019). Being safe from what and safe for whom? A critical discussion of the conceptual metaphor of “safe space”. *Intercultural Education, 30*(3), 275-288.
- Flowerdew, L. (1998). A cultural perspective on group work. *English Language Learning Journal, 52*(4), 323-329.
- Fouts, J. T., et al.. (1993). Secondary social education in the Peoples Republic of China: A quantitative study of classroom environments in the Guangdong Province. *Theory & Research in Social Education, 21*(1), pp. 7-24.
- Ha, P. L. and Li, B. (2014). Silence as right, choice, resistance and strategy among Chinese ‘Me Generation’ students: Implications for pedagogy. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education, 35*(2), pp. 233-248.
- Hand, M. and Levinson, R. (2012). Discussing Controversial Issues in the Classroom. *Educational Philosophy and Theory, 44*(6), pp. 614-629.
- Hess, D. (2008). Controversial issues and democratic discourse. *Handbook of Research in Social Studies Education*, pp. 124-136.
- Hess, D. E. (2009). *Controversy in the classroom: The democratic power of discussion*. Routledge.
- Holley, L. C. and Steiner, S. (2005). Safe space: Student perspectives on classroom environment. *Journal of Social Work Education, 41*(1), pp. 49-64.
- Hung, Y.-H. (2019). To teach or not teach controversial public issues in Taiwan?. *Asia Pacific Journal of Education, 39*(4), pp. 562-576.
- Jackson, J. (2002). Reticence in second language case discussions: Anxiety and aspirations. *System, 30*(1), pp. 65-84.
- Kenney, M. (2001). *Mapping gay LA: The intersection of place and politics*. Temple University Press.
- King, J. T. (2009). Teaching and learning about controversial issues: Lessons from Northern Ireland. *Theory & Research in Social Education, 37*(2), pp. 215-246.
- Lerner, J. E., & Fulambarker, A. (2018). Beyond Diversity and Inclusion: Creating a Social Justice Agenda in the Classroom. *Journal of Teaching in Social Work, 38*(1), 43-53.
- Littlewood, W. (1999). Defining and developing autonomy in East Asian contexts. *Applied Linguistics, 20*(1), 71-94.
- Liu, J. (2002). Negotiating silence in American classrooms: Three Chinese cases. *Language and Intercultural Communication, 2*(1), 37-54.
- Lynch, D. J., & Mckenna, M. C. (1990). Teaching controversial material: New issues for teachers. *Social Education, 54*(5), 317-19.
- Misco, T. (2013). We do not talk about these things: The promises and challenges of reflective thinking and controversial issue discussions in a Chinese high school. *Intercultural Education, 24*(5), 401-416.
- Misco, T. (2016). We are only looking for the right answers: The challenges of controversial issue instruction in South Korea. *Asia Pacific Journal of Education, 36*(3), 332-349.
- National Association of Social Workers. (2008). Code of ethics. Washington, DC: NASW Press. Retrieved from <https://www.socialworkers.org/About/Ethics/Code-of-Ethics/Code-of-Ethics-English>
- Oulton, C., et al.. (2004). Reconceptualizing the teaching of controversial issues. *International Journal of Science Education, 26*(4), 411-423.
- Pace, J. L. (2019). Contained risk-taking: Preparing preservice teachers to teach controversial issues in three countries. *Theory & Research in Social Education, 47*(2), 228-260.
- Paul-Binyamin, I., & Hayosh, T. (2021). “Safe Space” for Jewish and Arab teachers dealing with controversial issues. *Leadership and Policy in Schools, 1-16*.
- Rom, R. B. (1998). ‘Safe spaces’: Reflections on an educational metaphor. *Journal of Curriculum Studies, 30*(4), 397-408.
- Shi, Y., et al.. (2021). Dialogic teaching of controversial public issues in a Chinese middle school. *Learning, Culture and Social Interaction, 30*, 100533.



- Stengel, B. S., & Weems, L. (2010). Questioning safe space: An introduction. *Studies in Philosophy and Education, 29*(6), 505-507.
- Tan, C. (2017). Constructivism and pedagogical reform in China: Issues and challenges. *Globalisation, Societies and Education, 15*(2), 238-247.
- Tang, X., *et al.* (2020). Learning to be silent: Examining Chinese elementary students' stories about why they do not speak in class. *Language, Culture and Curriculum, 33*(4), 384-401.
- Wellington, J. J. (1986). Controversial issues in the curriculum.
- Wong, A. (2016). Classroom Response Systems and Student Performance Improvement: Local Versus International Students. *Journal of Teaching in International Business, 27*(4), 197-208.
- Wu, Q. (2015). Re-examining the "Chinese learner": a case study of mainland Chinese students' learning experiences at British Universities. *Higher Education, 70*(4), 753-766.
- Wu, X. (2009). The dynamics of Chinese face mechanisms and classroom behaviour: A case study. *Evaluation & Research in Education, 22*(2-4), 87-105.
- Zembylas, M., & Kambani, F. (2012). The Teaching of Controversial Issues During Elementary-Level History Instruction: Greek-Cypriot Teachers' Perceptions and Emotions. *Theory & Research in Social Education, 40*(2), pp. 107-133.
- Zimmerman, J., & Robertson, E. (2017). *The case for contention*. University of Chicago Press.

### Copyrights

Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to the journal.

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).