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Why teachers address unplanned controversial issues in the classroom

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ABSTRACT

This study examines teachers' justifications for addressing unplanned controversial issues in the classroom. It builds on the premise that controversial issues arise unexpectedly in the classroom context and that some teachers actively choose to address such issues rather than avoid them. Through a series of semi-structured interviews with teachers from different school contexts in Europe, we found that the justifications need to be understood within a temporal framework characterized by the immediacy of the situation, encompassing the teachers' past experiences and a desired future, unfolding in a specific context in which emotions play a significant role. The justifications are, at the same time, intricately embedded in teachers' personal and professional beliefs and their task perception. Participants' justifications were also guided by their moral convictions so that their actions may be understood as morally motivated responses to what they perceive to be unjust. The results suggest that the extent to which teachers' personal and professional beliefs are aligned and anchored to a justice and equity framework, and what teachers understand by justice and equity, has implications in the classroom. The study proposes a model that can support teachers to reflect on their pedagogical decision-making when addressing unplanned controversial issues in the classroom.

Introduction

Controversial issues characterize life in democratic societies, delineating the ability to function within a context that can sustain different conflictual views about the same issue. The scholarly debate on controversial issues in education has, from its modest beginning, gained traction, particularly in recent years. Research has addressed various aspects of controversial issues in education, generating in and of itself several controversies, including, but not limited to, what is a controversial issue, how to teach such an issue, and why (e.g. Alongi et al., 2016; Journell, 2017b, 2018; Kauppi & Drerup, 2021; Magendzo & Pavez, 2017). In turn, what, how, and why questions have generated debates related to identity issues, teacher neutrality, teacher disclosure, human rights, and the role of emotions in teaching controversial issues particularly in divided societies (e.g. Conrad, 2020; Donnelly et al., 2021; Garrett & Alvey, 2021; Mortenson, 2021; Pace, 2019; Swalwell & Schweber, 2016).

There remains, however, a significant gap in the literature—controversial issues often arise sporadically, unexpectedly, and authentically in the relative sanctity of the classroom (Wansink et al., 2019), throwing "the classroom in turmoil" (van Alstein, 2019). Even when an issue is expected to arise in class, as in the wake of a terrorist attack for example, teachers may struggle "to make sense of the events in real time" (Kawashima-Ginsberg et al., 2022, p. 38) or they may be taken off guard by the way in which the issue manifests itself in the classroom. Neither are issues restricted to history or social studies classrooms, the subjects that are traditionally associated with the teaching of controversial issues in secondary school (Kelly, 1986; Lynch & McKenna, 1990). They can arise unexpectedly in any classroom at any time.

The moment a controversial issue arises unexpectedly in the classroom, the teacher, acting as the gatekeeper, must, in a very short time, decide whether to address the issue. Research indicates that, for the most part, teachers will avoid teaching controversial issues even when they are part of a syllabus. Reasons why teachers avoid teaching controversial issues include lack of knowledge and expertise in the area and fear of reactions from students, parents, and administrators (Garrett & Alvey, 2021; Journell, 2017a). These same reasons equally apply to controversial issues that arise unexpectedly in the classroom, possibly making it easier for teachers to justify avoiding such issues, also because they are not required to teach them. Avoidance has become even more pronounced in the wake of attacks on teachers who do not shy from teaching controversial issues in their classroom. In 2020, Samuel Paty, a French teacher, was murdered by a terrorist over allegations that he had shown cartoons of the prophet Muhammad during a class on freedom of expression. Ironically, the student who made these allegations was absent on the day when the teacher reportedly used these cartoons in class. A year later, teachers in France reported being afraid, "weighing up every word," and how they were "going to avoid certain subjects that could be controversial" (Euronews, 2021, paras. 12–13). However, avoidance will not eliminate controversial issues from arising unexpectedly in the classroom. Despite the conundrum and risk often associated with controversial issues in the classroom, some teachers still dare to deal with controversial issues, even when these arise unexpectedly in the classroom (Hess, 2009; Zinn, 2002).

In an earlier exploratory study, the authors (Cassar et al., 2021) looked at what teachers identify as an unplanned controversial issue in the classroom—the "what" question beyond the luxury of time, deliberation, and instructional planning. In this current study, we look at the "why" question. We draw a distinction between *teaching* controversial issues and *addressing unplanned* controversial issues. In teaching controversial issues as part of a planned instructional activity, there is an assumed and conscious effort by the teacher to teach or integrate controversial topics in the classroom to develop specific competences within specific subjects (Hess, 2009). However, as (Journell, 2018) pointed out,

> Even if a teacher could somehow remove all issues from the formal curriculum, there is no way to prevent students from raising issues on their own, and once they do, the teacher either has to acknowledge those issues as valid or dismiss them. (p. 3)

In actively addressing an issue that is perceived as controversial by the teacher when it arises spontaneously in the classroom, teachers capitalize on the opportunity of the unscripted moment (Parsons & Vaughn, 2016) so that their pedagogical decision-making intersects with their sense of social purpose (Ho et al., 2017). Drawing on data from a series of

interviews with teachers from different school contexts in Europe, this exploratory study examines the justifications that teachers identified in actively addressing controversial issues that arise unexpectedly and authentically in their classroom to understand what motivates teachers to act. These teachers are "human beings who, if only for a moment, if only while beset with fears, step out of line and do *something*" (Zinn, 2002, p. 4, emphasis in original), as opposed to choosing to avoid the issues altogether.

Defining unplanned controversial issues in the classroom

In their review of research spanning a 10-year period, Ho et al. (2017) identified the multiple understandings of the term "controversial issues" to be at the root of the debate. In their work, the authors drew a distinction between controversial topics and controversial issues, the former being topics objectionable to certain people, with the latter being issues that deserve being debated. In line with this distinction, Journell (2017a) highlighted how teachers often treat race, gender and religion as issues when there is nothing inherently controversial about these topics.

Journell (2017b, 2018) identified four criteria that have emerged from the literature in the past years to classify an issue as controversial—the behavioral, epistemic, political, and politically authentic criterion. The behavioral criterion relies on a number of people disagreeing on a matter; therefore, any issue could be classified as controversial. The epistemic criterion relies on empirical evidence to determine if an issue is open or settled, "whereas the political and politically authentic criteria rely more on societal determination of the controversial nature of issues" (Journell, 2017b, p. 341). Zimmerman and Robertson (2017), provided yet another way of categorizing controversial issues relevant to public education—maximally controversial issues, which is when there is disagreement between fairly knowledgeable people over issues of public concern such as immigration; disagreements between experts and the general public, as in the case of vaccines and autism; and disagreements solely among experts, for example, over the interpretation of a literary text.

Controversial issues can be open or settled, but they may also tip from open to settled, and vice-versa, over time (Hess & McAvoy, 2015). The problem becomes even more complex because any issue can be framed as either open or settled by different people, at different times, in different contexts. However, as Dunn (2022) argued, "just because some people consider an issue 'open' for debate does not mean that it *should* be debated" (p. 32, emphasis in original) especially when controversial issues intersect with identity issues and human rights. As Journell (2017b) put it, the way "teachers frame controversial identity issues within their classrooms sends messages about the value and legitimacy of certain groups of students and segments of society" (p. 349).

This complex landscape becomes even more daunting when the controversial issue crops up unexpectedly in the classroom. In an earlier study (Cassar et al., 2021), we explored teachers' perceptions of unplanned controversial issues in the classroom. In line with Pace (2021), we found that the term "controversial issues" is often taken to mean topics that provoke "highly charged reactions due to their sensitive nature" (p. xviii). What teachers perceived as unplanned controversial issues in the classroom included:

(1) Instances of *mainstream controversies* in line with the politically authentic criterion in which issues were framed as open because they "have traction in the public

sphere" (Hess & McAvoy, 2015, p. 168). These issues were often initiated unexpectedly by students against other students and related to the rule of law, terrorism, the economy, abortion, migrants and refugees, and LGBTQ communities.

(2) Instances of *teacher-initiated controversies* that were more in line with "thorny issues" (Alexakos et al., 2016) or "fake controversies" (Zimmerman & Robertson, 2017). In such instances, students made unexpected and inappropriate comments, and the teachers chose to actively address the comments, challenging both the comments and the students' stance. The comments, which were racist, sexist, homophobic, or xenophobic, highlighted instances of prejudice, stereotyping, or discrimination and echoed culturally embedded beliefs and ideas that addressed notions of identity, race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and religion. This finding supported Journell's (2017a) argument that teachers often treat race, gender, and religion as controversial when there is nothing inherently controversial about them. Addressed as settled issues by the participants in the study, these examples strongly indicated that "students perceive questions concerning the constructs of religion, gender, and race/ethnicity to be important to their identities" (Tribukait, 2021, p. 554).

(3) Instances of *controversial pedagogy* referring to classroom episodes in which the teachers identified their own behavior as controversial. Triggered by a specific occurrence in the classroom, such episodes highlighted teachers' internal tensions and a heightened sense of self as the teachers critically reflected on their own behavior in dealing with the occurrence as it unfolded in the classroom. Teachers questioned how their own behavior aligned (or did not align) with their own personal and professional beliefs and how their behavior may have been labeled as controversial in their immediate and wider context. What teachers identified as controversial in these instances is not necessarily controversial but closer to teacher identity tensions or instances that "challenge a teacher's feelings, values, beliefs, or perceptions" (Pillen et al., 2013, p. 87).

The three categories of unplanned controversial issues described above frame the current study.

The classroom as a political site

The decision to address controversial issues is, in turn, influenced by several factors that include "the political, institutional and curricular context, teachers' emotional histories, their identities, beliefs and sense of purpose" (Ho et al., 2017, p. 327). In choosing to address an unplanned controversial issue, teachers acknowledge the classroom as a political site. As Journell's (2017a) argued,

> Teaching is innately a political endeavor, and any number of routine actions that teachers undertake on a daily basis could be considered political acts. . . . Similarly, the decision whether to address an inflammatory comment made by a student also represents a break from neutrality since rebuking the comment demonstrates a clear political position. (p. 112)

Hence, any attempt to maintain a neutral position in the classroom masks "the exercise of power by dominant groups" (Stubblefield & Chisholm, 2020, p. 236) and results in a tacit

complicity in support of the status quo (Kandel-Cisco & Flessner, 2018; Mortenson, 2021). Kelly (1986) advocated committed impartiality as an alternative to what Conrad (2020) identified as false or uneven neutrality. Such an approach supports teachers' commitment to a position while encouraging students to disagree and consider different viewpoints on the same issue. Journell (2016) argued that

> A committed impartiality relationship in which both parties subject each other to the truth not only tips the balance of power in the teacher—student relationship more toward the student, but it also provides students with a model of tolerant democratic discourse as well as the ability to express their opinions safely in a public forum. (p. 28)

Yet, Hess and McAvoy (2009) reported teachers being "clearly divided" about the issue of disclosure, in contrast with 80% of the students involved in their study who thought it was acceptable for teachers to share their opinion on a controversial issue. Similarly, Miller-Lane et al. (2006) found that middle and high-school social studies teachers categorically rejected the decision to disclose their position on a controversial issue because of the risks involved. Yet, Miller-Lane et al. also reported that when disclosure was taken to mean revealing one's values rather than a position, "teachers" responses were more complex, less fixed, more fluid, and more sensitive to the particular needs of their students, community, or the topic under consideration" (p. 40).

Teacher disclosure remains fraught with challenges alongside a responsibility "to model appropriate civic behavior rather than project the appearance of civic disengagement" (Journell, 2011, p. 242). This responsibility becomes even more pronounced when human lives are at stake (e.g. Dabach, 2015) and highlights the emotional work involved in teaching and addressing controversial issues. This point is powerfully expressed by Geller (2020) who highlighted teachers' efforts to avoid disclosure in the classroom as a core challenge simply because there is no neutral option. She described how a teacher "could allow a transphobic statement to hang in the air being breathed by her transgender students or she could speak out against it" (p. 200). Garrett (2020) argued that research on teaching controversial issues almost always identifies the role of the emotional demands of such conversations. Wansink et al. (2019), for example, acknowledged how "controversial pupil remarks can shock teachers" (p. 68). Similarly, Sinatra et al. (2014) noted that "when students view a topic as controversial or identity threatening, such as biological evolution or climate change, they can experience negative emotions" (p. 425). Teachers need to attend to both their emotional resonances and to students' emotions to "make significance out of knowledge that carries with it a difficult burden" (Garrett, 2020, p. 342).

Justifications for classroom controversy

Stradling et al. (1984) identified product-based justifications for the teaching of controversial issues in and for their own sake, which they distinguished from process-based justifications that refer to the skills and competences that students develop as they engage with controversial issues in the classroom. This distinction runs through many of the rationales for the teaching of controversial issues provided by different scholars (e.g., Al Badri, 2015; Berg et al., 2003; Magendzo & Pavez, 2017). More recently, van Alstein (2019) adopted a product-based justification to argue that controversial issues, a fundamental part of our societies, cannot be resolved through avoidance and proposed controversial issues as

opportunities "for students to learn how democracy works in practice" (p. 4). Empirical research has suggested a positive correlation between the teaching of controversial issues and active citizenship, particularly within an open classroom climate (Hahn, 2012). For example, Godfrey and Grayman (2014) found that an open classroom climate was positively related to "sociopolitical efficacy" and to critical action in the community. Johnson and Johnson (2014, 2016) advocated "constructive controversy" as a comprehensive instructional model that engages learners in deliberative discussions in a cooperative context and through which learners become engaged and socialized in the political discourse of a democratic society. Systematic studies conducted by Johnson et al. (2000) found that the model provides numerous benefits across multiple levels, including the development of positive self-esteem, cognitive reasoning, perspective-taking, and interpersonal engagements, which supports the quality of decision making and problem-solving processes, the quality of relationships, and the psychological well-being of citizens (Johnson & Johnson, 2014).

Working in the aftermath of the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election, Dunn et al. (2019) argued that "even within contexts that may be constraining, teachers have the capacity to resist and subvert" (p. 466). However, addressing controversial issues is not necessarily about resistance or subversion. Rather, teachers need to understand and

> Capitalize on the agency they do have in their pedagogical decision making. . . . For those teachers whose practice is anchored in understandings of justice and equity, making pedagogical choices becomes not about partisanship but rather an ongoing commitment to advance the liberatory possibilities of schooling for the good of all students. (Dunn et al., 2019, p. 467)

It could be argued that this pedagogical imperative is the teacher's "mission" (Korthagen, 2004) or raison d'être, inevitably related to what constitutes a good education and the "implications it holds for the realization of the broader transformative aims of education" (Mockler, 2011, p. 525), specifically in democratic countries. These transformative aims of education are at the intersection of various "educations" and approaches that include civic education, human rights education, social justice education, education for sustainable development, global citizen education, and others (e.g., Kavanagh et al., 2021; Osler, 2016; Zajda, 2020). Each "education" proposes a different focus, with nuanced theoretical underpinnings, but ultimately all aim to prepare students "to participate in the public life of a democracy, particularly as they work toward goals of social justice" (Ho & Barton, 2020, p. 471).

Theoretical framework

The present study rests on the premise that the classroom is characterized by an "endemic unpredictability" (Brookfield, 2006, p. 8) in which anything can happen. Schools inevitably reflect the general state of society (Aho et al., 2010). Consequently, controversial issues are bound to arise sporadically and unexpectedly in the classroom. Faced with such a situation, teachers need to decide whether to address the issue or not. In deciding to address the issue, teachers endorse a pedagogy that is not neutral. This non-neutrality is further exacerbated by the content of the unplanned controversial issues that teachers address. Such content is multi-faceted and draws upon personal, current, cultural, and historical dimensions, highlighting the classroom as a political site (McAvoy & Hess, 2013).

Product and process-based justifications for teaching controversial issues (Stradling et al., 1984) do not take the teacher into consideration. Following Gee (2001) and the claim that one "really cannot coerce anyone into seeing the particular experiences connected to those practices as constitutive (in part) of the 'kind of person' they are" (p. 106), one could argue that teachers address unplanned controversial issues also because doing so constitutes who they are in teaching. Kelchtermans (2009) argued that teachers develop a personal interpretive framework which guides their interpretations and actions in a given context. This framework is an interplay between professional self-understanding and the subjective educational theory.

According to Kelchtermans (2009), professional self-understanding, or the awareness of one's sense of self and the impact of experiences on that same self, made explicit through "the act of telling," includes five different components: self-image, self-esteem, task perception, job motivation, and future perspectives. Self-image refers to how teachers view themselves and is based on self-perception and the way others see them. Self-esteem refers to how well teachers think they are doing their job and involves an emotional dimension. Task perception refers to what teachers believe they are expected to do as teachers within a morally regulated dimension. Job motivation refers to what motivates teachers to become teachers and stay in teaching. Finally, the future perspective adds a temporal element to the theory, placing the teacher in the present moment while considering past experiences and future expectations as teachers. Kelchtermans argued that while the five components of professional self-understanding can be "distinguished analytically," they are inevitably connected to each other. In tandem, the subjective educational theory, or the personal system of knowledge and beliefs about education that teachers use when they perform their job, made up of idiosyncratic "content" derived from personal experiences, reflects a teacher's approach to a situation and the reasons for addressing that situation in a specific manner. The personal interpretive framework guides teachers'

> Interpretations and actions in particular situations (context), but is at the same time also modified by and resulting from these meaningful interactions (sense-making) with that context. As such it is both a condition for and a result of the interaction, and represents the— always preliminary – "mental sediment" of teachers' learning and developing over time. (Kelchtermans, 2009, pp. 260–261)

These meaningful interactions echo the "interactional process" between teaching, students, and subject highlighted by Roefs et al. (2021) in describing teachers' experience of presence in their educational practice so that

> By being concurrently attentive and aware of students and of themselves, (teachers) gained an in-depth and nuanced understanding of and sensibility to what was happening in class. This understanding and sensibility allowed them to judge what they considered best in that moment for the students and their development. (p. 20)

This study aims to explore what makes teachers address unplanned controversial issues when these arise unexpectedly and authentically in the classroom. We adopt a comprehensive definition of unplanned controversial issues in the classroom to include anything that generates conflict and polarization in the classroom as described in our earlier study (Cassar et al., 2021). We look at the justifications offered by teachers in terms of product or process as suggested by Stradling et al. (1984) and use Kelchtermans's (2009) "personal interpretative framework" understood "as a lens through which teachers look at

their job, give meaning to it and act in it" (Kelchtermans, 2009, p. 260) to support an understanding of the justifications offered by the participants. The main research question guiding the investigation is: How do teachers justify their decision to address unplanned controversial issues in the classroom?

Methods

Participants

This exploratory study draws on semi-structured interviews with a purposive sample of 12 teachers coming from nine democratic countries in Europe. Five participants were known and recruited by the first author through the network of the Pestalozzi Programme of the Council of Europe. The Pestalozzi Programme started in the 1960s and ran consistently till the end of 2017. It brought together teachers, teacher trainers, and other educational professionals to actively address issues related to human rights, democracy, and the rule of law in education. The program provided teacher-training opportunities and supported an online community of practice for teachers and teacher-trainers. It focused on change at the grassroots level and peer-to-peer engagement for active change. An additional four participants were invited to participate in the research based on recommendations from this network. Finally, three participants were recruited directly by the first author. All participants were known to be engaged in activist work or affiliated with non-governmental and voluntary organizations, strongly committed to social justice and equity in their respective contexts, and not afraid to make their voices heard.

Interviewees were initially invited to participate in the research through an e-mail in which the aims of the study and the data collection procedure were detailed. Informed consent was sought and obtained from all participants. The participants involved were all teachers working in either public and state-funded schools, Catholic schools, or in one instance, a college catering for an international audience. Table 1 describes the participating teachers in terms of sex, subject/s and level taught, years of experience, and highest qualification held. Names were changed to protect participants' identity.

Table 1. Participants.

Name	Sex	Country	Democratic Index 2019	Subject taught	School level	Teaching experience	Highest qualification
Angeliki	Female	Greece	7.43	Information technology	Secondary	16 years	Masters
Consuelo	Female	Italy	7.52	French	Upper secondary	20 years	PhD
Denis	Male	Romania	6.49	History	Secondary	16 years	Masters
Braam	Male	Malta	7.95	History	Secondary	20 years	Masters
Esrin	Female	Iceland	9.58	Social studies	Upper secondary	12 years	PhD
Julie	Female	Germany	8.68	English, French	Upper secondary	1 year	Masters
Agnieszka	Female	Monaco	8.12	French	Upper secondary	10 years	Masters
Ismael	Male	Croatia	6.57	History	Secondary	19 years	PhD
Adrian	Male	Malta	7.95	Religion	Secondary	8 years	Masters
Nora	Female	Croatia	6.57	Primary	Primary	20 years	Masters
Salma	Female	Germany	8.52	Global politics	Upper secondary	6 years	Masters
Jakub	Male	Malta	7.95	Primary	Primary	18 years	Post Graduate Diploma

We understand that being able to discuss controversial issues without inhibitions depends on the context in which it takes place. Without negating what Mockler (2011) referred to as the "teacher's political edge" in any context, the state of democracy in the participants' countries of origin was deemed of particular importance to ensure their safety from any possible form of repercussion due to their participation in this study. Hence, all teachers participating in the study came from countries with a Democratic Index of 6 or higher. The Democratic Index describes the state of democracy in a country based on five general categories—electoral process and pluralism, civil liberties, functioning of government, political participation, and political culture. Scores from 6 to 8 denote a flawed democracy while 10 indicates a full democracy (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2020).

Data collection and procedure

An interview schedule was formulated using the Interview Protocol Refinement (IPR) method as described by Castillo-Montoya (2016). The schedule included the main interview questions and several suggestions for probing and follow-up questions. Because of the first author's affinity with participants (Chenail, 2011), the interview protocol was subjected to rigorous scrutiny by the other authors to identify potential bias and issues that could influence the interview process and outcome. Two pilot interviews highlighted the complexity and potential emotional aspect of the topic under investigation. These pilot interviews emphasized the importance of providing space for participants to focus on the meaning attached to the event being recalled (Barbour, 2000). Another factor to transpire from the pilot interviews was the extent to which to probe participants (Price, 2002), particularly in relation to emotional content. A further series of follow-up questions was also added to the interview schedule to address any potential language issues and ensure precise understanding. The latter was directly related to the fact that participants were not equally fluent in English.

In preparation for the interviews forming part of the main study, participants received a second e-mail explaining the focus of the interview with an invitation to "think of examples of unplanned controversial issues" that they had addressed in their classroom. The term "controversial issue" was defined "to include anything that is contentious (hot/problematic) at any particular moment in time and specific context." Participants were also reminded of the spontaneous nature of the examples of controversial issues being sought at the start of each interview.

Interviews were conducted in English by the first author through video conferencing at a time that was convenient for participants between December 2019 and January 2020. Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes. Interviews started with a brief introduction, restating the scope of the research, data collection procedures, and ethical considerations. The first few questions were meant to ease participants into the conversation before they were asked for specific examples of unplanned controversial issues that arose spontaneously in their classroom and which they had addressed. Participants were encouraged to provide contextual details and any other information that supported understanding before being asked what had made them decide to address the unplanned controversy. The specific interview question was:

- What made you decide to address this particular issue when it cropped up unexpectedly in the classroom?

Bearing in mind participants' fluency in English, the question was paraphrased as necessary to support understanding. Probing questions were also pre-designed to obtain comprehensive responses. Examples of such questions included:

- Why did you address this issue?
- What made you address this issue?
- Why did you consider this issue to be important?

As recommended by Whiting (2008), the interview schedule also allowed space for spontaneous probing and follow-up questions based on participants' responses in order to check for meaning and to refocus the conversation when necessary.

Data analysis

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and imported into ATLAS-ti 8. The first author conducted a preliminary exploratory analysis of the data (Plano Clark & Creswell, 2014) by reading the interview transcripts several times. Holistic descriptive codes (Miles et al., 2020) were then assigned to segments representing justifications for addressing unplanned controversial issues in the classroom as offered by interviewees. Only justifications corresponding to examples of unplanned controversial issues that arose sporadically in the classroom were considered. Justifications relating to examples of controversial issues that were planned as part of a lesson or to generic examples that were not bound to a particular incident in the classroom were excluded from the analysis, as were examples from the pilot interviews.

A priori coding

A priori codes based on Stradling et al. (1984) and Kelchtermans's (2009) theory of self-understanding were applied to the teachers' justifications. Multiple justifications for addressing the unplanned controversial issues could be identified in each segment. The segments were extracted to an Excel spreadsheet, and each segment was subdivided into distinctive justifications for addressing the unplanned controversial issue. This task was reiterated with the segments pertaining to each of the 23 examples of unplanned controversial issues that teachers identified and addressed in the classroom found in the data. Table 2 presents the *a priori* codes and their definition as applied in the analysis. Table 3 provides an example of how each segment was subdivided into distinctive justifications and how the *a priori* codes were applied to the distinctive justifications identified.

Table 2. "*A priori*" codes and their definition as applied to the data.

a priori codes	Definition
Stradling et al. (1984)	
Product-based justification	Teaching controversial issues in and for their own sake.
Process-based justification	Teaching controversial issues to develop specific skills and competences.
Kelchtermans (2009)	
Self-image	The way teachers view themselves as teachers.
Self-esteem	How well teachers think they are doing their job.
Task perception	What teachers believe they are expected to do as teachers within a morally regulated dimension.
Job motivation	What motivates teachers to become teachers.
Future perspectives	The teacher's expectations about his/her future in the job, and the way actions in the present are influenced by meaningful experiences in the past and expectations about the future.

Table 3. Example of *a priori* codes applied to distinctive units of justification for addressing unplanned controversial issues in the classroom.

Participant	Entire justification	Distinctive justification	*a priori* code
Angeliki	Again, the fact that I do have an opinion on this topic, and the fact that as an educator I do not feel like I have to only address my curricula with my students. So given the opportunity I felt that I needed to support both parties let's say with a chance to think differently to collect more information on the topic and also for them to be able to critically think on what they are being advertised with mainstream media.	The fact that I do have an opinion on this topic.	Self-image
		The fact that as an educator I do not feel like I have to only address my curricula with my students.	Task perception
		I needed to support both parties … with a chance to think differently.	Task perception; process-based justification
		To collect more information on the topic.	Product-based justification
		To be able to critically think on what they are being advertised with mainstream media.	Process-based justification

Identifying themes

The *a priori* codes supported the analytical structuring of the data and provided for a deeper understanding of the justifications provided by the teachers. However, the process also highlighted the notion that subdividing the justifications into distinctive units resulted in an oversimplification of the data and an analysis of "isolated variables abstracted from their context" (Kvale, 1996, p. 174). We, therefore, performed a second round of analysis in which the justifications were explored in their entirety with a view to identify themes in the dataset, supported by the *a priori* codes. The justifications, in their entirety, were transposed to another Excel spreadsheet together with the unplanned controversial issue to which they referred. Tables 4, 5 , and 6 provide an example from each of the three categories identified in our earlier study (Cassar et al., 2021).

Visual maps (Decarlo et al., 2021) were created for each example, dynamically identifying overarching themes in the justifications. The process was iterated and the themes refined with each reading to incorporate the *a priori* codes. The individual visual maps pertaining to each example led to the creation of a model which we believe can support the holistic understanding of the justifications that teachers offered for addressing unplanned controversial issues in the classroom. This model was compared to a similar model that was developed independently by the second author. This second model was based on a dynamic reading of part of the dataset in a similar process to that conducted by the first author. The themes identified by each author were then compared and discussed until the final themes

Table 4. Justification for addressing an example of mainstream controversy.

Participant	Mainstream controversy	Justification
Angeliki	*I realized that I had two different positions in the class, the ones that were believing this was a developmental opportunity and the ones that were addressing this as a problem for the sustainability of the environment and the air and the water.*	*Again, the fact that I do have an opinion on this topic, and the fact that as an educator I do not feel like I have to only address my curricula with my students. So given the opportunity I felt that I needed to support both parties let's say with a chance to think differently to collect more information on the topic and also for them to be able to critically think on what they are being advertised with mainstream media.*

Table 5. Justification for addressing an example of a teacher-initiated controversy.

| Participant	Teacher-initiated controversy	Justification
Salma	*A sort of anonymous campaign of posters in school that sort of claimed that rape culture was rife in the college and that you know teachers and admin weren't doing enough and that people didn't feel safe.*	*If I were a teacher here, and I'd had experiences in the past with sexual assault and suddenly this poster accused me about, accused of not caring about this kind of stuff I would feel quite offended. So . . . taking a step back, putting yourself into somebody else's shoes . . . seeing where that takes you. And I feel like my subject does quite a lot of that because whether you do that on an interpersonal community level or whether you do that in international relations, it is all about intentions versus perceptions and unintended consequences and so on. Yeah. It is very important for me personally and I also thought look, if one of the poster makers is in my class, they were anonymous, I didn't want to be seen as somebody who ignores this kind of thing. And . . . it fits in with my subject as well, right, it's not like, like on a practical level we lost time talking about it, in fact we practice skills that are very relevant to my subject in a way that was informed and meaningful at a very local level. They cannot necessarily use that case in an exam, but . . . the multi perspective view of looking at a controversial issue is of course, you know, it is something we do . . . It just felt very natural to . . . it would have felt really unnatural not to talk about it.*

Table 6. Justification for addressing an example of controversial pedagogy.

Participant	Controversial pedagogy	Justification
Agnieszka	*And I said, ok, you are the journalists of a newspaper, You have to choose the title of your newspaper, the title of your article, and you have to build an article out of this . . . And I had a group of kids who chose to write the article from the point of view of a right, an extreme right newspaper . . . I didn't condemn what the students had written. I had shown what were the problems but I didn't say oh, you said that, it is bad, it is racist . . . Maybe an hour after the lesson a student called me, this student, she has been very affected because she said that you were supporting the students saying racist, having racist speech.*	*First of all because ok, I want all students to feel well at school, and we shouldn't have any discrimination, any racism and so on. And because of course here I had also some core values and I believe, I mean, I have, the, the strong belief that we need to struggle against discrimination, racism, and so on, which are, I mean it is a plague in our society still. And, I mean as a human person and as a human person with beliefs, I could not let any students think that I could agree with what had been said in this type of newspaper. This was also, maybe for, for preserving my own integrity that day, because it is a belief, a really strong belief, and also because I didn't want this student to lose confidence and to, cos I realized that maybe there was a bigger issue under this one, which was a very serious one . . . This is a society problem.*

were agreed upon so that, for example, the "Preservation of the Self" and "Personal Attributes/Tendencies" were clustered under "Personal Beliefs." Table 7 presents the final themes and the way these relate to the *a priori* codes used in the first round of analysis while Figure 1 presents the final version of the model. This model supported the analysis of the data but is in itself a significant result to emerge from the study.

Table 7. Themes, definitions and relation to *a priori* codes.

Theme	Definition	*a priori* codes
Immediacy	The urgency to address the unplanned controversial issue as a result of the occurrence in the specific moment in time.	Self-understanding (Kelchtermans, 2009)
Past experiences	Specific episodes recalled by the teacher that directly influence their decision to address unplanned controversial issues.	Self-understanding (Kelchtermans, 2009)
Future orientations	Reference to a desired state of being in the future for either themselves or students.	Self-understanding, Future Perspectives (Kelchtermans, 2009)
Emotions	Feelings elicited by the unplanned controversial issues either directly or as a result of the teacher addressing or not addressing the issue.	Self-image (Kelchtermans, 2009)
Personal beliefs	Reference to teachers' personal beliefs and values. Attempts to preserve the self.	Self-image (Kelchtermans, 2009)
Professional beliefs	Reference to the broader aims of education.	Self-image, Task Perception (Kelchtermans, 2009)
Task perception	Practical implications for addressing the unplanned controversial issue.	Task perception (Kelchtermans, 2009); Product and Process-based justifications (Stradling et al., 1984)
Context	Specific contextual influences, including an open-classroom climate and school culture.	n/a
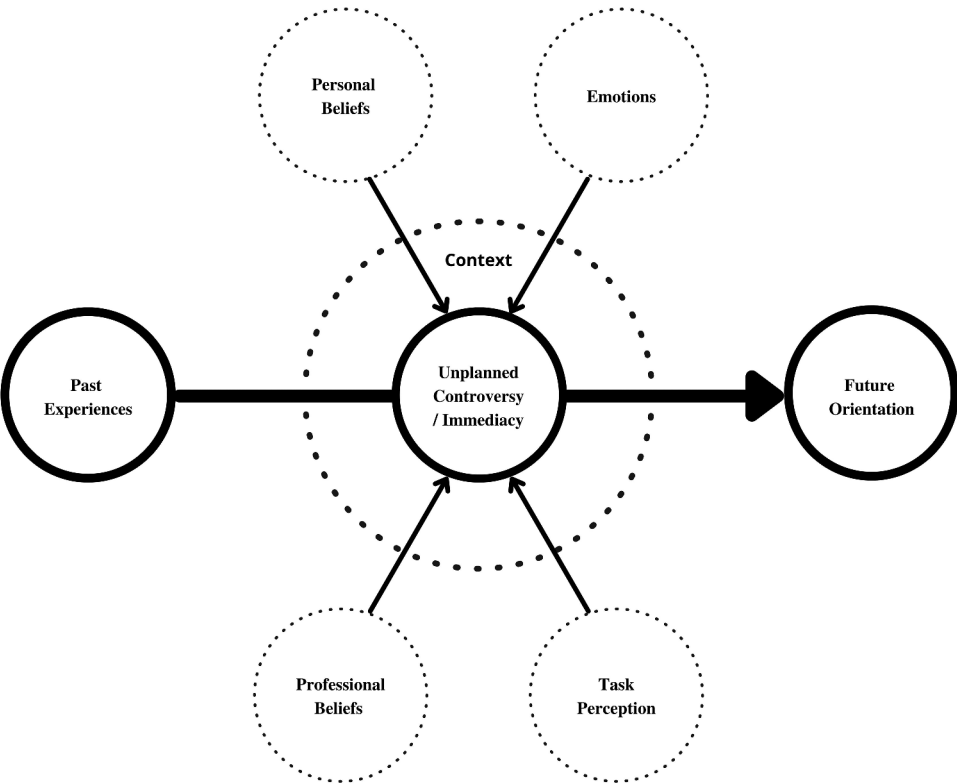
Figure 1. A model to understand teachers' justifications for addressing unplanned controversial issues in the classroom.

A note on positionality

As the first author collecting the data in this exploratory study, I acknowledge my positionality as a White male educator and researcher in Europe. I am committed to social justice and equity. My work is grounded in the belief that who we are makes a difference in the classroom and that our actions are never neutral. My involvement with the Pestalozzi Programme of the Council of Europe left an inedible mark on my identity as an educator and what I bring to my role as a researcher. I acknowledge the demographic and locational privilege (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012) that this affiliation provided. I have known and worked with most of the participants in this study. While the interviews were brief in length, the affinity with the participants and purposeful questioning favored "a personal and intimate encounter in which open, direct, verbal questions are used to elicit detailed narratives and stories" (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006, p. 317). The shared familiarity provided easier access, an ability to understand implied context, and a deeper awareness of the nuanced dimensions of the data (Berger, 2015). However, the familiarity of this essentially White space implied that I had to continuously negotiate the insider-outsider perspective (Fenge et al., 2019) since bias and power may not have been immediately visible (Phillippo & Nolan, 2022). Aware of the potential for confirmation bias (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012) and the need to ensure a critical-enough lens (Phillippo & Nolan, 2022), the need for reflexivity was paramount. Participants were given the space to tell their story. The data and subsequent analysis were reviewed repeatedly with a conscious time lapse between the reviews to look at the same material through a "new lens" (Berger, 2015).

The coauthors of this paper supervised this study. Both are White, female educators and researchers working at the same university in the Netherlands. They are committed to social justice and equity, how these ideas translate to democratic processes in classrooms, and how such processes relate to democratic practices in our societies. In their role as researchers and supervisors, as in this case, they are committed to include "the teachers' voice" in their practices, paying close attention to doing justice to this voice. The coauthors brought an outsider's perspective to the analysis of the data in this study, as they critically challenged my positionality throughout the process. They adopted a critical and objective stance in order to ensure that we did not read more than the data could reasonably tell us.

Limitations

We acknowledge the fact that what the teachers said in the interviews is not necessarily what actually happened in the classroom. While we have no reason to doubt the participants and their narratives, we deem it necessary to acknowledge the potential bias in the way the interviewees were selected (Ryan et al., 2009). The participants were selected on the basis of their openly proclaimed beliefs and their known commitment to social justice and equity. How this commitment accurately translates into their classroom practice is, at best, assumed and was not observed as part of this study.

Another possible limitation of the study is the fact that all participants have advanced degrees and all but three have over 10 years of teaching experience. We acknowledge that teachers may have been exposed to theoretical arguments in favor of controversy and disclosure in their work, which is almost definitely the case with participants who have been involved with the Pestalozzi Programme. While our sample was purposive, we did not specifically check if any of the participants had received or undergone specific training in

teaching controversial issues or how this may have influenced their decision to address unplanned controversies in the classroom.

Results

The model in Figure 1 and the themes identified in Table 7 structure the description of the results. We first provide some background to support the results. We then describe the model in Figure 1 and use it to further unpack the justifications offered by teachers. We explore the themes in detail using the examples of unplanned controversial issues as identified by participants and the justifications for addressing such issues from the examples in Tables 4–6 and the broader dataset while highlighting the interconnectedness between the different themes. Finally, we use the model to illustrate how the emphasis shifted across the three examples of unplanned controversial issues.

Background

It is important to reiterate that the justifications in this study relate to incidents in the classroom that teachers identified as unplanned controversial issues. These unplanned issues included mainstream controversies, teacher-initiated controversies, and controversial teacher pedagogy as described earlier. The issues identified arose unexpectedly, and participants chose to address them as they unfolded in the classroom.

In general, participants addressed mainstream controversies by adopting what Kelly (1986) identified as committed impartiality, providing time and space for "quality" discussions, allowing students "to voice different, evidence-based assertions" (Lo, 2022, p. 3) while carefully negotiating their own stance, particularly when it was already known. In response to mainstream controversies resulting from turbulent events, participants often adopted strategies reminiscent of Sondel's et al.'s (2017) "pedagogy of political trauma." These strategies were based on "critically caring relationships," "recursive pedagogical spaces," and "responsive teaching that engages current contentious political issues" (Payne & Journell, 2019, p. 77). Participants allowed for counternarratives, providing space for "marginalized voices . . . to justify their own humanity or to teach their peers about their life experiences as members of marginalized communities" (Gibson, 2020, p. 438). In addressing teacher-initiated controversies, specifically instances of prejudice, stereotyping, or discrimination, participants were more direct and deliberate in their approach. They often challenged students through a series of questions "in direct and honest terms" (Thacker & Bodle, 2022, p. 19) or through an impromptu activity that highlighted the bias and then allowing time for discussion and reflection within a classroom framework as described by Payne and Journell (2019) above. Instances identified as controversial teacher pedagogy were addressed either through an immediate change in the teacher's stance or through restorative practices. The discussions were, at times, carried forward and integrated in the participants' instructional plan later. In all instances, however, participants' responses were grounded within a social justice and equity framework supporting an emancipatory pedagogy (Freire, 1970/2000) so that their interventions were always "motivated by the idea that it will make this life somehow better: more complete, more rounded, more perfect— and maybe even more human" (Biesta, 2006, p. 2).

Themes in teachers' justifications for addressing unplanned controversial issues in the classroom: A model

At the heart of the model presented in Figure 1 is the unplanned controversial issue, characterized by the immediacy of the incident as it unfolds in the classroom. The decision to address an unplanned controversial issue is supported by the teacher's past experiences with a future orientation in mind. The decision was further influenced by the teacher's personal and professional beliefs, emotions, and the teacher's task perception. This decision happens in a context which, in some instances, assumes significant importance vis-à-vis the teacher's decision to address an unplanned controversial issue in the classroom. In the next sections, we explore the themes identified in more detail, drawing from the data to highlight the complexity of the justifications.

Past experiences, immediacy, and future orientations

The justifications that teachers offered were often characterized by a sense of urgency and immediacy caused by the unplanned event as it unfolded in the classroom context. Participants chose to suspend their original plans to address the unplanned controversial issues, prompted by the urgency of the situation. They acknowledged that failure to do so would have rendered it difficult, if not impossible, to deliver the planned lesson because of the heightened emotions in the classroom, so avoiding the unplanned event would have been ineffective in any case. This immediacy was identified by just over half the participants ($n = 7$). Three aspects related to immediacy could be discerned. The first related to the pedagogical potential of the episodes, or what Salma aptly referred to as "teachable moments." The second aspect related to the wider context and the specific event that may have triggered the unplanned controversial issue in the classroom. In Salma's case, this was an anonymous poster campaign that claimed rape was rife and condoned by the school administration. Other examples related to *Charlie Hebdo*, the Christchurch attacks, and the political assassination of a journalist.[1] Finally, the unplanned controversial issues necessitated immediate attention to be able to move on. Salma recounted how her class was thrown into turmoil following the unannounced visit of an Israeli ambassador whose "whole appearance and his speech was quite inflammatory" generating controversy on multiple levels in the classroom. Salma explained how

> When things like that happen, I would rather work through them and get them out of the way so that we can move on because otherwise they just fester and people feel attacked by the weirdest of all things.

The data supported an implicit reference to past experiences characterized by the teachers' lived experiences as persons rather than teachers. These explicit experiences, recalled in detail by the participants, influenced the teachers' decision to address the unplanned controversial issue. In turn, the future orientation is implicit in teachers' recollection of past experiences as a justification for addressing unplanned controversial issues. Jakub vividly recalled being singled out for his diligence in a particular class in primary school and how the teacher would mock and humiliate under-achieving students. Jakub affirmed that "years later, I can still remember that I want to be the opposite of what that teacher in that class was doing at that time." In so doing, Jakub affirmed that his actions in the moment were in contrast with his experience of "that teacher in that class" in the past and implied

that his actions in that moment, and thereafter, would continue to be guided by this experience. In Consuelo's example of controversial pedagogy, the temporality was restricted to the specific episode in class. She reproached a student for asking a question and, in turn, the student challenged her back, forcing her to question her behavior as controversial. She referred to her behavior immediately prior to the "crisis" brought on by the student's challenge and adapted her behavior after the "crisis" to address the fact that she was "wrong."

> Almost at the end of the lesson, this boy makes me a question which was quite stupid, a silly one. So, I just answered in a sort of reproach. And he answered me, if during the lesson I cannot do any question, I would like to know who I would address my questions (to). I was very surprised by this reply because it put me in a sort of crisis and I re-watched myself answering him in that way, reproaching him. And I said, ok he is right. Why I reacted like that to his question?

Personal and professional beliefs

Participants made a conscious distinction between their personal and professional beliefs, suggesting that addressing some of the unplanned controversial issues had more to do with being a person than with being a teacher. The data indicated a personal commitment to human rights and, in turn, an education that supports and nurtures these rights. In the example in Table 6, Agnieszka did not condemn the content of what some students had written as part of a writing task, choosing to focus on the quality of the writing instead. In the process, another student felt marginalized because of what had been written. In this instance Agnieszka framed part of her justification in terms of "I mean as a human person and as a human person with beliefs," stressing being a person over being a teacher. The same notion was picked up by Jakub who confronted his class over a rule proposed by some students. The students suggested that boys should get the first turn in a game, and the whole class agreed. Jakub challenged the students and justified his reaction:

> As a person I think I have the priority of seeing that everyone is treated fairly, so wherever I notice, or see, or feel that someone is being treated unfairly, something jumps in me, and I cannot let it go without intervening.

Similarly, Angeliki argued,

> As a person, as an individual, I always step in and take a position when things are happening in front of me. I do not like to take the attitude of not getting involved in things, just because they are controversial, and they will bring me in a difficult position.

Personal beliefs were particularly highlighted in justifications relating to teacher-initiated controversies and examples of controversial pedagogy. On the other hand, professional beliefs had more to do with participants' understanding of the purpose of education and what schools should be about. Following the murder of a journalist in Malta, Adrian overheard a student suggesting that the journalist deserved being murdered. He reacted to the comment arguing that "if we are a school ... the least we can do is act like one" implying that addressing this comment is inherent to being "a school." He continued:

> I realized how toxic it is that in schools we say politics are not for the classroom. If they are not for the classroom, for where are they? If kids are not engaged in the political system from a very young age, how do we expect them, when they grow up, one, to analyze critically the situation

that they are in, and two, to actually demand a better world, because if they don't even know how to do that, if they don't even know where to begin because nobody allowed them to speak about it . . . If we don't give them those tools, I believe that it would be a sort of. . . No! Not sort of! It is a disservice from the education system not to give them the right tools to be proper, engaged democratic citizens.

Esrin elaborated further:

I really have a pedagogical vision and a sort of teaching philosophy that I think we need, we really can incorporate almost every daily issues and controversial issues, and things that are coming up in our daily lives in our societies, into the teaching . . . and I make an effort to give examples of how mathematical teacher or how the more hard core subjects could also do this because, I think you make the teaching and the learning for the students so much more relevant and something that they can actually integrate and sort of relate to. Which is why I think I actually seek out these moments.

Task perception

Participants' professional beliefs translated into teachers' task perception in line with the task perception component in the theory of self-understanding (Kelchtermans, 2009). Task perception accounts for what teachers think they should do, in practice, to fulfil their job as teachers. This theme was the most represented one in the data, particularly in mainstream controversies. There were over 30 instances in which the justifications offered by the participants directly referred to what they believe they are expected to do as teachers in the classroom, as exemplified by Ismael:

I am doing it because, I think that's my job to encourage them, I can avoid that topic, and some other topics, but I don't want because I am teacher and that's my, that's my job to teach them to analyze, to raising multi-perspectivity and critical thinking.

The data provided for a more detailed understanding of what teachers perceived to be their "job" when addressing an unplanned controversial issue in the classroom. All the examples of unplanned controversial issues in the data included at least one justification related to task perception, with at least three distinct subcomponents that could be identified, namely the subject-fit, going beyond the syllabus, and student well-being, with an emphasis on nurturing a safe space for students. Three participants justified addressing the unplanned controversial issue as part of their subject/syllabus in line with Stradling et al.'s (1984) product-based justifications. Other participants insisted on the importance of such episodes in the classroom and the notion that their teacher's role goes beyond the prescriptions of a syllabus and aligns with their professional beliefs, as exemplified in Adrian and Esrin's claims above. These justifications often implied that there are other more important issues than what is prescribed in school syllabi and that it was important for students to engage with these issues—nurturing insights, promoting different worldviews, and developing competences beyond the subject content in line with process-based justifications (Stradling et al., 1984) for teaching controversial issues. Following the Christchurch Mosque shootings in 2019, a student in Braam's class pointed out that had it been Muslims attacking Christians, then the class would have been discussing the incident rather than ignoring it. Rather than feeling threatened by the statement, Braam described how it:

Was an ideal situation in which we could make do with the particular lesson which we had planned and focus on this, because of the important things and skills which we could use to

analyze and dissect and deconstruct this particular incident and for students to learn how to start interpreting such incidents which happen every day basically.

Participants emphasized thinking and research skills with a commitment to support students face similar situations in the future. Finally, addressing an unplanned controversial issue was also related to students' well-being. When students started complaining about how they were being treated by another teacher, Agnieszka decided to address this issue, identifying her behavior as an instance of controversial pedagogy. While she felt uncomfortable addressing the matter, knowing that her actions could be questioned as inappropriate, Agnieszka justified her action:

> So, when I see that my students don't feel peaceful in class, in mine or in other, I think it is my responsibility to try to make a safer space for learning. And, I will always stop teaching literature to make sure that we have good conditions for learning, otherwise it is just useless.

Julie acknowledged that she addressed the unplanned controversial issue because "it was so important for them to talk about it," and Esrin corroborated this point by stating that students "had been really appreciative of this discussion and the space where they could think about it."

Emotions

Reference to feelings and emotions generated by the unplanned controversial issues abound in the data without necessarily being pinpointed as a specific justification as to why the teachers chose to address the issues. The unplanned controversial issues generated strong emotions in both students and teachers because of their content and because of the spontaneity of their occurrence. Teachers' reactions included surprise, dislike, anger, frustration, and disappointment. When a student refused to interact with a student who came from a different country, Angeliki admitted that she was angry, and she had to take time to "be more calm and less by the heart acting." Faced with a discussion about migrants in a refugee camp, Adrian admitted how he took a defensive stance because he assumed the students would go on a "racist rant."

However, teachers mainly expressed concern for their students' well-being. Attending to the students' emotions, and in so doing preserving a safe space for learning, was considered an integral part of their job, particularly when they felt that their students had been emotionally affected or were impacted by the urgency and immediacy of the issues. Following the Israeli ambassador's visit described earlier, Salma described how some students "were visibly upset, some left the room . . . some students took this defensive stance . . . There were also some kids who were just really scared." Salma explained:

> If I hadn't addressed it, this class has to learn together, so I much rather bring things out, discuss them, work through this kind of thing and have a learning space where people feel comfortable then to not address (because) then people feel like they must self-censor or they can't say certain things or resentment builds up so that when people do speak their mind, others constantly assume the worse intentions.

In turn, the way teachers handled the situation impacted their self-esteem and how well they felt they were doing their job. Esrin justified her decision to address an issue related to gender stereotyping stating, "I think I would have not been happy with

myself as a teacher if I would have just ignored it," which is in line with the self-esteem component of the theory of self-understanding (Kelchtermans, 2009). This "happiness" seems to depend on how well the teachers do their job, or the task perception in Kelchtermans's framework and is directly related to students' well-being.

Context

Unplanned controversial issues unfold in a classroom context that is inevitably influenced by a wider context. The context became more pronounced in the light of specific events which triggered the unplanned controversial issues in the classroom, from an anonymous poster campaign to a terrorist attack. Two participants presented a school context they perceived as supportive. Coming from the same school but teaching different subjects, Braam and Adrian identified a school culture that "thrives on controversy." Adrian noted:

> The school culture where I am working in, it's very nurturing and in my opinion quite pro-active in a sense that it's, it lives, it thrives on controversy. . . . . The learning community in school. . . . I am lucky enough to say at least that they provide me with enough food for thought or support that give me the courage to address these issues in class. So, for example, I like to ask a friend of mine, to maybe, join me in class, to discuss certain issues. I even ask the headmaster to join me in class. Actually, the headmaster, on a number of times, especially when I feel like my back to the wall in certain issues with certain students, not disciplinary issues, I mean controversial issues.

On the other hand, several other participants implied not being afraid of any potential implications or "difficult positions," as Angeliki asserted in the example in Table 4, that may result from their actions within the wider context. Julie stated – "I don't care! I mean, I don't have a problem, I don't shy away from discussing certain topics. There shouldn't be any taboos." This stance can be discerned throughout the data and contrasted with Braam's perception that "many teachers are afraid of saying that . . . because of the repercussions."

Using the model to make sense of teachers' justifications

In this section, we use the model in Figure 1 to look at the three examples of unplanned controversial issues presented in Tables 4, 5, and 6. It was also deemed worthwhile to compare the visual maps pertaining to examples of unplanned controversial issues per category—mainstream controversy, teacher-initiated controversy, and controversial pedagogy as identified by Cassar et al. (2021) - and then across the three categories to identify possible patterns.

Angeliki – Justifications for addressing a mainstream controversy

Angeliki provided an example of a mainstream controversy in which she had "two different positions in class" over mining (Table 4). Some students, particularly those whose parents' livelihood depended on the mining industry, viewed mining as an opportunity; others viewed mining as a threat to the environment. In addressing the issue, Angeliki ascertained her own beliefs as a person and environmental activist. She then continued to justify the fact that she addressed this particular issue by anchoring it to what she believes is her role as an
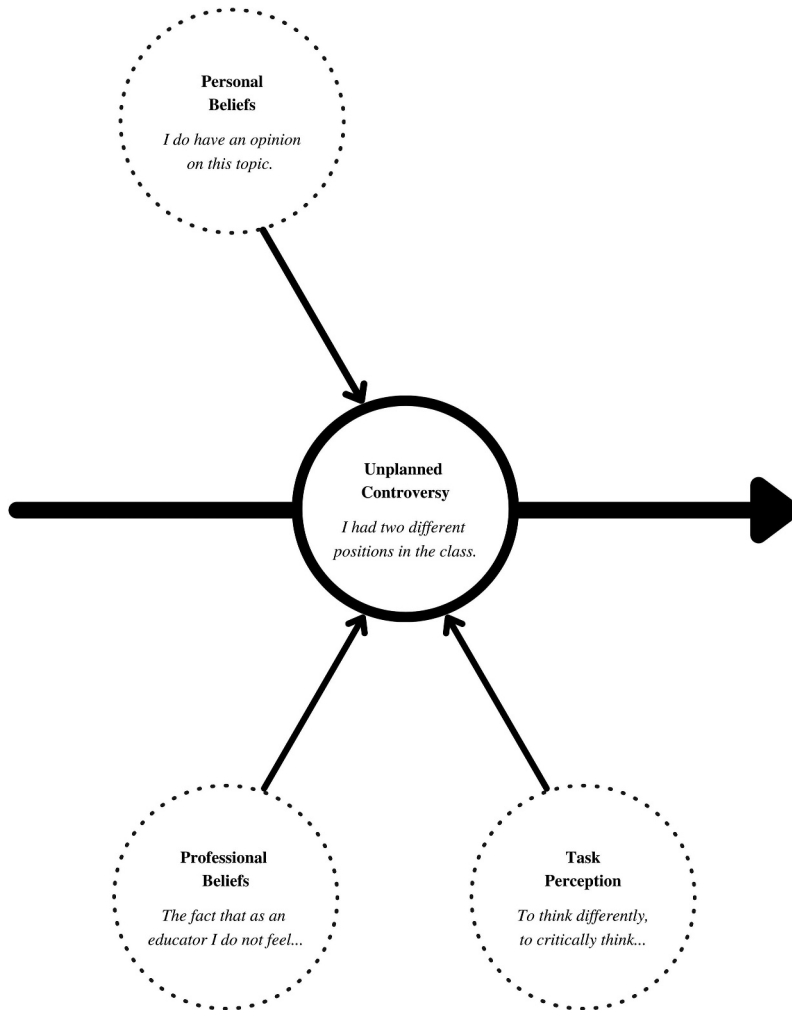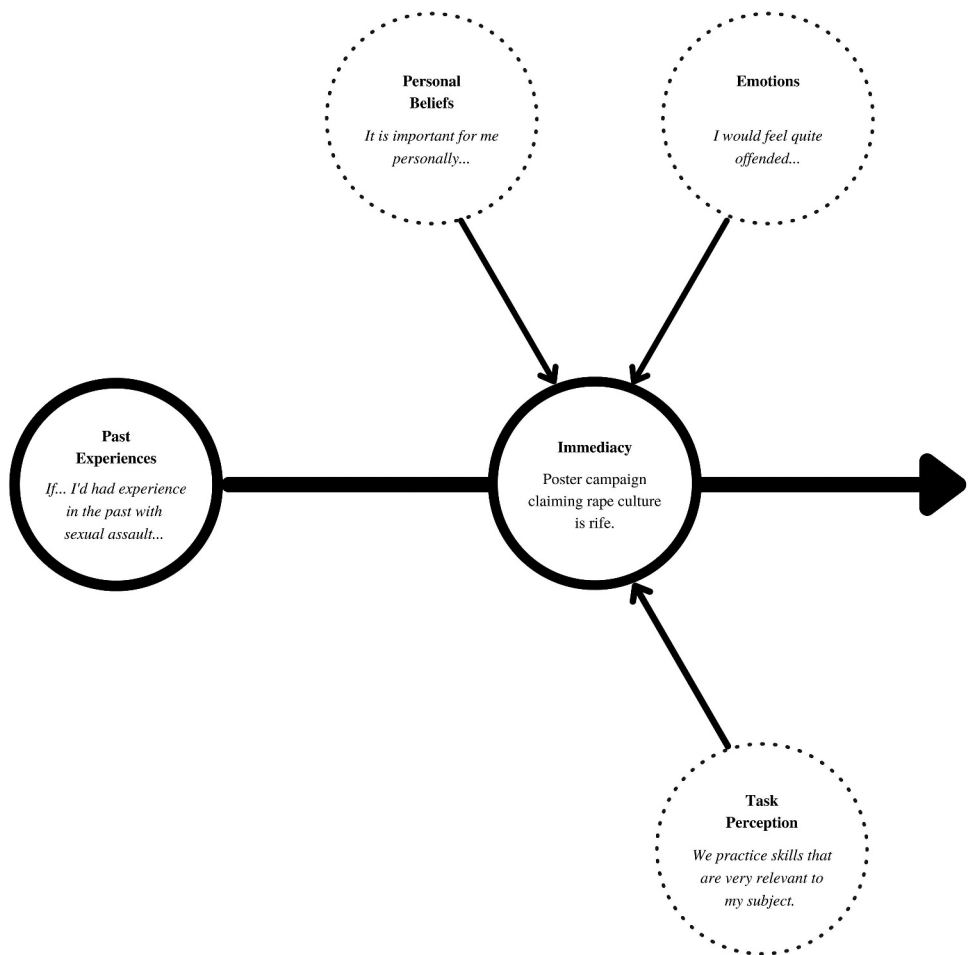
Figure 2. Angeliki – Justifications for addressing a mainstream controversy.

educator and the competences that this unplanned controversy in the classroom could help develop—in other words, her task perception. This stance is visually represented in Figure 2.

Salma – Justifications for addressing a teacher-initiated controversy

Salma's example is of a teacher-initiated controversy (Table 5). Addressing the anonymous poster campaign described earlier, she grounded her justification in a hypothetical personal experience in the past with a clear link to her personal beliefs and the emotions that this issue elicited in her students, as well as the immediacy of the issue. There was also a clear attempt to safeguard herself—she does not want to be seen as "somebody who ignores this kind of thing." Her justification then turns to subject-fit and the competences that addressing this issue nurtured – "a multi perspective way of looking at a controversial issue" as something that "we do." She closed her justification with yet another reference to emotions and how not addressing

Figure 3. Salma – Justifications for addressing a teacher-initiated controversy.

the issue would have felt "unnatural." Addressing this issue was "meaningful at a very local level." Figure 3 presents the visual map for Salma's example.

Agnieszka – Justifications for addressing controversial pedagogy

Figure 4 presents Agnieszka's example of controversial pedagogy (Table 6). She justified addressing the controversy as part of her job as a teacher, supported by her personal and professional beliefs while wanting to ensure the student did not lose confidence in the future. There is also a clear effort to preserve her "own integrity" by embedding the issue within the wider, societal context.

Differences across categories of unplanned controversial issues

The three examples above illustrate how the model can be used to unpack teachers' justifications for addressing unplanned controversial issues. The visual maps for each of the 23 examples in the data set, which served as the basis for the model, indicated that each justification stressed one or more aspects directly related to the unplanned controversial issue. This finding was generated by
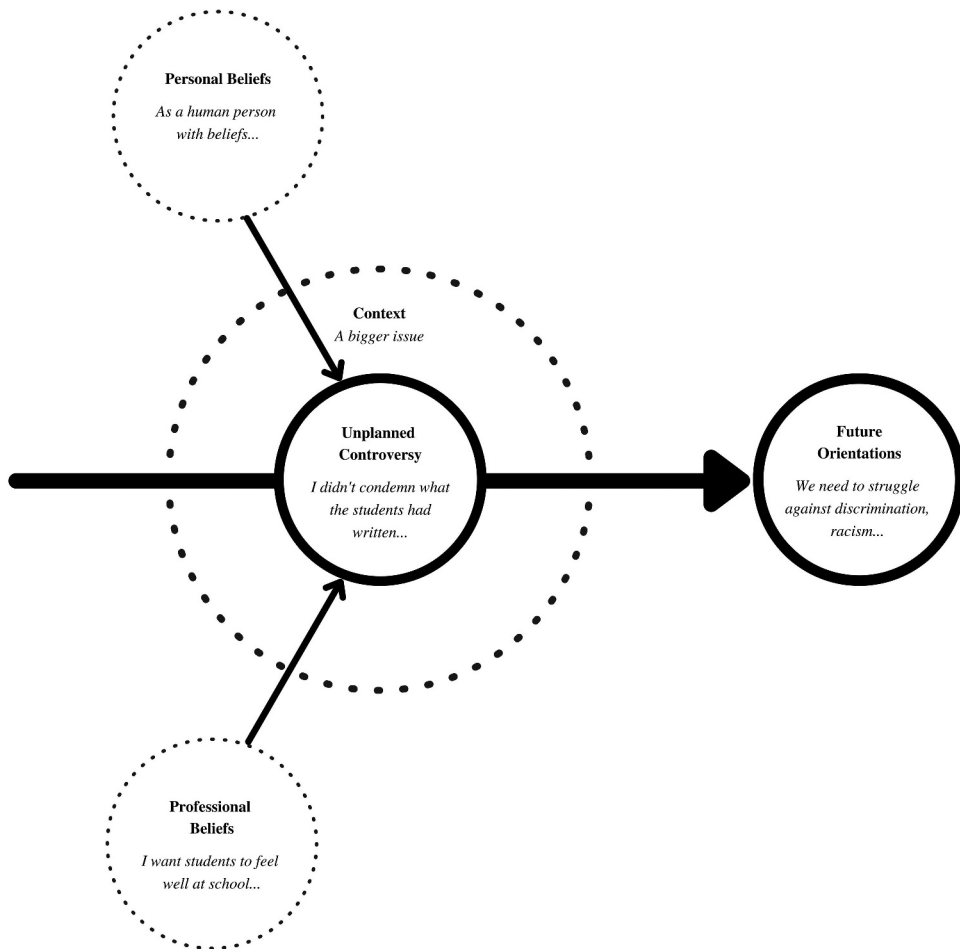
Figure 4. Agnieszka – Justifications for addressing controversial pedagogy.

visually comparing the maps and tallying the emerging themes across the three categories of unplanned controversial issues. While being aware of the small sample size, in general, justifications pertaining to examples of mainstream controversies ($n = 12$) were significantly more in line with process-based justifications (Stradling et al., 1984) or teachers' task perception (Kelchtermans, 2009). In teacher-initiated controversies ($n = 8$), personal and professional beliefs were more evident. In the justifications relating to controversial pedagogy ($n = 3$), the responses were more nuanced, with personal beliefs and emotions playing a significant role. In any case, and as can be seen by the three examples above, this distinction was not steadfast. It is also important to reiterate that the distinction between the different themes is only analytical and that the justifications need to be understood in their totality.

Discussion

This study is an attempt to understand what prompts teachers to address rather than avoid unplanned controversial issues in the classroom and, in so doing, deconstruct the

complexity of the justifications. In response to the research question, we found that the justifications can best be understood within a temporal framework characterized by the immediacy of the situation, encompassing the teachers' past experiences and a desired future, unfolding in a specific context in which emotions play a significant role. The justifications are at the same time intricately embedded in teachers' personal and professional beliefs and their task perception. This complexity plays out in a singular moment in time as teachers choose to address the perceived unplanned controversial issue as it unfolds in the classroom rather than avoiding it.

The model presented in this study builds on Stradling et al.'s (1984) work and Kelchtermans's (2009) theory to provide a more complete picture of the complexity inherent in the moment a teacher decides to address an unplanned controversial issue in the classroom. In these unscripted "teachable moments," who the person in teaching is becomes paramount, overriding the subject taught. In line with Kelchtermans's theory of self-understanding, participants framed their responses within a temporal framework, often referring to past experiences, the immediacy of the issue as it unfolded in the classroom, and future orientations, so that the "person of the teacher is always somebody at some particular moment in his/her life, with a particular past and future" (Kelchtermans, 2009, p. 263). However, the temporal dimension in the model goes beyond Kelchtermans's component of future perspectives to include not only the teacher but also the learners projected into the future. Personal and professional beliefs are also closely linked to Kelchtermans's self-image component, which refers to how teachers view themselves as teachers and the way others see them. The interplay between this duality was unmistakably evident in the data. The teachers' self-image was influenced by what they thought of themselves as both persons and teachers, which was evident in both Salma's and Agnieszka's justifications. Salma argued "I didn't want to be seen as somebody who ignores this kind of thing" while Agnieszka clearly distanced herself from "this type of newspaper" so that she could preserve her "own integrity." In these instances, the emphasis is on the preservation of the teacher's already established self-image as both a person and a teacher.

The responses provided by participants suggest that when teachers choose to address an unplanned controversial issue, they are "concurrently attentive and aware of students and of themselves" (Roefs et al., 2021, p. 20) and they choose to act in a way they considered best in that moment. The findings suggest an alignment between personal and professional beliefs and task perception in a context that may or may not be supportive. However, it is also important to acknowledge that the teachers did not only address unplanned controversial issues because of the educational value inherent in the "moment" or the notion that controversial issues should be addressed to support the development of students' democratic competences and their active participation in society. Teachers also addressed the unplanned issue because they felt that failing to do so would have rendered it impossible to proceed with their planned lesson. Hence, their decision to address the unplanned issue could also be anchored to simple classroom management strategies. However, the complexity of the responses offered by participants indicates that whereas this may have been one of the reasons for addressing the unplanned issue, it was never the only one.

The justifications in the data are further characterized by the moral convictions that guide the participants' actions when choosing to address an unplanned controversial issue. The decision to address the unplanned controversy may also be understood as a morally motivated response to what the participants perceive to be unjust or morally unacceptable.

Faced with such situations, the participants could not "not act." Doyon and Breyer (2015) argued that human activity is guided by norms:

> Our everyday activities and behaviors are constrained and sometimes even dictated by laws, politics, moral codes and social expectations; our intellectual projects are shaped by academic standards and institutional demands; and our daily choices and decisions are often powerfully influenced by the advice and recommendations we receive from people we love and admire (friends and family members), persons that have a certain authority over us (mentors and educators), and by the ideals and values that we cherish. (p. 1)

Teachers, as persons in the classroom, are likewise guided by norms of all kinds, so that the classroom context becomes a "a multi-faceted normative space" (Doyon & Breyer, 2015, p. 1) in which teachers function as gatekeepers who exert authority on learners. This relationship raises fundamental questions as to who teachers are and what they stand for. In choosing to address unplanned controversial issues in the classroom, teachers make "decisions about what is educationally desirable" (Biesta, 2010, p. 501).

At least at face value, the teachers involved in this research seem committed to provide an education that is in line with democratic principles, challenging the status quo, and addressing injustice, structural inequalities, and oppression. Dunn et al. (2019) argued that "only by anchoring pedagogy to a justice and equity framework can teachers determine how best to respond to contextual pressures and meet the needs of all students given the multiple forms of oppression our students currently experience" (p. 446). This stance is echoed in Salma's claim that an unplanned controversy

> Provides a teachable moment about … why conflict is difficult to resolve, and people's subjective experiences … don't negate structure inequalities but at the same time, structured inequalities don't negate people's personal experiences … to highlight that tension in a way … the fact that … yes, oppression is unevenly distributed.

In addressing the unplanned controversial issue, teachers also capitalized on the emotional work involved, moving beyond the mere expression of good or bad feelings in relation to an issue, using the emotional struggle against injustice to contest the norms perpetuating the injustice (Ahmed, 2014).

The justifications offered by participants diffuse any illusion of teacher neutrality in the classroom. The justifications were often direct, delivered with commitment and, at times, imbued with strong emotions. The deliberative use of the phrase "I think" (Aijmer, 1997) brings the interviews themselves closer to political discourse than normal conversation. Simon-Vandenbergen (2000) suggested that such deliberative use of the phrase "I think" is more frequent in, and typical of, political interviews, expressing the speaker's personal angle and turning the statements into subjective ones. Such linguistic hedging may be dismissed as typical of conversational expressions. However, the frequency of the term in the interviews was high and often added "weight to the assertion" (Aijmer, 1997, p. 22).

It follows that addressing unplanned controversial issues needs to be understood in a political context—an open classroom climate which may or may not be supported at a wider level. The support of the school community and a favorable wider context, as in Braam's and Adrian's case, are desirable but do not seem to be determining factors in terms of whether a teacher will address an unplanned controversy, highlighting the extent to which teachers determine what actually happens in the classroom context and the kind of climate they create. If a teacher wants to address an unplanned controversial issue, the teacher will address it, irrespective of the context

and possible consequences. This echoes Ho et al.'s (2017) assertion that "a teacher's beliefs and sense of purpose can potentially be more influential than other more 'objective' constraints in teacher decision making" (p. 327). The threat of possible repercussions also did not seem to prevent participants from enacting pedagogical decisions that they deemed appropriate when the unplanned issues arose (Journell, 2018).

A significant aspect of the open classroom climate in which unplanned controversial issues are addressed is the teachers' positionality and political disclosure, or lack thereof, that may occur. Geller (2020) suggested that political disclosure is not straightforward and that teachers need to reflect on how they "signal moral, ethical, and political beliefs, whether intentional or not" (p. 197). The findings corroborate the notion that teachers addressing unplanned controversial issues must also deal with how their actions will be interpreted within the context and how their intentions may not always align with how their actions are perceived. This finding was particularly evident in Agnieszka's example. Her unintentional lack of political disclosure resulted in her students assuming that she condoned racist comments. As a result, she was "forced" to address the issue to defend herself and preserve her "integrity" as a person.

The relatively small number of teachers in this study allowed us to explore their justifications in-depth. Further research might look at a larger sample of participants from the perspective of this model. For example, such research might focus on how teachers' justifications for addressing unplanned controversial issues in the classroom relate to "beliefs about what constitutes good education, about one's moral duties and responsibilities in order to do justice to students" (Kelchtermans, 2009, p. 262). It would also be worthwhile to explore how teachers who choose not to address unplanned controversial issues in the classroom justify their decisions and the way these decisions compare to the justifications in this study, as well as a broader justice and equity framework.

This study adds another layer to the scholarly debate on controversial issues in the classroom beyond the teaching of controversial issues understood as "a lesson, unit, course, or curriculum that engages students in learning about such issues" (Hess, 2009, p. 27). Because of the "endemic unpredictability" (Brookfield, 2006, p. 8) of the classroom, controversial issues are also bound to arise unexpectedly. This study sheds light on the complexity inherent in the moment a teacher decides to address an unplanned controversial issue in the classroom. Such a decision extends beyond the immediate experience to include the teacher's past and a desired future, unfolding in a specific context that is often emotionally charged. The teacher's decision is also anchored to some fundamental questions related to the purpose of education and who the person in teaching is.

The research has implications for teachers and teacher educators. Results from this study, in particular the model presented in Figure 1, can support teachers to systematically make sense of who they are in the classroom and "for the non-technical dimensions of teaching and being a teacher to be conceptualized, talked about, shared and critically challenged" (Kelchtermans, 2009, p. 270) further. Paying attention to why teachers do what they do, particularly during unscripted moments, is an important step in achieving this goal. More than a decade ago, (Hess, 2009) celebrated teachers as democracy workers:

> In a time when threats to democracy are numerous and powerful, the very possibility that schooling can play any kind of meaningful role in the creation, maintenance, or transformation of democracy may seem both idealistic and hopelessly naïve. Yet, many teachers continue to talk with passion and fervor about themselves as democracy workers. (p. 25)

As more established democracies face threats, from the insurrection of the U.S. Capitol in January 2021 to the rise of far-right political parties in countries like Italy and Sweden, Hess's statement is as relevant, and perhaps more urgent, today than it was then. Teachers, Hess continued to argue, should not shy away from teaching controversial issues, "as long as they continue to reflect upon the curricular decisions they make" (p. 129). Embedded in a social justice and equity framework, we hope that this study may support teachers to seize "teachable moments" in "a refusal to be silent in the face of injustice" (Dunn, 2022, p. 9) as they reflect upon "their own emotions, morals, and educational beliefs and how these play a role in their reactions" (Wansink et al., 2021, p. 504) in the classroom when they address an unplanned controversial issue. We hope that this work may support more democracy workers in our schools.

Note

1. In 2015, two members of an Islamic terrorist group murdered 12 people working at the French satirical newspaper, *Charlie Hebdo*. The attack was committed in response to the newspaper running defamatory images of the Prophet Muhammad. In 2019, an Australian White supremacist killed 51 Muslims worshipping at mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand.

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