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"There is Space, and There are Limits": The Challenge of Teaching Controversial Topics in an Illiberal Democracy

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Background/Context: Research indicates that across democratic societies, teachers face numerous intellectual and emotional challenges when handling controversial topics in the classroom. Less attention, however, has been paid to how teachers' willingness to teach controversial topics intersects with political and other societal factors in different sociopolitical milieu and, in particular, in an authoritarian-democratic and culturally diverse state like Singapore.

Focus of Study: This study focused on constraints to the teaching of controversial topics relating to diversity and the manner in which teachers navigated their personal beliefs amidst the evolving contours of public and official discourses in Singapore. By attending to the intersections of teachers' beliefs, state policies, and other sociopolitical factors, we aimed to inform scholarship on the teaching of controversial topics and illuminate states' powers to demarcate the discursive spaces of teachers.

Research Design: The study adhered to the qualitative case study design. We collected data from interviews that featured various elicitation tasks to describe 35 social studies teachers' perceptions and practice of controversial issues discussions relating to topics of diversity. Additionally, we drew on policy and curricular documents to portray the evolving contours of public discourse in Singapore.

Findings/Results: The findings highlight how the participants, influenced largely by state policies, differentiated between topics that were controversial-appropriate and controversial-taboo. In spite of the numerous legal constraints limiting the nature of public discussion of race and politics, the majority of the teachers regarded these topics as controversial-appropriate. There was, conversely, a consensus among the participants that topics related to sexual orientation were controversial-taboo even though there were no similar laws constraining public discussion of this issue.

Conclusions/Recommendations: This study challenges conventional assumptions about the impact that state-imposed constraints and controls have on the teaching of controversial topics in schools. Under some circumstances, state controls and constraints can result in teachers having more freedom to discuss controversial topics because of the clearly demarcated political and social boundaries. However, if the state's position is ambiguous, this may result in a Kafkaesque situation in which teachers become even more conservative in their curriculum decision making due to a heightened sense of uncertainty and insecurity. Ultimately, the study brings to light the nuanced ways that state control and censorship influence the spaces and limits of issues-centered discussion, and underlines the need for research that attends to various social forces that frame the teaching of controversial topics in different democratic settings.

Teachers face numerous intellectual and emotional challenges when handling controversial topics and issues in the classroom (Hess, 2009; Oulton, Day, Dillon, & Grace, 2004). Studies have, for example, shown that personal beliefs, community values, and norms influence teachers' decisions to avoid controversial topics related to sexuality and religion in the United States and Canada (Bickmore, 2002; Evans, Avery, & Pederson, 2000). Other studies have also shown how emotion plays a significant part in the teaching of controversial political issues in divided societies such as Cyprus, Israel, and Northern Ireland (Bekerman & Zembylas, 2011; McCully, 2006; Zembylas & Kambani, 2012). Less attention, however, has been paid to how teachers' willingness to teach controversial issues intersects with political and other societal factors in different sociopolitical milieu and, in particular, in an authoritarian-democratic state like Singapore. These limitations, thus, present important gaps in knowledge about the ways in which teachers navigate a complex agenda comprising personal beliefs and student needs (Alviar-Martin & L. C. Ho, 2011) amidst the various social forces that frame teachers' practice (Parker, 2010).

The case of social studies education in Singapore, a young and diverse "illiberal democracy" with an authoritarian and interventionist government (Zakaria, 1997), offers an opportunity to expand current scholarship by examining the pedagogical influence of contextual factors such as national policies and societal narratives. This qualitative study involving 35 social studies teachers in Singapore explores the kinds of controversial topics teachers in Singapore choose to avoid and the types of constraints that they face when teaching such topics. In this study, we attend to topics related to diversity such as race, politics, and sexuality because these have been traditionally considered controversial in the Singapore context.

This article focuses on two key issues. First, we show how teachers in Singapore differentiate between topics that are controversial-appropriate and controversial-taboo. In general, there were few differences in how the 35 participants defined controversial-appropriate and controversial-taboo topics. Teachers were willing to teach topics that they felt were controversial-appropriate, such as politics and religion, but were strongly opposed to teaching controversial-taboo topics, such as sexuality. Second, we highlight

the extent of the Singapore government's power and influence over the boundaries of public discourse of controversial social issues and its implications on teachers' willingness to teach controversial topics. The state seeks to serve as both a disciplining and moderating agent, guarding against extreme views from the conservative and liberal ends of the spectrum. Paradoxically, this study indicates that state controls can have a liberating influence on teachers' practice because the absence of state censorship can result in Kafkaesque circumstances where teachers struggle to reconcile competing public and private positions on controversial social and political issues.

THE CHALLENGES OF TEACHING CONTROVERSIAL TOPICS

Democracy, Young (2002) argued, is "a matter of degree; societies can vary in both the extent and the intensity of their commitment to democratic practice" (p. 5). Dewey (1916) characterized associated living within the public sphere as the fullness and freedom of communication between groups—such as cultural or religious associations—with differing perspectives, values, and agendas. Despite variations in democratic practice, scholars agree that democracy entails a modicum of commitment toward open public discussion so that citizens may share different opinions as they consider issues of common concern (Dewey, 1916; Sen, 2009). This sentiment is also evident in non-Western contexts. For instance, societies such as India and Japan have traditionally placed great emphasis on public discussion, dialogue, and participation (Sen 1999, 2009).

In most societies, schools are important venues in the promotion of democratic dialogue, especially with regard to public issues that are deemed controversial. Yet, teachers from different national contexts face numerous challenges in teaching controversial topics in schools. Even within democratic societies, "climates of censorship and restraint" (Cornbleth, 2001, p. 83) can take different forms, depending on the political, social, and historical context within which the teacher is operating. Teachers may face explicit official censorship and/or more subtle types of external and internal pressures from the school or from the public. Studies conducted in liberal democratic societies with decentralized education systems, such as the United States, indicate that only a minority of social studies teachers in the United States focused on teaching controversial issues in U.S. history and civics courses even though they acknowledge the value of discussing controversial issues, (Hahn & Torney-Purta, 1999). Notably, despite the relatively liberal democratic U.S. political system, many teachers were reluctant to address controversial topics related to diversity, including abortion, religious beliefs, and sexual orientation, due to their perceptions of the sensitivity of the subject matter topics (Hahn, 1999; Hess & Avery, 2008; Misco & Patterson, 2007). Similarly, in Canada, another country with a liberal democratic political system, teachers frequently avoid teaching conflict-laden topics such as sexual orientation "in anticipation of parents' or principals' potential objections" (Bickmore, 2002, p. 208). The threat of external challenges, a fear of sanctions, and the desire to avoid censure from their superiors or their peers have also resulted in teachers being constrained in their ability to select controversial texts, curriculum, and topics for their students (Cornbleth, 2001). Other researchers, in addition, have noted that teacher self-censorship is also prevalent. Schultz, Buck, and Niesz (2000), for instance, pointed out that in the United States, discussions about race in mixed race settings are "difficult and all too rare" (p. 34) because teachers find this topic too disconcerting and uncomfortable. The researchers observed that official discussions of controversial issues such as race in classrooms tended to be "safely protected by history" (p. 58) and, as a result, these conversations were largely confined to lunchrooms and hallways.

Teaching controversial topics in a nation-state with a highly centralized and authoritarian government, however, poses a different set of challenges. A case study of educators in Beijing, China, for example, revealed that teachers were reluctant to explore controversial issues related to politics and the Communist Party because they were not part of the official curriculum defined by the Chinese Ministry of Education (Misco, 2011). In interviews, two Chinese teachers of moral education expressed that it was not appropriate for them to introduce into the classroom any topics or issues that were not prescribed by the Ministry. Research in Singapore, a country with an illiberal democratic political system, also indicates that the state has a significant and direct influence on whether and how teachers address controversial topics in the classroom. Small-scale preliminary studies have noted that social studies teachers and students are wary about discussing controversial topics such as race in class because of the fear of breaching laws such as the Sedition Act and the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act, and fear of being reported to the authorities (L. C. Ho, Alviar-Martin, Sim, & Yap, 2011; L. C. Ho, 2010). In a survey conducted by the Singapore Ministry of Education, social studies teachers expressed "concerns about how open and candid they could be in discussions and how they could manage debates on areas of controversy" (Singapore Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 16).

Despite these different political, historical, and social contexts, the literature also suggests that teachers in different national settings face common challenges in teaching controversial issues. Teachers in China, Canada, and Singapore cite very similar constraints when teaching controversial topics. These include the fear of not meeting curricular objectives, the difficulty of teaching these controversial topics, and the desire to maintain an orderly classroom (Alviar-Martin & Ho, 2011; Bickmore, 2002, Misco, 2011). Research findings also suggest that teacher uncertainties (Helsing, 2007) and role ambiguity (Schwab, 1983) are significant challenges. A teacher's heightened sense of uncertainty and insecurity, for instance, can result in increased conservatism and conformity (Helsing, 2007). Finally, it is also important to note that a teacher's personal beliefs and dispositions toward students, pedagogy, and curriculum matter greatly. Studies, for instance, have examined how teachers' personal dispositions (Garmon, 2004), beliefs (Pohan, 1996), and experiences (R. Smith, Moallem, & Sherrill, 1997) appear to influence their attitudes toward the teaching of controversial issues related to diversity.

Given the common challenges faced by teachers in different national contexts, scholars observe that there is much to be learned from illuminating the social forces that frame the instruction of contentious issues (Parker, 2010), particularly in societies marked by constraining climates (Cornbleth, 2001). It is with these assumptions that we examined the teaching of controversial topics in Singapore. In the following section, we explore the extent of the Singapore government's power and influence over the boundaries of public discourse of controversial social issues. We attend to the changing contours of public discourse in Singapore, and conclude by citing previous studies to illustrate the

mediating effects of the government's official stance on teachers' perceptions and practice of controversial issues discussions.

CONTEXT: CENSORSHIP AND CONTROL IN SINGAPORE

The Singapore political system exhibits many of the characteristics of Dye, Ziegler, and Schubert's (2012) and Barber's (2003) conceptions of elite and authoritative democracies. A privileged class consisting of a small group of highly educated elite plays a central role in governing, shaping policies, and determining societal priorities and values. Singapore politicians share the belief of scholars who argue that government by elites is particularly beneficial because elites are more committed to important democratic values such as freedoms of press, speech, and religion (McClosky & Brill, 1983). The masses are, in addition, regarded by elites as being uninterested and ill-informed about politics and public policy. Political power is concentrated in the hands of a small group of elites, including members of the ruling People's Action Party (PAP), the Cabinet, the judiciary, and the leaders of the civil service and military. The Prime Minister, however, has the most influence and he "performs the greatest single role in policy adoption in the Singapore system" (K. L. Ho, 2000, p. 35). Regular democratic elections help maintain a level of governmental accountability but, in general, political participation is severely limited by the hierarchical political system and other political constraints (E. K. B. Tan, 2010).

Singapore's diverse resident population of 3.7 million consists of Chinese (74.1%), Malays (13.4%), Indians (9.2%), and other minorities (3.3%; Department of Statistics, 2010). The Taoists and Buddhists form the largest religious group, and other major religions in Singapore include Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism. At least in theory, the national Constitution guarantees parity between groups and freedom of expression regardless of race and religion. The governing elite, however, regularly cite Singapore's ethnic and religious diversity as well as past instances of racial and religious riots as justifications to forward a comprehensive agenda of social cohesion. The state's official narrative of unity between groups is promoted through the five national Shared Values and this includes "racial and religious harmony" and the meritocratic nature of the education system (Parliament of Singapore, 1991). A statement by a senior minister of state for education captured the government's vision of schooling as a platform that advances the values of meritocracy and parity between groups:

> Our education system upholds the principle of meritocracy, and gives equal opportunities for everyone, regardless of race, class or gender. Indeed, under this system, the minority groups have made big strides in social mobility through their own efforts. Singapore is always conscious that the divide between the different communities can never be ignored, and we strive continuously to close the gaps. (Wong, 2000)

The Ministry of Education, which monitors curricular programs for both private and public schools, reinforces the government's official stance on Shared Values via textbooks, curricular materials, and nationwide activities such as Racial Harmony Day. From their schooling experiences, Singaporeans learn that social cohesion and diversity are extremely sensitive matters that implicate security and national survival (Alviar-Martin & L. C. Ho, 2011; L. C. Ho et al., 2011).

In parallel with efforts to promote its official stance on social cohesion, the government has codified a range of policies that limit how issues relating to race and religion are discussed in the public sphere. For example, the government established race-based "self-help" associations that encourage Chinese, Indians, Malays, and other minorities to tackle problems at the community level. Although groups such as the Singapore Indian Development Association (SINDA) and MENDAKI (a Malay association) allow citizens from each group to address problems through culturally sensitive approaches, these race-based organizations inadvertently limit and constrain the exchange of ideas regarding issues with potentially broad societal significance. More directly, legal instruments such as the Sedition Act, the Internal Security Act, and the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act clarify what types of public discussion relating to issues of race and religion are deemed acceptable by the state. The Sedition Act, for example, prohibits seditious speech, and this is, in part, defined as promoting "feelings of ill-will and hostility between different races or classes of the population of Singapore" (Neo, 2011, p. 9).

Amid a public sphere that is evolving due to the emergence of new political parties, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), independent media, and online platforms, the governing elite argue that it is necessary to impose a set of unwritten guidelines, commonly known as *out-of-bounds (OB) markers*, to define the acceptable boundaries of political and social discourse. The government has also maintained strict controls over the mainstream media and public discourse with regard to race and religion by executing various legal instruments in conjunction with OB markers. For example, in 2005, the OB markers were deemed to be breached by three bloggers who wrote disparaging comments about Malay-Muslims in their blogs. The bloggers were then prosecuted under the Sedition Act. The definition of sedition has since been extended by the state to include evangelical activity. In 2009, an evangelical Christian couple attempting to proselytize was convicted of distributing pamphlets that characterized Islam and Catholicism as false religions. This was judged to be offensive and the court sentenced the couple to 16 weeks of imprisonment for promoting "feelings of ill-will and hostility" (Neo, 2011, p. 10).

Generally, the Singapore government makes clear the extent to which controversial issues can be discussed in the public sphere. Certain topics such as abortion are considered closed from the state's perspective because an executive decision has already been made. Despite being a contentious issue in many countries, the legalization of abortion in Singapore is surprisingly uncontroversial. In the past three decades, there has been relatively little public opposition against the liberal abortion laws. In response to questions tabled by a member of Parliament in 2008, the Minister for Health stated unequivocally that the Abortion Act of 1974 permitting abortions, subject to a 24-week limit, would

remain unchanged. He reminded other parliamentarians that the issue of abortion "(H)as been debated at length and decided in Singapore . . . It would not be wise to reopen the debate and introduce into Singapore the divisive battles going on in the West" (Parliament of Singapore, 2008). Consequently, public discussions tend to center around the provision of sex education and appropriate social and moral values rather than limiting access to abortions (S. H. Tan, 2011).

The Singapore government, in contrast, has deliberately not adopted a definitive stance toward the position of gay individuals in Singapore. Unusually, the Singapore state's position on this issue is ambiguous, and as a result, the OB markers are less clearly demarcated. For instance, during a very contentious and public debate surrounding the petition to repeal Section 377A of the Penal Code criminalizing sexual relations between gay individuals, the current prime minister, Lee Hsien Loong, explained his government's position with regard to gay individuals in Singapore. Citing the open presence of gay bars and clubs, he reiterated the government's position that it would not proactively enforce the law criminalizing gays. In the same speech, however, the Prime Minister argued that the majority of Singaporeans held conservative values. In his definition of mainstream values, he highlighted the importance of the traditional nuclear family:

> Singapore is basically a conservative society. The family is the basic building block of our society. It has been so and, by policy, we have reinforced this and we want to keep it so. And by "family" in Singapore, we mean one man one woman, marrying, having children and bringing up children within that framework of a stable family unit. (Lee, 2007, n.p.)

Subsequently, the Prime Minister maintained that it was premature to repeal the law even though the government was committed to not enforcing it. Arguing that it was better to "let the situation evolve gradually," he felt that "the legal untidiness and the ambiguity" was preferable to what he saw was the risk of dividing and polarizing Singapore society (Lee, 2007).

This ambiguity in the Singapore state's position has contributed to a significant amount of uncertainty with regard to the location of the OB markers for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transsexual (LGBT) issues. While gay rights groups and supporters are tolerated and have become increasingly vocal and visible in mainstream and social media, a case of a gay teacher coming out in his public blog illustrated the complicated nature of the government's policies with regard to the status of gay individuals in Singapore society. Despite proclaiming that "the Government does not act as moral policemen," the Prime Minister drew a clear line between what was acceptable private and public behavior for teachers:

> (T)he recent case of Mr Otto Fong, who is a teacher in Raffles Institution . . . He put up a blog which described his own sexual inclinations, and explained how he was gay . . . So MOE (Ministry of Education) looked at this. The school spoke to the teacher. The teacher understood that this was beyond the limit, because how he lives is his own thing. But what he disseminates comes very close to promoting a lifestyle. So, they spoke to him, he took down his blog . . . So there is space, and there are limits. (Lee, 2007, n.p.)

The example of the controversy over sex education in Singapore in 2009 captures some of the difficulties that Singapore teachers face when dealing with this topic in schools. This controversy involved the surreptitious takeover of a nongovernmental woman's organization by a group of conservative Christians who objected to the depiction of homosexuality as "normal" in the school sexuality education manuals produced by the organization. After a dispute between supporters of both groups, which was covered extensively on television, in print, and in online forums, the Minister for Education issued a statement outlining the Ministry's position with regard to how LGBT issues should be addressed in schools:

> MOE's sexuality education programme respects the primary role of parents, reflects social norms and reinforces family values which uphold the conventional family as the basic building block of our society. We must reflect and not move ahead of the values and attitudes of mainstream society, particularly when it comes to contentious issues such as homosexuality. (Ng, 2009, n.p.)

The Minister also expressed a strong desire to avoid the same kind of acrimonious discourse found in the United States. He sternly reminded teachers that Singapore "must not go down the way as has happened in the U.S., where schools become the proxy battleground for the Christian right and gay interest groups to settle arguments" (Ng, 2009, n.p.).

Previous case studies further reveal that the Singapore government's desire to uphold conventional and mainstream values have had a mediating influence on teachers' classroom practice when discussing issues of diversity (Alviar-Martin & Ho, 2011; L. C. Ho, 2010). One case study involving interviews with nine secondary teachers illustrated that, especially when instructing about controversial topics such as race, religion, and sexuality, participants tended to consider how their personal understanding of these topics adhered to and implicated the state's official position. Whereas a majority of teachers expressed an understanding of diversity in agreement with the government's views, three teachers questioned the state's official stance and labeled the government's efforts to promote social cohesion as contrived. Regardless of their personal understanding, a majority of teachers said that they taught controversial issues related to diversity by conforming to official state discourse. Intriguingly, teachers who taught about diversity in ways that deviated from the state's official platform said that their practice was guided by personal beliefs in the potential of education to transform

society. They further noted that the changing climate of public discourse in Singapore offered a means for teachers to discuss controversial issues in ways that authentically reflected public sentiments (Alviar-Martin & Ho, 2011).

In the present study, we build on previous research by using an array of qualitative techniques to probe 35 social studies teachers' perceptions of diversity and how their perceptions negate or adhere to official state narratives. We focus particularly on constraints to the teaching of controversial issues and the manner in which teachers navigate their personal beliefs and the evolving contours of public and official discourses in Singapore. By attending to the intersections of teachers' beliefs, state policies, and other sociopolitical factors, we aim to inform scholarship on the social forces that shape controversial issues instruction and illuminate states' powers to demarcate the discursive spaces of teachers.

METHOD

The data presented in this study were drawn from a two-year project examining 35 Singapore humanities teachers' perceptions of diversity and multicultural education. The research team consisted of two principal investigators who were education professors in the only teacher education institute in Singapore and a full-time research assistant. All three members of the research team contributed to the design of the study, data collection, and analysis. The institute's Internal Review Board (IRB) approved the research protocol, including steps taken to ensure the participants' anonymity and confidentiality. The present study focused on these research questions: (a) What topics relating to diversity do Singapore social studies teachers think should be avoided? (b) What are the teachers' perceptions of the constraints that affect their teaching of these topics?

SOURCES OF EVIDENCE

The data consisted of semistructured individual interviews as well as relevant curricular and political documents such as the national Social Studies curriculum, reports from the Ministry of Education, and political speeches and publications. We conducted individual interviews lasting 60 to 90 minutes. The interviews were conducted in English as this was the primary medium of instruction in Singapore. This article focuses on the interview responses of 35 humanities teachers drawn from an original sample of 60 teachers. In Singapore, *humanities* is an umbrella term for a disciplinary area similar to *social studies* in the United States, and includes subjects such as geography, history, and social studies (an interdisciplinary subject focused on citizenship education). We purposefully selected teachers from these subject areas because they are assigned the main responsibility of teaching diverse social and citizenship issues in Singapore schools (Merriam, 2002).

Although subject area background served as our primary criterion of selection, the resulting sample of participants closely represented the different types of public schools in Singapore, as well as gender, ethnic affiliation, and years of experience of Singapore's teaching force (Creswell, 1998; Miles & Huberman, 1994). The sample comprised 23 teachers from regular government schools, six teachers from elite government schools, two participants who were currently involved in teacher education, and four curricular officers at the Ministry of Education. In Singapore, 13-year old secondary students are ranked based on their performance in the national primary school examinations. The students are then sorted into different tracks and schools, with the best students joining the most selective elite secondary schools. These elite schools have more freedom to design their own academically demanding curricula, albeit within certain parameters established by the Ministry of Education (L. C. Ho, 2012). Seventeen teachers were male and 18 were female. Of the 35 teachers, 24 identified as ethnic Chinese, six as Indian, four as Malay, and one as Eurasian. Twelve of the teachers had less than five years of teaching experience. Of the remaining 23 experienced teachers, twelve held senior positions as department heads, subject heads, or lead teachers.

The interview protocol included questions and two elicitation tasks focusing on the teaching of diversity, deemed by the state to be a highly controversial topic. Elicitation techniques help produce rich data, especially when participants' knowledge is largely tacit and when the topic is controversial (Barton, n.d.). The first elicitation task required teachers to view an array of 17 photographs depicting diversity in Singapore society. We used photographs as a means to probe how our participants understood the concept of diversity and to reveal "what they took for granted, what they assume is unquestionable" with regard to diversity (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003, p. 137). The array included photos of religious institutions and Racial Harmony Day, which are features of diversity that have been promoted through official policies, and photos depicting less conventional forms of diversity, such as sexual orientation age. Guided by the literature, the interviewers asked participants to select photos based on two criteria: (a) their personal understanding of diversity and (b) official conceptions of diversity in Singapore. In addition, the interviewers asked follow-up questions to surface the participants' curricular practices.

During the second elicitation task, the participants reviewed a list of potential factors that constrained their teaching of diversity. The list included constraints emanating from teachers' understanding of their role in the classroom, students' academic ability and language proficiency, official delineations or OB markers regarding specific topics, and curricular demands, such as preparation for examinations. The participants identified factors that they considered constraining, and then ranked the identified factors according to the order of significance that each hindered their teaching. The purpose of ranking was to derive simple quantitative indicators that would serve as starting points to elicit detailed explanations regarding the participants' perceptions of constraints to their classroom instruction (Krosnick, 1999). Table 1 illustrates the study's research questions and correspondent interview questions.

Table 1. Research Questions in Relation to Interview Questions and Tasks

Research Question	Interview Question/Task
(1) What topics relating to diversity do Singapore social studies teachers think should be avoided?	Elicitation task 1: The participants are presented with photos depicting aspects of diversity in Singapore. a. Please pick FIVE that you think best represent your understanding of diversity in Singapore. Kindly explain what you see in these photos and why you chose these photos. b. Now, please pick FIVE photos that best depict official conceptions of diversity in Singapore. Kindly explain what you see in these photos and why you picked these photos. c. Can you tell us why your choices in (a) and (b) are similar or different? d. Are there any other aspects of diversity that should be included in this set of photos? Why? e. Are there aspects of diversity that you prefer not to talk about in the classroom? Why?
(2) What are the teachers' perceptions of the constraints that affect their teaching of these topics?	Elicitation task 2: Participants are presented with a list of potential constraints that Singapore teachers face when teaching about diversity. a. Do you agree that the following are constraints to your teaching about diversity? If yes, please rank them in order of significance to your teaching. b. You picked these three as the most significant constraints. Can you tell us how these constraints affect your teaching? c. Are there any other constraints that you face in the classroom that are not on this list? d. Can you tell us more about how these constraints affected your teaching?

DATA ANALYSIS

Creswell (1998) described analysis in qualitative research as a process that aims to reduce the collected information into a manageable number of ideas, stories, or categories that thematically address the questions of interest. Our own analysis, shaped largely by the constant comparative method, was data-driven and inductive (Miles & Huberman, 1994). During the analysis process, the raw data, including researcher notes as well as transcriptions of the interviews, were jointly classified and coded with the use of the qualitative data analysis software, QSR International's NVivo 8 software. The analysis process comprised four iterative stages. The emergent codes, categories, and relationship to the research questions are mapped in Table 2 (Anfara, Brown, & Mangione, 2002).

The three researchers individually coded sample interview transcripts at the initial stage of analysis. The purpose of this stage was to "get a sense of the whole" (Creswell, 2008). Each researcher then employed the constant comparative method (Miles & Huberman, 1994) by comparing particular incidents and insights from the interviews and documents with other incidents from the same data set. If a similarity was detected, we assigned tentative codes to text segments. We noted how each code emerged from interview questions that corresponded with research questions and assigned a number "1" for codes that addressed Research Question 1 and "2" for codes that addressed Research Question 2. We further assigned a letter (a, b, c . . .) to distinguish each group of codes. Examples of codes in the initial stage can be found in the bottom of Table 2.

Table 2. Code Mapping: Stages of Analysis (To Be Read From the Bottom Up)

RQ#1: Topics that need to be avoided?		RQ#2: Constraints that affect teaching about diversity?		
Fourth Iteration: Application to Data Set				
There is space and there are limits: The challenge of teaching controversial topics in an illiberal democracy				
Third Iteration: Merged categories				
1. Distinguishing controversial-appropriate from controversial-taboo topics (1a, 1b, & 2a)		1 & 2. Knowing the limits: Many people don't want to rock the boat (2a & 2b)	2. Managing constraints: Finding space in an illiberal democracy (2a & 2c)	
Second Iteration: Pattern Codes				
1a. Controversial yet appropriate topics	1b. Topics to be avoided	2a. State's definition of mainstream values	2b. Centralized education system	2c. Managing constraints
First Iteration: Initial Codes				
1a. politics 1a. the PAP 1a. race/race relations 1a. socioeconomic background	1b. sexual orientation 1b. same-sex marriages 1b. institutionalized racism 1b. economic disparity based on race	2a. out-of-bounds markers 2a. conservative positions/not the norm/ not mainstream 2a. policies/ government officials' rhetoric 2a. state-controlled media	2b. examinations/ test preparation 2b. school policies 2b. job security 2b. school curriculum 2b. textbooks	2c. appropriate tone/presentation 2c. students bring up topics in class 2c. reverse-bias against PAP 2c. presenting multiple perspectives

In the second stage of analysis, the researchers collaboratively reviewed the interview transcripts to identify similarly coded texts and eliminate redundancies. Upon agreeing on the clustering of codes, we characterized the patterns that unified each group (Tesch, 1990). Five pattern codes resulted from this stage of analysis: (1a) controversial-appropriate topics, (1b) topics to be avoided, (2a) the state's definition of mainstream values, (2b) centralized education system, and (2c) managing constraints. The third iterative stage entailed bringing meaning and insights to the words of the participants by collapsing codes into larger categories, thus generating themes (Merriam, 2002) that addressed the research questions. Notably, the state's definition of mainstream values informed themes that addressed both research questions. As depicted in Table 2, teachers' distinctions between controversial-appropriate and controversial-taboo topics, teachers' hesitation to "rock the boat" or challenge the status quo when teaching about diversity, and teachers' efforts to manage state-imposed constraints to their teaching of controversial issues were influenced in part by the state's definition of mainstream values. In the final stage of analysis, we sought to theorize the process of teaching about controversial topics relating to diversity in Singapore and the constraints faced by teachers in their classroom instruction.

FINDINGS

Focusing on the interplay between the larger sociopolitical contexts and the school circumstances that influence or impact the participants' public, personal, and professional teaching personas, we examined Singapore social studies teachers' willingness to teach controversial topics related to diversity as well as their perspectives of teaching constraints. Notably, the participants expressed significant concern about the far-reaching and pervasive state controls over teachers.

CONTROVERSIAL-APPROPRIATE AND CONTROVERSIAL-TABOO TOPICS

One of the key findings of this study is how Singapore teachers differentiated between (a) topics that were controversial but appropriate for students and (b) topics that were so controversial that they were deemed taboo. During the interviews, the Singapore social studies teachers indicated that they were, to a large extent, willing to teach topics that they felt were controversial-appropriate. In contrast, the majority of the teachers were adamant about not teaching controversial-taboo topics. These topics were described by the majority of the teachers as absolutely out-of-bounds. Notably, there were few differences in how the 35 participants defined controversial-appropriate and controversial-taboo topics.

A significant proportion (29 of 35) of the participants categorized topics linked to sexual orientation as controversial-taboo and felt that this should be avoided at all cost.

These teachers felt that discussions about sexual orientation were out-of-bounds (OB)—a term that is commonly used in Singapore to denote topics that are considered particularly inappropriate or unsuitable—for different reasons. Interestingly, an overwhelming majority (26 of 29) of the participants who categorized topics related to sexuality as controversial-taboo based their decision on the conservative positions adopted by the state, parents, students, their colleagues, and other social organizations such as churches. The participants' responses also clearly reflected the state's position about the importance of "mainstream values," and the implicit assumption that gay individuals were not part of mainstream Singapore society. For example, Larry, a young Chinese teacher in his fourth year of teaching at a government school, stated that he avoided this topic because he felt that LGBT individuals were "non-mainstream" and, as a result, Singaporeans like him were "uncomfortable" addressing this topic. Likewise, Penny, a female Chinese teacher with more than five years of teaching experience, said that she did not want to talk about this topic in class: "I don't want to be encouraging it, and I don't want to be seen like making people feel accepted if they are not of the norm, so I will not discuss (it)."

Several other teachers felt that that this topic was controversial-taboo because they were afraid of offending students and parents from the more conservative religious groups. Keva, a young female Indian teacher with two years of teaching experience explained her reasons: "Different religious groups have different perceptions, different takes. So I'm not too sure." Similarly, David, an experienced Chinese teacher, described how the religious backgrounds of students and their families affected his teaching: "Because when you talk about same sex marriages, there will be . . . not only personal, societal, but also religious constraints coming in." Linda, a Chinese department head in an elite girls' school shared similar sentiments. In her response, she emphasized that her students wanted to discuss these controversial topics but their parents were uncomfortable with the idea:

> Actually the girls also tell us: "What's wrong with discussing this in class?" You know, because they feel that there is nothing wrong, it's a good platform to just discuss it (and) look at the plus and minus . . . but some parents due to religion, due to their background . . . tend to be a bit more protective over their children.

Interestingly, only three teachers explicitly based their decision to avoid this topic on their personal religious beliefs. Wei Ling, a female Chinese teacher, explained why she avoided this topic in class:

> I have friends who are, how do I put it, their sexual orientation is not normal, is not . . . I won't say normal, is not conventional. I can be friends with them . . . but I will not discuss this in class. The reason is because personally I can accept it, but it does not agree with my values because of (my Christian) religion.

Similarly, Steve, a young and conservative Chinese teacher in his second year of teaching who strongly identified as a Christian, was particularly vocal about his anti-gay beliefs. He strongly defended the existing law criminalizing homosexuality and quoted a prominent conservative political leader, Thio Li-ann: "I think that (homosexuality) is very unnatural . . . it's just like sticking your nose up a straw."

The participants, on the other hand, categorized politics and race as controversial-appropriate topics. Almost all the participants (33 of 35) expressed a willingness to discuss these topics in class, although they noted that they had to take more precautions and be more careful in terms of how they approached controversial-appropriate topics as these topics were complex and politically and socially sensitive. David, an experienced Chinese department head, thought that discussions about political issues were acceptable, "I feel that political diversity is still OK because it's rising and there's you know, lots of resources, lots of newspaper articles which cover political views." Notably, in contrast to his earlier objection to the discussion of sexual orientation and same-sex marriages, David felt that this topic was important and stated that "It's good for them (the students) to know." Reflecting the changing political climate in Singapore, several teachers noted that their students regularly expressed antigovernment viewpoints in class. Alex, a very senior Indian teacher, observed that "there is this reverse bias business going on against the PAP (People's Action Party)." He also added that he had to remind his students not to "swing the other way and criticize the government." Only two teachers, Jameerah and Kiat Hui, felt that it was a controversial-taboo topic. Kiat Hui, a female Chinese department head stated that she avoided all political discussion in class because she feared losing her job. Jameerah, on the other hand, explained that she felt that the students were too immature:

> Well, definitely I will not talk about the political orientations of people, simply because I think the students I am dealing with, they are . . . they can be rather immature. It requires a certain level of maturity to discuss and to understand people's different political viewpoints and standpoints about issues.

Remarkably, despite the Singapore government's constant reminders of the problems of living in a multiracial society, the Singapore teachers felt that race was a controversial-appropriate topic. In general, they appeared to be much more confident when discussing racial issues, even in a multiracial setting, as compared to other topics such as sexual orientation. Despite expressing reservations about the political immaturity of her students, Jameerah, an experienced department head, described her willingness to talk about race in the classroom, albeit within certain limits:

> Race and religion, of course, we do discuss. Sometimes people do say silly things in class, and they don't mean it. You know, a lot of times I find that the teenagers, they don't mean what they say . . . They repeat things which they've heard, but when you talk to them about it, most of them are quite reasonable.

Her views were shared by Wei Sheng, a blunt male Chinese teacher from a government school, who said: "Race, we can talk . . . When it's rational, we can talk. When it's irrational, (it's) difficult to talk." Similarly, Fatimah, a young female Malay teacher in her third year of teaching explained why she was more willing to talk about race: "Because if it's race . . . I can maybe break it down for the students that it's just social construct . . . it all comes down to differences in the physical attributes after that." These discussions were, however, confined largely to promoting acceptance and tolerance of different groups—a stance that was clearly within the state's OB markers. Darryl, a Chinese teacher from an elite boys' school, described his approach thusly:

> I think that it's important to mention that diversity exists in many different forms (and) many different ways . . . Across race, across religion, social economic backgrounds, and it just happens to be one group. Right? And if you can accept every group then it's just the same thing.

None of the teachers, however, expressed a willingness to talk about more difficult and controversial aspects of race in Singapore society such as institutional racism or the reasons why particular racial groups were economically disadvantaged. David, an experienced Chinese department head, provided several reasons to explain why teachers did not want to address these controversial topics: "Teachers are not taught that way, so the teachers may not be comfortable . . . Teachers may feel that it is part of the national agenda to talk about diversity and send them (the students) a message."

MANAGING STATE-IMPOSED CONSTRAINTS: "MANY PEOPLE DON'T WANT TO ROCK THE BOAT"

The second main finding of this study is the significant impact of the state on teachers' perspectives and beliefs about the teaching of controversial topics. The Singapore government's position with regard to controversial topics seems to have played a significant role in influencing social studies teachers' perspectives of whether a topic was controversial-appropriate or controversial-taboo. Based on our analysis, state influence was evidenced primarily by two interacting elements: (a) the state's definition of "mainstream values;" and (b) the establishment of a centralized national education system with significant control over teachers' curricular decision making. The teachers' responses suggested that the state's position could be explicitly expressed through official channels, such as ministerial speeches, laws, and legal sanctions, or implicitly conveyed through the establishment of OB markers, state-controlled media, the school curriculum, and the Ministry of Education.

First, teachers are pressured to conform to state-imposed norms of behavior, keep within the OB markers, and impart "mainstream values" to the students. Of the 35 humanities teachers in the study, 21 participants felt that the existence of OB markers affected their teaching of controversial topics such as diversity. Komala, a very senior female Indian teacher from a government school, defined OB markers thusly: "OB markers means something that we can't talk about." Several teachers, including Larry and Mark, referred to the idea of mainstream values to explain their reluctance to address topics related to sexual orientation in class. In his interview, Larry spoke about how LGBT individuals were in the minority:

> In Singapore, I understand where the government wants to focus on it and wants to focus on the mainstream . . . there are things that they totally don't want to include in certain discussions . . . I don't think they want the school to mention about it.

Similarly, two other teachers, Penny and Wei Ling, used phrases such as "not of the norm" and "not normal (or) conventional" to describe the status of gay individuals in Singapore. This pressure to conform to mainstream values also extends to controversial-appropriate topics such as race and religion. Komala cited an example of a religiously conservative teacher who was compelled to adhere to the relatively more liberal mainstream value of religious tolerance and harmony as defined by the state. During a National Education fieldtrip designed to promote racial and religious harmony, a conservative Christian teacher from Komala's school was reluctant to enter an unusual place of worship that included a Malay-Muslim *keramat* (a shrine dedicated to a holy man), a Taoist temple, and a Hindu temple. As a result, the principal reprimanded the teacher:

> The principal was quite angry. She told the teacher off. She said, "I understand you have your own religious inclination but I think you should be a good role model to the students . . . you should go in for the sake of understanding it. We are not asking you to change your religion. It's a different thing . . . your own religious belief and your professional practice."

Interestingly, Komala expressed complete support for the principal's stance as she felt that this teacher had to set a good example for the students in order to impart the national value of religious harmony.

Conversely, if a teacher is deemed to be too liberal, the Ministry of Education or school leaders will also step in to remind the teacher not to stray too far from state-defined "mainstream values." Linda, a Chinese department head teaching in an elite girls' school, cited an example of how the parents of a student lodged a complaint about a teacher's discussion of an article in the *Straits Times* that focused on gay marriages. As a result, the school leaders issued a directive reminding teachers not to talk about sexual orientation and other related topics in class. Mark, a department head from a government school, cited another example of how a teacher was pressured to conform to mainstream values as defined by the state. He described how a gay teacher was censured by the Ministry of Education for coming out on his Facebook page that was also accessible to his students.

Second, the participants' responses highlighted the power of the state to directly and indirectly influence teachers' curriculum decision making with regard to the teaching of controversial topics. Several teachers spoke of the consequences of not conforming to the state's expectations. Kiat Hui, a female Chinese department head, was reluctant to talk about politics, which she regarded as being controversial-taboo because, according to her, "If anything that I say is not really acceptable, then I'll lose my job and I cannot support my family." Other participants felt that teachers had to be role models as defined by the state. Ben, a young Indian Catholic teacher in his second year of teaching at an Anglican school, stated cynically that a teacher should be "a nation-loving, loyal citizen who will speak only good of the country." He felt that teachers could not be seen as being critical of the system: "Just follow, don't argue . . . I want to keep my job. So I have to follow the rules." This fear of losing their jobs greatly affected these teachers' willingness to introduce controversial topics in class.

The Singapore state also maintains its influence on teachers' curricular decision making through the production of a rigid national curriculum, prescribed textbooks, and national examinations (L. C. Ho, 2012). One of the biggest concerns cited by the participants was the lack of curricular time and, in relation to that, the need to spend a significant amount of time preparing students for the high-stakes national examinations. Two-thirds of the teachers felt that the lack of curricular time was a significant constraint and half the participants felt that the national examinations greatly affected their ability to introduce discussions of controversial topics in their lessons. Alvin, an experienced teacher from another elite boys' school, spoke about the focus on preparing students for the national examinations: "There is just no time to discuss. Yeah, especially when you teach Upper Sec(ondary), because the whole syllabus, you're just rushing, you're just doing model essays and stuff. Drill and practice mainly." Similarly, Brandon, a vocal teacher from an elite boys' school, criticized his colleagues' priorities: "Many teachers would say (that my role is to) make sure that my kids get their As." Nancy, a teacher from a government school, in addition, felt that the lack of time and the constraints of the social studies curriculum limited her ability to discuss controversial topics in class: "The insufficient time . . . because really, if you have that, and without the restriction of the curriculum, you could do more . . . to address when such issues, you know, arise."

In sum, these examples illustrate how the majority of Singapore teachers are pressured to conform to social and political norms by the state apparatus that closely controls teacher behavior in the classroom through various direct and indirect means. Teachers, consequently, are wary of introducing controversial topics and contested perspectives that challenge official knowledge because, as Brandon observed, "Many people don't want to rock the boat. They don't want to stand out. They don't want to be seen as (being) radical." Notably, there were six teachers, all from elite schools, who did not express similar concerns about their job security. Zainal, a male Malay teacher at an elite boys' school, stated that he was not concerned about the potential consequences for his career: "So for me there's nothing I would not discuss. I don't think I'm afraid of OB markers . . . I don't face that problem . . . Yeah they can sack me, no problem." During the interviews, the six teachers explained why they felt comfortable teaching these topics and talked about how they managed to find curricular space within a tightly controlled and prescriptive education environment. Four of the teachers suggested that it was possible to address any topic in class, provided it was dealt with in a responsible and even-handed manner on the part of both the teacher and the students. Brandon, a male Chinese teacher in his sixth year of teaching at an elite boys' school said: "I guess to me obviously nothing's out of bounds, (I) can talk about anything. It's how we do it, (it's) the teacher's role in the classroom." Brandon also observed that it was easier for him to discuss these issues because his students were more intelligent:

> They're higher ability . . . you can talk about anything very academically. They can geek out about it. You can take the discussion one step higher you see. When people don't understand concepts very well and they can't engage at a certain level, it's very limiting, and they're afraid they will offend someone, so they don't go there.

Tung Mei, a Chinese department head in an elite boys' school, on the other hand, observed that it was important to present different perspectives in class in order to empower students to make their own evaluation. She stated: "Actually I'm quite comfortable talking about that in class . . . we cover the more conservative viewpoints, liberal viewpoints, and then, of course, you allow the students to make decisions."

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The findings of this study highlight how the participants, influenced largely by state policies, divided controversial topics into two categories: (a) topics that were controversial but appropriate for students; and (b) topics that were so controversial that they were deemed taboo or out-of-bounds. The findings also indicate that Singapore teachers confront unique social, political, and educational circumstances that paradoxically, both constrain *and* enhance their freedom to teach controversial topics such as race, politics, and sexual orientation.

This study thus raises an interesting question with regard to the relationship between teachers' curricular decision making and state policies, censorship, and control. Do *all* forms of state controls and censorship have a negative impact on teachers' freedom to teach controversial topics? Previous studies conducted in the United States, China, and Singapore have emphasized that the state acts in various ways to limit teachers' independence by imposing constraints on teachers' curricular decision making (L. C. Ho, 2010; Misco, 2011; Misco & Patterson, 2007; Nelson & Ochoa, 1987). As a result, teachers teach more conservatively and tend to avoid contentious topics (Cornbleth, 2001). The examples of institutional and legal controls over teachers in Singapore partly support this conclusion. At a political level, the Singapore state, through the implementation of

laws such as the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act, is the dominant actor in the establishment of boundaries between acceptable and inappropriate discourse within Singapore schools. At an institutional level, the state is equally dominant as it determines the kind of official knowledge and mainstream values that teachers have to impart through the state-mandated curriculum. Our analysis also revealed a close parallel between the state's position on social issues and the participants' perspectives of controversial-taboo and controversial-appropriate topics for social studies classrooms. As a result, similar to findings of a small-scale study conducted by the authors (Alviar-Martin & L. C. Ho, 2011), the majority of the teachers drew on the arguments and reasons used by the Singapore government to support their personal positions. They were, in addition, fully cognizant of the existence of OB markers when discussing topics such as race and politics and were generally unwilling to push the boundaries because of their fear of being sanctioned.

Remarkably, despite the numerous legal constraints limiting the nature of public discussion of these topics, the majority of the teachers regarded race and politics as controversial-appropriate topics, defined in the previous section as politically and socially sensitive topics that were acceptable for discussion within the classroom, albeit within certain limits. The interview data suggest that almost all the teachers felt more comfortable addressing controversial-appropriate topics related to politics and race, partly because they felt that they were on safer ground, given the state's clear delimitation of boundaries between acceptable and unacceptable public discourse. There was, conversely, a consensus among the participants that topics related to sexual orientation were controversial-taboo even though there were no similar laws constraining public discussion of this issue. In other words, teachers felt more secure addressing topics related to race and politics (in spite of the explicit legal constraints and OB markers) compared to discussing sexual orientation—a topic without a similarly explicit set of political rules and norms to guide public discourse.

This unusual situation thus poses a challenge to conventional assumptions about the impact of state-imposed constraints and controls on the teaching of controversial topics in schools. Intriguingly, the findings suggest that, under some circumstances, state controls and constraints can result in teachers having *more* freedom to discuss controversial topics such as race and politics because of the clearly demarcated political and social boundaries. In this situation, guided by the government's explicitly stated and consistent public positions, different groups, including teachers, students, school administrators, parents, and the public, have a shared tacit understanding of what kind of discussion is deemed acceptable or unacceptable in schools. The state appears to perform the role as the final arbiter of political and social values and, as a result, schools and teachers are liberated from pressure from parents, the public, and external organizations with differing views or agendas.

However, if the state is conspicuously absent or sends ambiguous messages, particularly in a racially and religiously diverse country with a history of social tension like Singapore, this may result in a Kafkaesque situation in which teachers become even *more* conservative in their curriculum decision making due to a heightened sense of uncertainty and insecurity. The literature on teacher uncertainties suggests that uncertainty can contribute to increased conservatism, acceptance of the status quo, and conformity (Helsing, 2007). The case of the Singapore government not taking a definitive position with regard to the legal status of gays in Singapore clearly illustrates this point. The legal ambiguity, together with the contradictory public and state discourses among the governing elite about homosexuality and gay rights, appears to have contributed to the reluctance of many of the teachers to address this topic in class. The examples cited in the previous section of the controversies over the apparent normalization of homosexuality in the school sex education curriculum and the gay teacher who came out in his blog, furthermore, appear to reflect the larger political and culture wars occurring in Singapore society. In this context, because the teachers in the study did not know where the OB markers were located, they did not feel empowered to make their own curricular decisions. Consequently, they preferred to adopt the safer and more conservative option of self-censorship and avoid the topic altogether. The experiences cited by Linda, Keva, Ben, Larry, and other participants, for instance, indicate that teachers face increased uncertainty due to pressure not only from school administrators but also from their more religiously conservative colleagues, parents, religious groups, and, occasionally, the students themselves.

Singapore social studies teachers, in addition, face high levels of role ambiguity given the essentially contested nature of the subject. Schwab (1983) defined role ambiguity as "the lack of clear, consistent information regarding the rights, duties, and responsibilities of teaching and how best they can be performed" (p. 23). Role ambiguity caused by state-mandated restructuring of curricula and pedagogy and negative public perception can result in high levels of job stress (Byrne, 1994). The implications of uncertainty for teachers are significant: "When professional roles are characterized by conflict, change and ambiguity, intense and often negative emotional reactions are often the consequence" (Schmidt, 2000, p. 829). The findings of the study suggested that the level of role ambiguity for the teachers in the study varied according to the state's position on a particular controversial topic. A lack of clarity, especially with regard to teaching controversial topics related to sexual orientation and gay rights, appeared to be linked to the participants experiencing a higher level of role ambiguity. This is partly due to the numerous and occasionally contradictory expectations placed on teachers. Singapore teachers, the majority of whom are government employees, are expected to uphold "positive mainstream values and attitudes" (Singapore Ministry of Education, 2012). This, however, has been largely tacit, inconsistent, and undefined, especially in relation to the status of gays in Singapore. Teachers, for example, are supposed to focus on teaching critical and creative thinking (Singapore Ministry of Education, 2007). However, they are also regularly warned not to stray into advocacy (Ng, 2009). In a speech addressing the teaching of sex education in schools, the Minister for Education clearly defined the role of the teacher as being a neutral arbiter in the classroom. He stated that "teachers must not abuse their privileged access to advocate their own points of view" and reminded schools that they should not become "arenas for advocacy" for religious, political, and social issues (Ng, 2009, n.p.). The Ministry of Education, however, has not clearly articulated the definition of "advocacy" and this normative judgment is largely left to individual school administrators whose decisions may be influenced by pressure from external organizations with different values and priorities. Mark's example of the gay teacher's blog post, for example, was deemed by the state to be a form of advocacy for a gay lifestyle. In the case of the controversy surrounding the sex education curriculum, the treatment of homosexuality as normal was regarded by conservative religious groups as a form of gay advocacy. Similarly, Linda's school administrators, in

reaction to a parent's complaint about the teacher in her school who referred to the legalization of gay marriage in New York in passing, categorized this topic as controversial-taboo and requested that all teachers refrain from discussing it.

To conclude, while social studies is "buffeted by all manner of social forces" (Parker, 2010, p. 5), this study suggests that these "social forces" vary significantly according to national context. The existence of these social forces, however, has consistently resulted in social studies teachers across national contexts being subjected to some form of state control and restriction. This investigation of 35 social studies teachers, although focused on Singapore, brings to light the nuanced ways that state control and censorship influence the spaces and limits of issues-centered discussion in a tightly-controlled authoritarian–democratic system. It also supports Nelson and Ochoa's (1987) assertion that "not all censorship is inherently evil nor is it necessarily conducted by illiterate kooks" (p. 426). This study has, in addition, shown how the state's power to define conventional values and demarcate discursive spaces of teachers in Singapore both limit a teacher's capacity to discuss controversial topics in class and, under certain circumstances, provide relatively more freedom for them to address controversy in the classroom.

At a broader level, the present study implicates conventional thought on democratic public discourse. Democracy thrives through the freedom of communication between groups with varied interests and potentially conflicting value systems (Dewey, 1916). Intriguingly, the findings suggest that in Singapore, official stances on racial harmony and other Shared Values serve as a means to integrate public discussion by providing a coherent framework for citizens to discuss diversity and other controversial issues. At the same time, the state's controls over public discourse place limits on coordination between local associations and among individual citizens. Understanding of unity and diversity in Singapore, furthermore, overwhelmingly reflect "top-down" constructions imposed by the governing elite. In this vein, we believe that more studies are needed to unpack the unintended consequences of, and tensions between, state-imposed constructions and local constructions of diversity in multicultural democracies. Given the emerging visibility of human rights and its implications on states' codifications of cultural and social rights (Sen, 2009), research can further inform how such transnational discourses are influencing local dialogue and the teaching of diversity in various political settings. As schools in democracies confront these issues, studies of how teachers reconcile their identities and navigate constraints can help inform common efforts. Ultimately, this study underlines the role of education in nourishing the dialogue that sustains the democratic enterprise and prepares youth to face the challenges of an interdependent world.

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