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**Discussing Controversial Issues in the PSCD Classroom - Listening to
PSCD Teachers**

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degree of Master in Teaching and Learning.

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ABSTRACT

This research aimed to explore the engagement in dialogues with individuals of differing values, a practice that is crucial to the democratic process and vital for the promotion and reinforcement of a culture of human rights (Hess, 2019). Controversial and sensitive issues will inevitably appear in the PSCD classroom discussion (Parker & Hess, 2001). These may include issues on politics, religion, culture, or social norms, frequently involve competing values, beliefs, and interests (Hand & Levinson, 2012). For this reason, educators need to be ready to talk about these topics with their students. Issues become contentious when people hold conflicting or opposing viewpoints. When this happens, people usually have strong beliefs and feelings about an issue, leading to a series of complex and emotional responses. The study delves into the complexities surrounding controversial and sensitive topics, emphasizing their significance to individuals and society. It acknowledges that such issues often involve value conflicts, disputed claims, and heightened emotions, contributing to societal division and mistrust. Specifically focusing on contentious matters during Personal, Social, and Career Development (PSCD) lessons, the study raises pedagogical concerns about safeguarding students' feelings, addressing conflicts, and delivering sensitive material. The research, adopting a qualitative design with semi-structured interviews and Reflective Thematic Analysis (RTA), aims to explore how educators handle these challenges. The main findings highlight the myriad challenges faced by professionals when addressing contentious issues in the classroom. These include navigating diverse perspectives, managing student conflicts, and ensuring a safe and inclusive learning environment. The study advocates for future research to prioritize a student-centric approach, aiming to understand their perspectives on engaging with controversial topics. Recognizing the influence of cultural and societal norms on classroom discussions is deemed essential. Overall, the research sheds light on the experiences of professionals dealing with contentious issues and underscores the need for a comprehensive understanding of student needs and experiences in educational settings.

Keywords: Controversial issues, PSCD Classrooms, Sensitive topics, Classroom discourse, and Discussion.

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Table 1. Main Findings

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Declaration

This is to affirm that the content presented in this thesis for the Master in Access to Education is solely my original work and has not been used for any other academic evaluation except as a partial requirement for the abovementioned degree.

Signature of candidate:

.....

Date: 07/12/2023

Dedication

This dissertation is lovingly dedicated to my husband and our three sons. AL, you have been my rock throughout this journey, providing unwavering support and encouragement. Your love and understanding have kept me grounded, allowing me to pursue my academic aspirations confidently. I love you more than you can ever imagine. To my three incredible boys, Ben, Joe, and Tom, you have been my constant motivation and source of inspiration. Your laughter and joy have reminded me of the importance of balance in life, pushing me to strive for excellence in my personal and professional endeavours. I love you more than words can express.

And lastly, to my beloved parents, who have been incredible supporters, helping me manage and nurture my children throughout my journey. I am forever grateful for your love and belief in me. My heart overflows with gratitude and love for you both. Forever and always, I love you.

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List of Abbreviations

CI	Controversial issues
DQSE	Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education
ELC	Experiential Learning Cycle
FREC	Faculty Research Ethics Committee
LGBTIQ+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Intersex, Queer,lgbt and Other
MEYE	Ministry of Education, Youth & Employment
PGCE	Postgraduate Certificate in Education
PSCD	Personal, Social and Career Development
PSD	Personal and Social Development
PSHE	Personal, Social, and Health Development
RTA	Reflective Thematic Analysis
SLOs	Subject Learning Outcomes
TA	Thematic Analysis

Chapter 1: Introduction and Rationale

This section presents the primary considerations that directed me in making decisions regarding the selection and execution of the study. It elucidates the study's goals and gives a thorough synopsis of the research questions, taking into account the forthcoming sections.

Context of Research

Controversial Issues (CI) that may arise during the PSCD classroom include discussing sensitive topics such as race, religion, and politics. These issues can create tension among students and may require careful handling by the teacher to ensure a respectful and inclusive learning environment. Additionally, teachers must consider ethical considerations when conducting research in a classroom setting, such as obtaining informed consent from participants and protecting their privacy and confidentiality (Gurin et al., 2002). The main interest of this study was to explore the impact of these discussions on students' attitudes and perspectives. By analysing their responses and interactions, researchers aim to understand how these sensitive topics influence students' understanding of diversity, tolerance, and social dynamics. Furthermore, this study aimed to provide educators with recommendations on facilitating productive and respectful discussions on these topics to promote a more inclusive and accepting classroom environment (Carrasco & Iribarra, 2018).

Research Purpose and Aims of the Study

The aims of this study included examining current practices and strategies used in facilitating discussions, exploring the impact of these discussions on student learning and engagement, and identifying effective techniques to address potential challenges and barriers that may arise during these discussions. Additionally, the study sought to understand students' and educators' perspectives and experiences to understand the dynamics at play in classroom discussions on sensitive topics. The study also aimed to identify strategies for promoting inclusive and respectful dialogue.

The research questions are:

- What do adolescents consider contentious issues that should be addressed in the PSCD classroom?

- How do professionals perceive controversial issues that adolescents bring to the PSCD classroom?

These questions aimed to explore the perspectives of professionals who facilitate PSCD discussions and how they navigate sensitive topics raised by students. Additionally, the study seeks to explore any challenges or concerns professionals may have in addressing these contentious issues in the classroom.

Background and Inspiration for this Study

My journey into this research began with a keen interest in Personal, Social and Career Development (PSCD) and a commitment to deepening our collective understanding of adolescent engagement in sensitive discussions. My tenure as a teacher, fresh from university with a Post Graduate Certificate in Social Studies Education (PGCE), gave me a front-row seat to the spontaneous eruption of controversial topics in the classroom. These were moments of potential tension and opportunities for growth and learning. I observed how these complex discussions could shape young minds, and it intrigued me how skilled facilitators steered these conversations gracefully and effectively.

After my PGCE course, I was employed as a PSCD teacher. My experience in the trenches, so to speak, during those early PSCD classes, catalysed this study. I became increasingly drawn to the nuanced dance between educator and student during heated debates. The delicate balance of maintaining order and respect while allowing for open expression was a challenge I embraced daily. This research is thus a natural progression from those initial observations, an endeavour to distil the essence of what makes for successful dialogue in the face of controversy.

Through this study, I aimed to enrich my facilitation repertoire to weave the wisdom of seasoned professionals into my approach, to ensure that every student feels seen and heard. By shedding light on these dynamics, I can contribute to a broader discourse on nurturing an educational atmosphere where diversity of thought isn't just tolerated but celebrated.

Research Design

This study uses a qualitative approach using individual, one-hour, audio-recorded semi-structured interviews to explore how PSCD teachers in secondary schools deal with controversial topics in their classrooms. Qualitative research is rich, intriguing, and challenging, since it portrays the complexities, complexity, and conflict that characterise the

real world while also enabling us to uncover meaning patterns (Clarke & Braun, 2013). In this approach, the researcher is the primary tool of investigation, where the method is individualised. The results are subjective: “What you care about, how you view the world, and how you have chosen to study what interests you is [sic] a part of qualitative methodology” (Patton, 2015, p. 3).

This study embraced the philosophy of postmodernism since, as Wilson (1997) states, some main concepts encompass that individuals and groups form knowledge and that reality is subjective and rooted in daily life, which is also influenced by interpersonal relationships. Postmodernism recognises the legitimacy and viability of various views and the contextual development of meaning (Wilson, 1997). Thus, this study adopts an interpretivism approach since it emphasises truth as a personal fabrication that must be individually comprehended (Kroeze, 2011). RTA was utilised to analyse data gathered throughout semi-structured interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

Epistemology

This study is fundamentally based on integrating phenomenological perspectives into a socio-constructivist framework.

Social Constructivism

Social Constructivism is a theoretical perspective that emphasises the role of social interactions and cultural context in shaping knowledge and understanding. This perspective suggests that individual experiences or perceptions do not solely determine knowledge but are co-constructed through social interactions and shared accounts within a specific cultural context. Controversial topics in the PSCD classroom may be approached from a social constructivist lens, as students are encouraged to engage in collaborative discussions and critically analyse different perspectives (Gergen, 1999; Vygotsky & Cole, 1978).

Phenomenology

Phenomenology is a philosophical approach that focuses on studying subjective experiences and consciousness. It emphasises the importance of understanding the world through personal interpretations and lived experiences (Paley, 1997). In the PSCD classroom, a phenomenological perspective can be applied to encourage students to reflect on their experiences and emotions, fostering self-awareness and empathy towards others. By exploring different perspectives and interpretations, students can develop a deeper understanding of complex social issues and enhance their critical thinking skills. Educators

can further explore how individual experiences and perceptions contribute to constructing knowledge within a social context by incorporating phenomenological perspectives into this framework. This approach allows for a deeper understanding of controversial topics, as it acknowledges the influence of personal experiences and social interactions in shaping students' understanding and opinions.

Theoretical Framework of the Research Theme

The theoretical framework provides a comprehensive structure for examining the relationship between phenomenological perspectives and critical thinking skills in education. It offers a lens through which educators can analyse how individual experiences and perceptions shape students' knowledge construction, ultimately enhancing their ability to think critically and engage with complex topics.

This framework prompts educators to acknowledge the role of social context in learning, emphasizing how social interactions influence students' understanding (Brookfield, 2011; Freire, 2020). My research is framed by constructivism, social constructivism, and critical theory, offering insights into how students construct knowledge through interactions and underscoring the need to address power imbalances and social inequalities in education for a more inclusive environment (Kalina et al., 2009).

These theoretical frameworks emphasise the importance of active learning, collaborative knowledge construction, and examining power dynamics in educational settings (Vygotsky & Cole, 1978). By understanding how students actively construct knowledge through their interactions with the world and with others, educators can design instructional strategies that promote meaningful learning experiences. Addressing power dynamics and social inequalities in educational settings can help foster an inclusive and equitable educational environment where every student has an equal chance to thrive. These theoretical frameworks provide valuable insights into effective teaching practices that encourage active learning, collaborative knowledge construction, and a critical examination of power dynamics within the classroom (Kalina et al., 2009). I aimed to professional teachers perceive how students' learning experiences are shaped by their interactions with others and the larger social context in which they are situated.

Additionally, these frameworks helped me analyse how power structures within education can either facilitate or hinder students' ability to critically engage with controversial topics and develop a sense of agency in their learning. I can better identify

students' barriers in expressing their opinions and challenging dominant narratives by understanding how knowledge is constructed and how power is distributed. Furthermore, this research allows me to explore potential strategies and interventions that empower students to navigate these power dynamics and become active participants in shaping their educational experiences (Freire, 2009; Knoblauch & Wilke, 2016).

This research also highlights the importance of creating inclusive and equitable learning environments where all students feel valued and respected. Educators can help students develop the skills necessary to navigate power dynamics and advocate for their educational needs by promoting critical thinking and fostering a sense of agency. (Farrell & Aune, 1979).

Terminology

Since its introduction to the local context, PGCE as a subject has changed its name over the years. It was originally referred to as Lifeskills, then Personal and Social Education (PSE), then Personal and Social Development (PSD) and lately the state refers to this subject as PSCD. This subject is also referred to with other names in Church and Independent schools, for example Personal, Social, and Health Education (PSHE) (DQSE,2015). In this work, I will be referring to PSCD when I refer to the subject and PSD when I refer to the methodology.

Overview of the Dissertation Chapters

This chapter served as an introduction, providing readers with the research context, topic, and rationale. The following chapter reviews the literature, defines key terms, overviews power dynamics in education, identifies research gaps, and establishes the study's questions and objectives. The methodology chapter then describes the research design and approach, including data collection methods and analysis techniques. The dissertation also addresses the study's limitations and ethical aspects. The following chapters analyse and contrast the results with established literature. The concluding chapter summarises the study, discussing its implications and constraints and offering suggestions for further research and practical application.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Learning to engage in dialogue with people who hold opposing views and respecting them is critical to the democratic process, as is the protection and maintenance of democracy and the promotion of a human rights culture. Conversations that allow us to understand different points of view and find common ground are critical in a diverse society. This may result in improved problem-solving and decision-making, enhancing our democracy (Malikow, 2006). Additionally, promoting cultural awareness and sensitivity can lead to greater respect and acceptance of diversity (Kirmayer, 2012; O'Connell et al., 2007; Richards, 2007).

The Importance of Discussing Controversial Issues

The literature presents that educators hold a variety of perspectives regarding controversial classroom issues. Some educators believe that controversial topics should be avoided in favour of strictly adhering to the curriculum and avoiding divisive subjects. Others believe these discussions can benefit student engagement and critical thinking if handled with care and respect. The key to successfully navigating these contentious issues is creating an environment where all perspectives are heard and respected. This entails creating a safe, supportive environment where students can express their opinions, even if they differ from their peers. Nevertheless, teachers must consider the emotional impact these discussions may have on students, particularly those who may have experienced trauma or discrimination due to the topic. Educators must demonstrate sensitivity and mindfulness to recognise this and create a safe space for all students to express their thoughts and feelings. Teachers must establish clear guidelines and ground rules for respectful dialogue and actively monitor the conversation to ensure it remains constructive and inclusive. Finally, when moderating these discussions, teachers must confront their own inherent biases to foster an inclusive environment in which every student feels valued (Al Badri, 2015; Gootman, 2008; Jennings, 2015; Nieto & Bode, 1992; Oulton et al., 2004; Pace, 2022; Washington & Humphries, 2011; Woo et al., 2023).

According to Hess and McAvoy (2014), important skills are required for successfully teaching such contentious issues. These skills must be developed over time and include the ability to remain neutral and open-minded, as well as the ability to facilitate respectful dialogue among students with differing opinions. It is crucial for teachers to continuously

work on improving these skills to create a safe and productive learning environment for all students. The goal of debating controversial issues in the classroom should be to help students develop critical thinking skills, empathy, and understanding for people who hold opposing views. Students can also learn to navigate complex issues and become more informed and engaged citizens by engaging in thoughtful and respectful discussions (Cipolle, 2010; Hess & McAvoy, 2014; Kennedy, 2007).

The PSCD classroom teaches students personal, social, and career skills to help them navigate their lives after school (Camilleri & Bezzina, 2022). Giving students opportunities to discuss controversial issues is an important aspect of PSCD. Controversial matters must be addressed in the PSCD classroom because they help students develop critical thinking skills, understand societal matters more deeply, and learn how to engage in civil discourse with others who hold opposing views (Hand & Levinson, 2012).

Additionally, discussing issues in the classroom can help students learn how to respectfully disagree with others and build empathy towards those with different perspectives (Moore, 2012). However, discussing contentious issues in the PSCD classroom presents several challenges. These difficulties include but are not limited to ensuring that classroom discussions are respectful, inclusive, and culturally responsive, addressing students' diverse backgrounds and experiences, and navigating legal and ethical issues associated with discussing controversial topics (Banks, 2004; Journell, 2017). Furthermore, teachers may feel unprepared or uneasy when confronted with contentious issues or face opposition from parents, administrators, or community members (Von der Lippe, 2021).

The purpose of this literature review on controversial issues in the PSCD classroom was to provide a comprehensive overview of the current state of knowledge on controversial issues in the PSCD classroom and to identify potential areas for further research and practice improvement, specifically address the aim of the research.

A Safe Environment

Teaching controversial issues in PSCD lessons can be an effective educational tool, but teachers must handle these discussions with sensitivity and respect for their students' diverse experiences and feelings. Creating a safe and respectful environment for students to share their perspectives is vital to discuss controversial issues in the classroom. This can be difficult when dealing with emotionally charged or polarising topics, but teachers must establish ground rules and expectations for civil discourse. This may include encouraging

active listening, avoiding personal attacks, and acknowledging and validating various points of view (Hess & McAvoy, 2014; Pace, 2015).

In addition to encouraging respectful debate, teachers must be aware of their own values, biases, and standpoints and how they may influence classroom discussions. Teachers should strive to create an environment where all students feel heard and valued, regardless of their background or beliefs. This may entail being open to different points of view, recognising the impact of power dynamics in the classroom, and providing opportunities for students to share their stories and experiences with the topic (Gay, 2018; Hess & McAvoy, 2014; Milner, 2021).

It is the teacher's responsibility to create a safe, inclusive learning environment when teaching controversial issues. Teachers must be mindful of the potential impact on students who may have experienced trauma or discrimination due to these topics. This is especially important in discussing sexuality, religion, immigration, climate change, language, and gender equality. Teachers must approach these topics with sensitivity and respect while encouraging open dialogue and critical thinking among students. Additionally, teachers should consider incorporating diverse perspectives and resources to ensure a well-rounded understanding of the issue (Cole & Knowles, 2001).

Teachers should also consider collaborating with school counsellors and other mental health professionals to ensure they appropriately support students, especially when dealing with complex subjects (Cefai et al., 2015). The Department of Education in Malta emphasises the importance of protecting students' well-being in all aspects of their education, including emotional and psychological health, during PSCD lessons (Malta Ministry of Education and Employment, 2016).

Another strategy teachers can use to prepare students for potentially upsetting content is to provide trigger warnings before discussing sensitive topics. This practice can assist students in anticipating the discussion and, if necessary, arranging for them to leave the classroom or using coping mechanisms to manage their emotional responses (Cole & Knowles, 2001).

An additional approach for students who may feel uncomfortable participating in specific discussions is to provide alternative assignments or activities. This allows them to engage with the material while avoiding potentially triggering topics. Educators must create a safe and inclusive learning environment where all students feel comfortable expressing

themselves and participating in discussions for students to learn about the subject safely and comfortably, promoting an inclusive learning environment (Cole & Knowles, 2001).

Finally, discussing controversial issues in the classroom aims to help students develop critical thinking skills and engage in civil discourse with others, not to promote a particular viewpoint or agenda. Teachers can help students become informed and engaged citizens in a diverse and rapidly changing world by providing opportunities to explore complex issues and perspectives (Oulton et al., 2004).

Creating a safe and inclusive environment for such discussions allows students to share personal experiences and learn from one another. These discussions can help students build empathy for their peers from various backgrounds and convictions (Bickmore, 1999; Hess, 2009). Furthermore, students exposed to multiple viewpoints are better prepared to deal with complicated social and political challenges in their personal and professional lives (Hess & McAvoy, 2015).

Defining Contentious Issues

According to Kerr and Huddleston (2015), the term controversial issues refers to topics or things that elicit strong emotions in people and can lead to disagreements or splits in communities and society. These issues, related to politics, religion, culture, or social norms, frequently involve competing values, beliefs, and interests (Hand & Levinson, 2012). Controversial issues should be handled respectfully and constructively to foster understanding and dialogue among people with different points of view. Recognising that contentious issues can provide opportunities for growth and learning by challenging our assumptions and encouraging critical thinking is critical. We can broaden our understanding of complex issues and work towards common ground by engaging in respectful dialogue and seeking diverse perspectives (Hess & McAvoy, 2014; Zimmerman & Robertson, 2017).

Moreover, it is critical to note that these contentious issues can vary depending on where and when they are discussed. Crucifixes in schools, for example, may be a controversial issue in one country but an accepted part of life in another. Similarly, bilingual education, abortion, the legalisation of drugs, and Islamic headscarves may be contentious in some places but not in others. Almost any topic can become contentious, and new controversies emerge daily (Kerr & Huddleston, 2015).

Context and location, ranging from regional to global, influence contentious issues. Like any other place, Malta has its contentious issues. Abela et al. (2005) had talked about

changing values in Malta. Some issues, such as the political divide between the Nationalist and Labour parties, are deeply rooted in the country's history. Others, however, are more recent, such as immigration policies and abortion legalisation. Furthermore, as a Mediterranean island nation, Malta is dealing with 2008 environmental issues such as overfishing and preserving its unique marine ecosystems (Abela et al., 2005).

Stradling (1984) proposed a widely accepted definition of controversial issues, presenting them as issues that significantly divide society, resulting in competing interpretations and resolutions based on opposing worldviews. This viewpoint focuses on the political aspects of controversies.

Hand (2008) advocated for a more rigorous epistemic definition, distinguishing between issues perceived as controversial and those that should be recognised in an educational context. Hand (2008) agreed with Dearden's (1981) initial proposition that an issue is controversial if rational individuals can take opposing positions without defying logic. According to Hand (2008), evaluating these points of view necessitates an examination of the evidence and the strength of the arguments that support them.

Additionally, some authors have highlighted the distinction between contentious and sensitive issues as crucial (Byford et al., 2009; Gereluk, 2006; Pace, 2015). While contentious issues are those that involve a disagreement over facts or interpretations, sensitive issues are those that involve deeply held values and beliefs. This distinction can help us understand why some debates are more heated and challenging to resolve than others. According to Gereluk (2012), sensitive issues are those that have the potential to cause distress, anger, or offence. An issue, such as abortion, is a sensitive issue because it involves deeply held beliefs about the value of human life and a woman's right to control her own body (Kipsang, 2006; Siegel, 1992).

Similarly, debates around same-sex marriage can be sensitive because they involve deeply held values about love, family, and religious beliefs. It is essential to approach these sensitive issues with empathy and respect for different perspectives to have productive conversations and find common ground. A topic, such as terrorism or extremism, can be both controversial and sensitive simultaneously; however, it is possible for an issue to be both controversial and sensitive concurrently and vice versa (Clarke & Drudy, 2006; Giordmaina & Zammit, 2019; Oulton et al., 2004).

In education, discussing contentious issues is frequently regarded as the best teaching method for examining such matters in the classroom. This approach encourages critical thinking and helps students develop their opinions (Zimmerman & Robertson, 2017). For these reasons, educators must create a safe and respectful environment where all perspectives are valued and heard. However, because this idea has become so widely accepted, questions about why it is the preferred method and how to facilitate it best have received little attention (Parker, 2006). One explanation could be that many scholars approach the topic through the lens of democratic citizenship education (Gereluk, 2012).

In her, Hess (2002) explores several ideas, one of which is the notion that engaging in discourse on contentious subjects can be beneficial because it can help advance democratic discourse. Furthermore, it suggests that democratic citizenship education should focus on knowledge acquisition and promote critical thinking and active participation in democratic processes. This will ultimately lead to a more informed and engaged citizenry, which is essential for the health and sustainability of democracy.

PSCD in Malta

For over three decades, PSCD has been an integral part of the school curriculum in Malta. This subject stands out due to its origins, growth, ethos, design, structure, teaching approaches, methodologies, and how it is implemented, differentiating it from other academic subjects. Its primary goal is to equip students with the necessary skills, knowledge, and attitudes for effective participation and living within their communities. PSCD in Malta emphasises fostering positive values, including self-respect, respect for others, embracing diversity, self-awareness, critical thinking, and problem-solving abilities. A distinctive aspect of this subject is its use of the Experiential Learning Cycle (ELC), which focuses on processing experiences to enhance students' intrapersonal and interpersonal skills and their meta-cognitive awareness (Camilleri et al., 2012).

According to the PSCD syllabus's mission statement, "PSD aims at empowering students to develop skills, knowledge and attitudes which will enable them to live and participate fruitfully and effectively in their environment" (Abela et al., 2002, p. 2). This supports giving students the tools to realise their potential productively and constructively (Ministry of Education, Youth & Employment [MEYE], 2005). The fundamental principles and implementation of the subject are rooted in promoting universally acknowledged positive values and attitudes. These include self-respect, respect for others, embracing diversity,

cultivating self-awareness, and honing skills in critical thinking and problem-solving (Dewey, 1916). Despite this, the teaching methods employed in PSD in Malta encourage students to develop their value systems, highlighting a unique approach to education and personal development (Falzon & Muscat, 2009; Falzon et al., 2019).

The Significance of Contentious Topics in PSCD

The importance of discussing disputed problems in PSCD has long been recognised as assisting adolescents in developing critical thinking, empathy, and a sense of responsibility. As a result, society may become more tolerant and inclusive (Hess, 2015; Mirra & Morrell, 2011; Parker, 2003). Students can gain a greater awareness of other perspectives and learn how to interact effectively with those who hold opposing views by participating in debates about contentious topics. There are numerous advantages to engaging students in open and courteous discussions about sensitive issues (Hand & Levinson, 2012). These dialogues can build empathy and tolerance for different points of view and improve critical thinking abilities (Mirra & Morrell, 2011).

Addressing contentious topics in PSCD is widely recognised as a technique for training critical thinking, creating empathy, and promoting responsible citizenship among teenagers (Bickmore, 1999; Hess, 2009). As a result, dealing with these concerns sensitively and inclusively is the responsibility of teachers in preparing students to be well-rounded persons and knowledgeable citizens.

While highlighting the need to discuss contentious themes in education, Hess and McAvoy (2014) advised that such debates are crucial for building students' critical thinking, empathy, and responsible citizenship. Furthermore, these talks assist students in developing a more profound knowledge of complex societal issues and encourage them to engage in meaningful dialogue with people with opposing viewpoints. Students participating in these debates are better prepared to negotiate the world's complexities and become active, informed citizens (Hess & McAvoy, 2014).

PSD Pedagogy

PSD pedagogy is generally recognised by educators and scholars for its role in teaching critical thinking, empathy, and responsible citizenship (Falzon & Muscat, 2009; Schonert-Reichl et al., 2017). Furthermore, these dialogues assist students in developing critical thinking abilities and the capacity to analyse diverse points of view. This can lead to better problem-solving and decision-making skills in their personal and professional lives.

PSCD also helps students understand their values and ideas and the values and beliefs of others, which can lead to a great appreciation for diversity and tolerance in society (Greenberg et al., 2017).

PSCD prepares teenagers for active social involvement by promoting empathy, developing critical thinking abilities, and cultivating responsible citizenship. Participating in debates on essential matters exposes students to other points of view, encouraging them to think critically, analyse evidence, and assess arguments. These talks encourage students to generate informed perspectives, think about the ethical dimensions of complicated topics, and recognise the value of evidence-based decision-making. PSCD also strives to build empathy by assisting students in understanding and appreciating different points of view, promoting tolerance, and instilling a sense of social duty and justice (Bezzina & Camilleri, 2021; Falzon, 1999; Falzon et al., 2019; Malti & Noam, 2016; Mirra & Garcia, 2017; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004).

Yeager et al. (2014) emphasised the benefits of discussing contentious issues in the classroom. According to the study, such dialogues can help adolescents improve their critical thinking skills. Students learn to analyse material from many perspectives, evaluate evidence, and develop well-reasoned arguments through struggling with complicated and challenging subjects. This critical thinking approach aids in their intellectual development. Addressing contentious themes in the classroom can help adolescents develop intellectually and emotionally. Yeager et al. (2014) researched to explore these benefits. Their study concluded that students who engaged in discussions about controversial topics demonstrated improved critical thinking skills and were better equipped to navigate complex issues in the future. Furthermore, these students also reported feeling more confident expressing their opinions and engaging in constructive dialogue. These communication skills are critical for teenagers' intellectual and social development because they allow them to successfully explain their thoughts and engage in constructive dialogue.

Discussing contentious issues in the classroom might benefit adolescents' emotional growth. Yeager et al.'s (2014) study emphasised the role of controversial discussions in fostering a growth mindset and supporting adolescents' emotional well-being. Challenging themes like intellect and ability can challenge entrenched attitudes and encourage students to accept that their talents can be improved through hard work and learning. This growth

mindset has a positive impact on students' emotional resilience, motivation, and willingness to take intellectual risks (Bezzina et al., Camilleri et al., 2012; Elder, 2007)

Classroom discussions about complex topics benefit adolescents' cognitive and emotional development by promoting critical thinking skills, improving communication skills, and fostering a growth and learning mindset. Students who engage in these debates develop crucial intellectual and emotional resilience, preparing them for future academic success and personal development (Dweck, 2008; Kuhn, 1999).

PSCD, as an essential component of the whole educational landscape, plays a vital role in developing crucial abilities in students. These competencies include critical thinking, empathy, responsible citizenship, and appreciation for diversity, all of which are distinct but linked aspects of this specialised educational approach (Camilleri & Bezzina 2022; Cefai et al., 2018; Mayo, 2013; Sultana, 1992). These competencies enhance students' academic experiences and prepare them to manage the diverse and complex world outside the classroom (Elder, 2007; Hess, 2009).

Regarding critical thinking ability development, PSCD provides a solid basis for this crucial cognitive skill (Falzon et al., 2019). Elder (2007) argued that this instructional approach motivates students to engage in problem-solving activities that foster intellectual curiosity and self-direction. Students are driven to examine prevalent views, process information discerningly, draw informed deductions, and evaluate opposing viewpoints through these assignments. This results in an academic environment where critical thinking is common practice, allowing students to approach issues more thoroughly and analytically.

PSD pedagogy also fosters empathy, another critical competence. According to Hoffman (2008), the school setting is an optimal platform for promoting empathic reactions due to its structured and community-based environment. This is accomplished through exercises that emphasise perspective-taking and emotional awareness, allowing students to connect more deeply with the experiences and feelings of others. Last but not least, this contributes to greater understanding between different groups while lowering prejudice's prevalence.

PSCD becomes the foundation for developing responsible individuals when focusing on responsible citizenship. According to Westheimer and Kahne (2004), citizenship education can be divided into three types: personally accountable, participative, and justice-oriented. These examples demonstrate the critical function of PSCD in educating students

about their rights and obligations as citizens. Beyond that, PSCD encourages students to participate in active community service while motivating them to investigate and fight societal imbalances, instilling a sense of duty and justice (Falzon & Muscat, 2009; Falzon et al., 2019).

PSCD is critical for fostering diversity appreciation and creating inclusivity. Banks (2008) emphasised the transformative effect of PSCD in enabling students to recognise, appreciate, and respect cultural diversity. This approach encourages students to assess their cultural assumptions and biases and learn about critically and value diverse cultural practices and beliefs. This broadens their worldview and develops an environment of acceptance and mutual respect. PSCD is an all-encompassing approach to developing essential life skills and values. It raises a generation of academically competent, thoughtful, compassionate, responsible, and inclusive people, creating a more harmonious and equitable society.

Avoiding or Ignoring Controversial Topics in the PSCD Curriculum

The significance of incorporating complex topics into PSCD cannot be overstated. Ignoring these essential concerns can have negative consequences, hurting the breadth and intensity of students' learning experiences and overall development (Banks & Banks, 2009; Hess, 2009). These authors underlined the importance of incorporating contentious issues into intercultural education. They argued that avoiding these debates may hinder students' knowledge of diversity and critical societal issues, potentially encouraging an incomplete or inaccurate understanding of society's multifaceted nature and depriving them of a comprehensive and accurate worldview.

Hess (2016) emphasised the negative implications of ignoring sensitive topics in the classroom, demonstrating how this avoidance can impede students' critical thinking abilities, reduce civic consciousness, and limit their active engagement. Hess (2016) advocates for creating a safe and supportive learning environment where students can actively participate in open, respectful, and challenging conversations about complex and difficult themes.

Likewise, Kahne and Sporte's 2008 study emphasised the need to address contentious subjects to build engaged citizenship among students. It presents compelling evidence that engaging, rather than avoiding, such issues creates a more substantial commitment to civic involvement.

These research findings highlight the importance of direct involvement with contentious issues in educational contexts, particularly in PSCD (Banks & Banks, 2009; Hess, 2016; Kahne & Sporte, 2008). Educators can encourage the development of critical thinking, civic awareness, and active citizenship in students by cultivating a culture of robust debate and discussion around contentious issues.

PSCD is essential for developing crucial abilities such as critical thinking, empathy, and responsible citizenship (Hess, 2009). Encouraging students to debate contentious themes benefits their intellectual and emotional development. Neglecting these issues, on the other hand, may result in missed learning opportunities and hinder pupils' readiness for meaningful involvement in society. As a result, it is critical to address these concerns in a setting that encourages open discourse, mutual respect, and a dedication to understanding different points of view (Hess, 2009).

In the realm of politics, party affiliations can sometimes bring discomfort. The divisive nature of political ideologies may create tension in the classroom, requiring educators to navigate discussions carefully to ensure a respectful and inclusive environment for diverse perspectives (Azzopardi, 2008). Fostering open dialogue about political issues becomes crucial in cultivating civic awareness while acknowledging potential discomfort and promoting a constructive exchange of ideas (Kim & Kim, 2008). Understanding that party politics can evoke strong emotions, educators must foster an environment that values diverse opinions, encourages critical thinking, and maintains an atmosphere of respectful discourse (Darmanin, 1990). Addressing potential discomfort in political discussions is integral to nurturing an informed and engaged citizenry (Chadwick, 2021).

The PSCD Learning Outcomes

According to the Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education (DQSE), the Subject Learning Outcomes (SLOs) are crafted to foster educator flexibility, emphasising learner-centric teaching strategies. This encourages recognising diverse learner needs, catering to individual learning styles and promoting their progression. Europe's 2020 Education and Training policy underscores teachers' pivotal roles in steering students and moulding their perspectives. The PSCD curriculum champions this, empowering students through teachings on democracy, active citizenship, and communal significance. Furthermore, PSCD enhances student participation in school leadership, mirroring broader societal contexts. Its core aims encompass fostering a nurturing learning atmosphere,

boosting self-awareness, nurturing interpersonal relationships, and equipping students to navigate real-world challenges, including health and career decisions (DQSE, 2015; European Commission, 2015).

PSCD holistically develops learners, enhancing emotional comprehension, self-esteem, and confidence. It readies students for post-school life, emphasising informed choices, healthy living, and active citizenship. Malta's Education Ministry supports this through numerous policies addressing career guidance, sexuality education, and substance abuse prevention (DQSE, 2015).

PSCD teachings resonate with democratic and humanistic tenets, accentuating empowerment throughout learning phases. Central to this is the ELC, which emphasises holistic learning through experience, reflection, and planning. This approach, intrinsic to PSCD, entails smaller class sizes for maximum efficacy. The curriculum bifurcates into health & physical education and democracy education, addressing diverse topics to cultivate informed decision-making and human rights respect. Educators harness varied skills for optimal learning, including effective questioning and facilitating dialogues. SLOs guide educators towards dynamic, learner-focused strategies, stipulating clear objectives while granting latitude in their delivery, ensuring a tailored approach that meets each student's unique needs (DQSE, 2015).

Professionals' Opinions

Professional perceptions, such as those of educators, teachers, and school administrators, considerably impact how controversial matters are addressed in classrooms (Hess & McAvoy, 2015). These professionals are responsible for developing and implementing courses representing their ideas and values. Furthermore, their attitudes about contentious matters can influence how they approach classroom discussions and whether they encourage students to think critically about these problems. These professionals' attitudes, views, concerns, readiness, confidence, personal prejudices and political ideologies influence their approaches to problematic matters (Parker, 2003). Furthermore, studies conclude that teachers who are more open-minded and eager to tackle contentious topics have students who are more interested and driven in the classroom. On the other hand, teachers who avoid these topics or approach them with a closed-minded attitude may unintentionally hinder critical thinking and limit the range of

opinions in their classroom (Bickmore, 2014; Hess & McAvoy, 2014; Journell, 2011; Pace, 2015).

Educators must provide a secure and polite environment where all students feel comfortable sharing their views on contentious topics. Including multiple opinions and promoting respectful dialogue can help students develop vital communication and critical thinking skills. The attitudes and views of professionals define their willingness to debate contentious topics and establish a safe and inclusive learning environment for all pupils. Educators must understand their prejudices, be open to learning from their pupils, and serve as role models for respectful communication and active listening. Teachers may empower their pupils to think critically and become informed global citizens. Some professionals, for example, see these dialogues as opportunities for students to develop critical thinking skills, participate in democratic processes, and develop empathy. Certain professionals, however, may be hesitant to discuss contentious matters due to concerns about potential disputes, emotional reactions, or disruptions to the learning environment (Camilleri et al., 2012; Hess & McAvoy, 2015; Parker, 2003; Zimmerman & Robertson, 2020).

Furthermore, there are differing views on offering balanced perspectives, addressing power relations, and avoiding biased viewpoint promotion throughout these dialogues (Gay, 2018). Notwithstanding these obstacles, professionals must provide a secure and inclusive environment where all students can express themselves and engage in meaningful conversation. This is possible with careful planning, clear communication, and establishing ground rules for respectful dialogue (Ladson-Billings, 2014; Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012).

Teachers' readiness and comfort in navigating talks on controversial themes can substantially impact the effectiveness of these classroom encounters. Professional development and training influence this preparedness and confidence, with educators who have received training in leading talks on controversial themes being more likely to feel equipped. Furthermore, the teacher's ideas and biases can impact their ability to handle these debates fairly and impartially. Educators must be mindful of their preferences and endeavour to create a safe and inclusive environment where all children can express themselves. Additionally, pedagogical practices and a supportive classroom environment characterised by open expression, polite listening, and constructive discourse can boost teachers' confidence in dealing with contentious problems (Camilleri et al., 2012; Cefai, 2020; Hess & McAvoy, 2015; Parker, 2003; Zimmerman & Robertson, 2020).

Furthermore, professionals' prejudices and political views can influence their response to contentious topics (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Confirmation bias may unwittingly cause professionals to reinforce their opinions by selecting specific materials or phrasing interactions in a particular way. Different political perspectives among professionals can result in differing degrees of comfort in tackling specific contentious issues or in distinct debate emphases. These personal prejudices and ideological leanings can also impact their capacity to convey varied viewpoints and develop a balanced picture of contentious matters (Gay, 2018). Professionals must identify and actively reduce their prejudices to enable equal and inclusive discourse. This can be accomplished by self-reflection, seeking out different points of view, and continuing education and training in cultural competence. Understanding the intricate interactions of attitudes, beliefs, concerns, readiness, confidence, and personal biases helps drive the development of suitable assistance, training, and resources to facilitate practical dialogues and foster a prosperous, inclusive classroom environment (Hess & McAvoy, 2015).

As a result, professionals must be self-reflective, conscious of their prejudices, and committed to establishing a balanced, inclusive learning environment that promotes polite dialogue and critical thinking (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Furthermore, developing a diversified curriculum encompassing many perspectives and experiences can foster an inclusive learning environment. This can include incorporating literature, history, and other materials that reflect the student body's and society's diversity.

Understanding Teenagers' Perspectives

Assessing teenagers' impressions of problematic themes and their perspectives on which topics they believe should be discussed in the PSCD classroom. By diving into their viewpoints, we can gain insights into adolescents' cognition, interests, and preferences (Seixas, 2018). These data can then be used to design PSCD programmes that are more engaging and relevant to students. Furthermore, understanding teenagers' perceptions of contentious issues can assist educators in creating a safe and inclusive classroom climate in which all students feel comfortable expressing their perspectives and engaging in constructive conversation. The first step in this path of comprehension is to examine adolescents' knowledge and grasp of problematic issues. This reveals their readiness to discuss these topics and enlightens us on the many elements influencing their viewpoint. It

also helps us tailor our communication and education strategies to better meet their needs and preferences.

Developmental considerations include cultural and societal factors, personal experiences, and media exposure. It is critical to provide a safe and respected environment where teenagers can openly express their views and beliefs without fear of condemnation or scorn. Furthermore, it is crucial for adults to actively listen to and validate their ideas, even if they differ from our own. This can lead to more productive and meaningful talks by fostering mutual respect and understanding. Adolescents' cognitive and socio-emotional development substantially influences their ability to comprehend and critically examine contentious subjects (Lechner, et al., 2019; Steinberg, 2005). As a result, examining these developmental factors can shed light on practical teaching approaches and content selection. This can engage and challenge students positively. Including multiple perspectives and encouraging open-mindedness can also improve the learning experience and create empathy for different points of view (Marshall et al., 2021).

The sources from which adolescents obtain their information are also crucial in forming their understanding of contentious matters. We may comprehend the aspects that influence their ideas by evaluating these sources, which include media, peers, family, and formal education (Seixas, 2018). Furthermore, adolescents are not passive information consumers; they actively engage with and analyse the messages they hear. This underlines the importance of critical thinking skills and media literacy instruction in equipping students with the tools they need to comprehend complicated and frequently opposing ideas. Beyond cognition and awareness, various factors contribute to adolescents' interest in and participation in debates on contentious themes. Creating a safe and courteous environment where students feel comfortable expressing their thoughts without fear of condemnation or mockery is one such element (Uline et al., 2003).

Another critical component is allowing students to relate the topic to their own lives and experiences, making it more relevant and meaningful to them. Understanding these elements is vital to developing a PSCD curriculum that piques their interest while encouraging critical thinking abilities. The personal significance of these concerns is essential. Adolescents are frequently more interested in and passionate about things that reflect their lives, experiences, and social situations (Steinberg, 2005).

Peer influence is another powerful component. Adolescents' opinions about complex issues and their enthusiasm to engage in conversations about them significantly impact their attitudes towards complex topics. Their peers heavily influence their willingness to participate in discussions about them (Brown & Larson, 2009). The dynamics of peer interactions can significantly impact their desire to participate in debates and share their opinions.

When evaluating influences on adolescents' interest in discussing contentious topics, the involvement of teachers must be examined. They can substantially impact adolescent motivation and participation by using pedagogical tactics, creating a suitable classroom environment, and practising facilitation skills (Torney-Purta, 2002).

Incorporating the viewpoints of adolescents in curriculum design and decision-making processes develops a sense of ownership and participation in their education (Borg, & Mayo, 2001; Fielding, 2004). This method increases the relevance and efficacy of classroom information while encouraging critical thinking and open conversation among students and between students and teachers. Feedback obtained through surveys, interviews, or focus groups might reveal their preferences regarding contentious issues, for example, sex education or drug abuse prevention.

Furthermore, tackling contentious subjects with societal importance and a direct impact on teenagers' lives, such as climate change or racial injustice, provides insights into the issues they consider most important (Seixas, 2018). Furthermore, discussing contentious issues respectfully and openly helps foster empathy and understanding among students with varied experiences and opinions. This can assist educators in customising their teaching techniques and resources to engage pupils better and build critical thinking abilities. Through a safe and inclusive environment, where students feel comfortable expressing their opinions and challenging their beliefs is essential to promoting critical thinking and empathy towards others, we can ensure that PSCD classroom discussions are exciting and informative if we have a thorough understanding of the viewpoints of adolescents, ultimately leading to a more informed and socially responsible generation.

Lastly, when customising the content for PSCD classroom discussions, the preferences and suggestions of adolescents regarding specific controversial topics hold immense importance. Consequently, educators should contemplate conducting polls or focus groups to solicit their students' feedback, ensuring the chosen topics are pertinent

and captivating. Moreover, educators need to foster a secure and respectful atmosphere where all students feel at ease expressing their opinions and thoughts regardless of their backgrounds or beliefs.

Locally, there is little research on the unity between local ELCs and teachers' contentious points. However, educational institutions must conduct their research or collaborate with external organisations to bridge this gap and ensure that the curriculum aligns with current research findings. Additionally, seeking input from teachers with expertise in the subject matter can provide valuable insights into potential areas of contention and help inform curriculum development. Skinner et al. (2009) examined the attitudes and perceptions of youth towards abortion. The findings revealed a significant knowledge gap among young individuals regarding the topic, with many holding misconceptions and lacking accurate information. This highlights the importance of incorporating comprehensive and evidence-based education on abortion within the curriculum to address these gaps and promote informed decision-making. Furthermore, the study also found that the lack of accurate information on specific controversial topics can contribute to stigmatisation and judgement towards individuals who have undergone the procedure. This emphasises the need for open and non-judgmental discussions about abortion to foster a supportive and understanding environment for young people (Mercier & Sperber, 2011; Meneses, 2021; Vella, 2020).

Additionally, it is essential to consider recent research that explicitly addresses the concrete factors influencing youth, such as abortion, parents, money, and politics (Vella, 2020). Exploring the existing literature on these topics can offer valuable insights into understanding young individuals' specific challenges and experiences. By engaging in open and non-judgmental discussions about CI, we can help young people navigate the complexities of these topics and provide them with the necessary support and resources they may need. Moreover, incorporating the perspectives of young individuals themselves in these discussions can further enhance our understanding of their unique needs and empower them to make informed decisions regarding their reproductive health. By incorporating this research into curriculum development, educators can ensure the material is relevant and reflects real-world issues affecting youth today (Alismail & McGuire, 2015).

Challenges When Discussing Controversial Issues

When tackling controversial issues, it is crucial to consider various perspectives and avoid making assumptions. Maintaining an open-minded and respectful attitude towards those with differing views is equally important. Additionally, garnering information from reliable sources and participating in constructive discourse rather than resorting to personal attacks or dismissive behaviour is essential (Lusk & Weinberg, 1994).

The intricate complexities and critical considerations inherent to discussing controversial issues among adolescents should be noticed (Steinberg, 2005). Creating a secure and inclusive environment where everyone's voices are acknowledged and respected is vital, recognising the diverse backgrounds and experiences that mould individual perspectives (Banks & Banks, 2009; Poulou 2017). Moreover, approaching these discussions with empathy and a readiness to learn from others, rather than solely attempting to prove one's point, is essential (Dewey, 1996; Rogers, 1995). This perspective highlights several key aspects: the significant role of ethical considerations, the delicate balance between promoting intellectual freedom and sustaining respectful communication, and the skilled management of potential disagreements, emotional reactions, and power dynamics that might surface during these dialogues (Hess, 2016).

In broaching contentious issues with adolescents, ethical considerations claim a central place. At its core is the recognition and respect of adolescents' autonomy. This requires ensuring their informed consent and voluntary participation in such discussions. To uphold this principle, educators must provide detailed, transparent, and comprehensive information about the dialogues' aim, content, and potential emotional consequences. This empowers students to gauge and decide the degree of their involvement, thereby respecting their autonomy and reinforcing their decision-making capabilities (Biesta, 2011).

Another crucial aspect is protecting and safeguarding vulnerable individuals during these discussions. This task requires educators to be vigilant about potential emotional discomfort or harm that specific topics may induce and to respond by offering suitable support mechanisms and resources as needed (Smith, 2012). Running parallel to this is the requirement to foster cultural sensitivity and inclusivity. Educators must acknowledge and respect their classrooms' diverse cultural backgrounds, values, and beliefs, establishing a secure and inclusive environment conducive to fruitful dialogue (Banks, 2013).

Striking a careful balance between intellectual freedom and respectful discourse in the classroom is central to successfully orchestrating these dialogues. Cultivating an environment that encourages the exploration of diverse viewpoints catalyses academic freedom and critical thinking, essential components for robust classroom discussions (Nussbaum, 2010). In conjunction, educators should establish a set of clearly articulated ground rules to facilitate respectful dialogue. These rules may include active listening, abstaining from personal attacks, and valuing diverse perspectives (Arao & Clemens, 2013). Furthermore, educators can enhance students' ability to navigate conflicting viewpoints and build empathy by guiding them to question and challenge ideas respectfully, seek clarification, and identify areas of consensus (Hess, 2009).

Possible Conflict, Emotions, and Power Dynamics

It is crucial to cultivate a classroom climate that fosters emotional safety and trust when dealing with contentious issues (Cohen, 2006). Giving students the chance to express their feelings, concerns, and points of view in a welcoming, understanding, and non-judgmental environment will help achieve this. Equally important is recognising and addressing power dynamics within the classroom to promote equitable participation in these discussions (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Additionally, educators should be prepared to offer emotional support when necessary, providing resources for deeper introspection, access to counselling services, or additional learning opportunities. These resources aid students in processing emotional reactions, navigating contentious dialogues more effectively, and fostering resilience in challenging discussions (Jagers et al., 2019).

Challenges addressing Controversial Issues in the Classroom

Controversial issues can be challenging to teach because they may evoke strong emotional reactions from students, leading to discomfort or conflict in the classroom. Additionally, teachers may feel unprepared or uncertain about navigating these topics respectfully and inclusively from all perspectives. The apprehension surrounding contentious matters frequently deters people from engaging in discussions that may be perceived as controversial. As a result, they often gravitate towards those who share similar viewpoints. This tendency can give rise to the echo chamber phenomenon, in which individuals are predominantly exposed to and reinforce their own beliefs without encountering a variety of perspectives and ideas. To foster intellectual growth and understanding, it is essential to participate in respectful and open-minded conversations,

even if they might provoke discomfort or require confronting challenging views (Journell, 2017).

In the context of Malta, a small island nation with a rich history and diverse cultural influences, it is especially important to promote dialogue and understanding among its population. For instance, debates surrounding the balance between modern development and the preservation of historical sites, as well as discussions on issues like immigration, can benefit from including diverse perspectives. By actively seeking out and engaging with differing opinions, residents of Malta can work towards a more informed and cohesive society (Darmanin, 2020; Ho et al., 2014; Tribukait, 2021).

Debated topics frequently involve significant conflicts of values and interests and disagreements over fundamental facts. These issues are intricate and multifaceted, lacking straightforward solutions. They evoke powerful emotions and often contribute to or exacerbate individual divisions, fostering distrust and suspicion (Kerr & Huddleston, 2015).

Introducing such contentious topics into the school curriculum presents numerous educational challenges, such as safeguarding the cultural and personal sensitivities of diverse students, mitigating tension within the classroom, and presenting disputed material in a balanced manner to avoid accusations of bias. Moreover, it prompts discussions about academic freedom and the influence of a teacher's personal beliefs and values on their teaching approach (Kerr & Huddleston, 2015).

For school administrators and decision-makers, addressing these controversial topics entails considering various policy-related questions, such as how to support educators in teaching these subjects effectively, how to encourage open dialogue within the school community by incorporating democratic school governance methods, fostering a positive and supportive school atmosphere, monitoring the overall quality of educational offerings, and addressing the concerns of parents and external stakeholders (Kerr & Huddleston, 2015).

Addressing controversial issues in Malta's school curriculum fosters critical thinking and promotes a respectful, inclusive learning environment. Schools and educators should consider cultural, religious, and historical contexts while encouraging open dialogue and supporting teachers in navigating these complex subjects. There is value in engaging in civil discussions of a controversial nature among people with differing opinions. Through respectful and open-minded discussions, individuals can better understand different

perspectives and develop empathy for others (Haidt, 2008; Kerr & Huddleston, 2015; Nagda, 2006).

How to Approach Controversial Issues

Saetra (2021) sought to contribute to research that encourages learning and practising active citizenship by investigating the factors that enable practical discussions of controversial issues. However, as noted above, defining controversial topics is debatable. Stradling (1984) offered a widely accepted definition, stating that controversial issues profoundly divide society and produce conflicting explanations and solutions based on different worldviews. This is known as the political criterion. In contrast, Hand (2008) proposed a stricter epistemic definition, initially suggested by Dearden (1981), which defines an issue as controversial if opposing views can be held without being contrary to reason. This criterion calls for evaluating ideas based on supporting evidence or arguments.

Furthermore, some authors emphasise the distinction between controversial and sensitive issues, which can easily provoke distress, anger, or offence (Gereluk, 2012). While some issues can be controversial and sensitive, others may only fit one of these categories.

In pedagogy, discourse is frequently deemed the optimal approach for grappling with contentious subjects within the academic environment. Yet, there needs to be more exploration into the underlying rationale for its preference and the most productive techniques for its implementation. This could be partially attributed to scholars typically approaching the issue from a democratic citizenship education perspective, underscoring the critical role of discussing controversial topics in fostering democratic deliberation (Hand & Levinson, 2012).

Bridges (1979) proposed three necessary and sufficient conditions for an activity to qualify as a discussion: (1) presenting multiple views on a subject, (2) being open to examining and responding to various perspectives, and (3) intending to develop knowledge, understanding, and judgements on the topic under discussion. This definition is suitable for two reasons: it distinguishes teaching through discussions from other teaching methods and is flexible enough to encompass the diverse forms of discussions that can take place in a classroom.

Strategies and Approaches for Facilitating Controversial Discussions

Facilitating controversial discussions effectively within the classroom necessitates an intricate melding of skilled teaching strategies, creating a secure and inclusive learning

environment, and the comprehensive incorporation of multifaceted perspectives, a range of sources, and critical media literacy (Nash et al., 1999). Below, we delve deeper into each of these essential elements:

Proficient Teaching Methodologies and Pedagogical Approaches

To effectively navigate the challenging waters of controversial discussions in educational settings, educators must leverage a blend of adept teaching methodologies and thoughtful pedagogical approaches. This involves not only a deep understanding of the subject matter but also a keen awareness of the dynamics within the classroom. The strategies employed need to be carefully tailored to foster an atmosphere of respect, critical thinking, and open dialogue. These methodologies are not just about imparting knowledge; they are about guiding students through the complexities of diverse viewpoints, encouraging them to critically analyse information, and helping them build their own informed opinions. In the following sections, we explore the key aspects of proficient teaching methodologies and pedagogical approaches that can effectively facilitate controversial discussions in a classroom setting.

Inquiry-based learning. Inquiry-based learning, as a teaching strategy, prompts active exploration, kindles critical thinking, and guides students towards the formulation of evidence-based arguments (Savery, 2006). It comprises posing thought-provoking questions, promoting extensive research, and directing student-led discussions where learners can assertively express their findings and viewpoints (Soysal, 2022).

Socratic questioning. The application of Socratic questioning is instrumental in fueling critical thinking and fostering profound understanding (Paul & Elder, 2007). This pedagogical tool involves the teacher posing incisive questions designed to challenge preconceived assumptions, facilitate introspective reflection, and stimulate a dialogue that advances the discussion into deeper cognitive layers (Ben Maad, 2020).

Role-playing and simulations. Role-playing exercises and simulations facilitate students' probes into differing viewpoints, fostering empathy towards an array of outlooks (Tiedens & Linton, 2001). This pedagogical strategy encourages perspective-taking, promotes critical analysis, and aids in the comprehensive understanding of complex social issues by providing learners with a first-hand experience of different roles and scenarios (Bezzina, 2022; Cefai et al., 2018; Rios et al., 2003).

A safe and Inclusive Classroom Atmosphere

As mentioned above, creating an inclusive, respectful, and empathetic classroom environment is paramount in the contemporary educational landscape. Educators must employ multifaceted strategies to achieve this harmonious atmosphere that shapes classroom interactions and student relationships. Three pivotal approaches—establishing explicit behavioural norms emphasising the significance of student voices and cultivating trust and empathy—are foundational to developing a classroom that facilitates effective learning and nurtures students' socio-emotional growth. The subsequent discussion delves into these strategies, highlighting their value and implementation in the educational setting (Schaps et al.; Fielding, 2004).

Establishing classroom norms and ground rules for respectful dialogue in collaboration with students can define behavioural expectations and lay the foundation for a safe and respectful learning environment (Woolfolk et al., 2018). These rules can encompass active listening, using I statements to express personal viewpoints and feelings, and demonstrating respect for diverse perspectives.

Actively involving students in decision-making and genuinely valuing their contributions empowers them and fosters a sense of ownership and personal responsibility for the classroom community (Fielding, 2004). Encouraging students to vocalise their perspectives, share personal experiences, and articulate concerns helps cultivate an inclusive classroom culture.

Trust and empathy among students are paramount in building a supportive classroom community (Schaps, Battistich, & Solomon, 2004). Facilitating team-building activities, advocating for active listening skills, and providing opportunities for students to share personal stories and experiences can foster empathy, mutual respect, and understanding among learners.

Integrating Diverse Perspectives, Sources, and Critical Media Literacy

In educational contexts, navigating the complex terrain of controversial topics is a nuanced and multifaceted endeavour. Educators confront the dual challenges of fostering critical media literacy and ensuring the inclusion of diverse perspectives as the wave of digitisation sweeps across the landscape of information dissemination. Today's students are inundated with information, including media narratives, scholarly expositions, and personal accounts. To instil a comprehensive comprehension, it is essential to guide students through

the labyrinth of biases, contexts, and digital complexities while emphasising any discourse's inherent historicity and reflexivity.

Educators can elucidate the myriad facets of controversial issues through a synergy of pedagogical methodologies, ranging from structured classroom discussions to incorporating guest speakers and media analysis. The overarching objective is not merely acquiring knowledge but cultivating an atmosphere that encourages deliberate, critical, and respectful engagement (Banks, 2004; Bridges, 1979; Buckingham, 2013; Hand & Levinson, 2012; Hess, 2009).

Encouraging students to critically examine various information sources, including media outlets, scholarly articles, and first-hand accounts, can amplify their media literacy skills and foster a well-rounded understanding of controversial subjects (Buckingham, 2013).

Inviting guest speakers from diverse backgrounds, such as subject-matter experts, community members, and individuals directly affected by the issues under discussion, can provide authentic and unique perspectives that enrich the classroom dialogue (Keown et al., 2005).

Guiding students towards critically appraising biases and the contextual factors that shape different perspectives can enhance their understanding of the intricate nature of controversial issues (Brave et al., 2022; Hess, 2009). Fostering reflection on personal biases and promoting nuanced comprehension of the complexities involved nurtures critical thinking skills, a critical competency in today's information-saturated society.

The digital and information revolutions have made it even more critical to help students discern the various forms of bias and assess sources' reliability (Goldberg & Savenije, 2018). Educators should guide students in discerning the credibility of digital content and understanding the role of algorithms and filter bubbles in shaping online experiences (Attard & Cremona, 2022; Borg & Lauri, 2009). This involves exploring the political, economic, and social factors influencing media production and consumption (Brave et al., 2022).

Teaching students to consider historical context is another essential aspect of discussing controversial issues. Perspective, bias, and power dynamics all play a role in the ongoing conversation that is history (López-González et al., 2023). This recognition helps students understand that present controversies are connected to historical events and

discourses. It encourages them to explore how different historical narratives can shape our understanding of contemporary issues (Goldberg & Savenije, 2018).

Furthermore, educators should encourage reflexivity – reflecting on our thoughts, feelings, and biases – in the context of controversial discussions. This involves cultivating an awareness of how one's experiences, identities, and preferences shape how one understands and engages with controversial issues (López-González et al., 2023). Reflexivity encourages empathy, humility, and openness to other perspectives (Blasco, 2012).

Addressing controversial discussions in the classroom necessitates a dynamic fusion of pedagogical acumen, cultivating a respectful and inclusive learning environment, and thoughtful integration of diverse perspectives and critical media literacy. The ultimate goal is not to achieve consensus or indoctrinate specific viewpoints but to foster a learning environment where students feel empowered to engage with complex issues critically, thoughtfully, and respectfully (López-González et al., 2023).

Facilitating controversial discussions in the classroom demands using refined teaching methods, creating a secure and inclusive environment, and incorporating various perspectives, diverse sources, and critical media literacy (Bickmore & Parker, 2014). We can engage students effectively through a balanced mix of inquiry-based learning, Socratic questioning, and role-playing or simulations (Worthington, 2018). Additionally, the classroom environment is crucial to supporting respectful and meaningful dialogue (Jones, 2022). Finally, presenting students with various sources, fostering critical analysis of these sources, and stimulating reflection on bias and context significantly contribute to their understanding of controversial issues (McClune & Jarman, 2012). These strategies and approaches help students navigate complex discussions and equip them with essential critical thinking skills for their future roles as active and responsible members of society (Wineburg, 2001).

Best Pedagogy?

Bridges (1979) identified three essential conditions for an activity to qualify as a discussion within an educational setting: First, participants must present and explore multiple viewpoints on a subject. Second, there should be a genuine openness to and engagement with these differing perspectives. Third, the primary goal must be to enhance knowledge, understanding, and judgment about the discussed topic. This framework not only differentiates discussion-based teaching from other instructional methods but also

accommodates various forms of discussions in the classroom. Bridges emphasized the importance of receptiveness and the willingness to learn from each other, as highlighted by Hand & Levinson (2012), advocating for a move beyond merely repeating entrenched views.

Participants in oral group discussions must share a set of moral dispositions or principles that include reasonableness, peaceability, orderliness, truthfulness, freedom, equality, and respect for persons. This suggests that the quality of discussion in classrooms depends partly on students' acquisition of these virtues and that learning to participate in discussions can aid in their development (Hand & Levinson, 2012).

When it comes to teaching controversial issues, discussion is the preferred method due to two main reasons. Firstly, discussions help to create an appreciative understanding of different positions in controversy and empathy with those who hold them. It is difficult to convey a sense of passion, sincerity, and plausibility of rival views through instructional or expository means. Secondly, discussions involving classmates' deeply held commitments and affiliations make ideas more tangible and relevant (Hand & Levinson, 2012). As Brookfield and Preskill (2012) noted, ideas that may seem distant or abstract in a lecture come alive when explored through speech, and interpretations that may be skipped outside the classroom cannot be dismissed when a colleague proposes them.

The PSCD pedagogy provides a holistic approach to education that equips students with the skills, knowledge, and attitudes necessary to understand and navigate the complexities of the world around them. By focusing on personal and social development, the pedagogy enables students to engage in deep, meaningful discussions about controversial issues (DQSE, 2015).

The PSD approach places significant emphasis on the creation of a secure and respectful setting wherein students are able to openly articulate their viewpoints without experiencing any kind of retaliation or ridicule. This organisation ensures that in conversations that may provoke controversy, all perspectives are given an opportunity to be expressed, thus promoting the development of comprehension and empathy. The foundation of this ethos is based on empirical research that demonstrates the advantages of creating such a conducive atmosphere (DQSE, 2015; Bezzina et al., 2015; Falzon, & Muscat, 2008).

In addition, the PSD methodology fosters the development of critical thinking abilities, allowing students to assess several viewpoints, identify potential biases, and make

well-informed judgements. As individuals engage with controversial subjects, they possess the necessary skills to analyse the available information in a critical manner and construct conclusions that are based on sound reasoning. Furthermore, through engaging in structured activities and discussions, students develop the capacity for empathy and comprehension, fostering a sense of respect and value for diverse perspectives.

This ability becomes particularly crucial when dealing with delicate topics. In order to optimise the process of acquiring knowledge, the pedagogy of Problem-Based Learning, Self-Directed Learning, and Cooperative Learning emphasises the importance of engaging in active involvement. Therefore, students are encouraged to thoroughly explore disputes, participate in role-playing exercises, and engage in a wide range of activities that expose them to a variety of perspectives (Leary et al., 2019; Loyens et al., 2008).

The PSD approach places significant importance on considering both global and local circumstances as a fundamental element. In the context of Malta, a nation characterised by a diverse historical background, cultural heritage, and distinct sociological complexities, it is crucial for students to compare and contrast global concerns with their local surroundings and vice versa (Fenech & Seguna, 2020; Hay et al., 2013).

The incorporation of an ethical framework is an integral component of the holistic education provided by PSCD. Equipped with a strong ethical framework, students possess the ability to navigate contentious domains while demonstrating respect, honesty, and a comprehensive understanding of diverse viewpoints. Ultimately, the field of PSCD advocates for a comprehensive perspective that emphasises the interrelated nature of contentious matters and their impact on all facets of human life, encompassing individual encounters as well as wider societal consequences. According to DQSE (2015), an all-encompassing lens facilitates the development of a well-rounded comprehension among students about complex issues.

Current Controversial Issues In Malta

PSCD in Malta is a dynamic, multi-faceted depiction of the numerous points of view and views on a wide variety of controversial problems that exist throughout social sectors. This section explores current controversial issues in the local context. These include Sexuality and LGBTQ+ Rights, Abortion, Role of Religion in Public Schools, Immigration, Integration, and Asylum, Corruption and Governance, Freedom of Speech and Press Freedom, Gender Equality and Stereotypes.

Sexuality and LGBTQ+¹ rights are especially relevant, given Malta's remarkable development in this area and the ongoing divide in societal ideas. The variety of opinions extends from fighting for equal rights to conservative views that are typically founded on religious or cultural convictions (Camilleri et al., 2012).

Another controversial subject is abortion, which has traditionally provoked fierce debate in Malta. Given the country's severe abortion laws, discussions regarding decriminalisation or liberalisation attract a broad spectrum of reactions. Women's reproductive rights and safe healthcare advocates frequently confront opposition based on moral ideals and the sanctity of life (Harwood, 2023). Another source of disagreement is the role of religion in public schools. Malta, a mostly Catholic country, has concerns regarding religious symbols and prayers in schools, as well as whether religion should be taught in schools. The discussion swings back and forth between those who argue for a more secular approach that encourages inclusivity and diversity and others who underline the need to conserve religious traditions and values (Gellel & Buchanan, 2011).

With its strategic location as a Mediterranean gateway to Europe, Malta is beset with issues relating to immigration, integration, and asylum, all of which stir fierce debate. Some advocate for humanitarian inclusion, while others are worried about resource depletion and cultural identity (DeBono, 2013). Corruption and governance have long been issues in Malta, provoking discussion about the effectiveness of government, the accountability of public officials, and the efficiency of anti-corruption initiatives. Opponents advocate for greater transparency and higher ethical standards, while others downplay the extent of the problem and the need to find remedies (Pirotta, 2012).

Freedom of speech and press freedom have provoked heated disputes, notably in the aftermath of the 2017 assassination of journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia, concerning media independence, journalist protection, and press reform. Concerns over irresponsible reporting are accompanied by requests for enhanced legislative protections for free expression and independent media (Sammut, 2019).

Finally, gender equality and stereotypes, as well as representation, the gender wage gap, and cultural expectations are commonly emphasised in PSCD seminars. More

¹ Kindly refer list of abbreviations on p. 9

traditional perceptions towards gender roles persist even when campaigners push for equal opportunities and rights (Micallef, 2007).

Party Politics

In Malta's vibrant political scene, the influence of party politics notably intersects with the controversial topics discussed in PSCD classrooms. The major political forces, namely the Nationalist Party (PN) and the Labour Party (PL), offer distinct perspectives on critical issues such as LGBTQ+ rights, abortion, and immigration policies. These stances are not just reflective of their ideological roots but also resonate within broader societal debates. For instance, the Labour Party's progressive outlook on LGBTQ+ rights contrasts with the Nationalist Party's more conservative views on abortion and the role of religion in public life (Cini, 2002).

This political diversity is further enriched by smaller parties and independent voices, adding complexity to discussions on corruption, governance, and media freedom, particularly highlighted following the assassination of journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia. Such events underscore the urgency for reform and transparency in governance, echoing in the political rhetoric (Sammut, 2019).

In the context of PSCD classes, these diverse political viewpoints offer a rich backdrop for student discussions. While the curriculum aims for impartiality and encourages critical thinking, the prevailing political climate inevitably influences classroom debates. Topics such as immigration and national identity, which are highly pertinent to Malta, often reflect the prevailing political sentiments. This interplay between party politics and social issues provides a practical framework for students to examine the multifaceted nature of these topics, enhancing their understanding of Malta's unique political and social landscape (Sultana, 1992).

Conclusively, the intertwining of party politics and controversial social issues in Malta is pivotal in shaping the discourse within PSCD classrooms. It not only offers students a real-world context to explore these issues but also equips them with the critical skills necessary to appreciate diverse perspectives (Chircop, 2018). Such an understanding is essential for nurturing informed, engaged citizens capable of contributing thoughtfully to democratic processes and societal development.

Rather than encouraging students to certain points of view, PSD pedagogy aims to foster tolerance, respect, and understanding of a wide range of viewpoints. PSD pedagogy

fosters critical thinking abilities in kids, increases comprehension of opposing viewpoints, and promotes informed decision-making. Furthermore, these arguments are placed in a worldwide context, helping students to recognise the global resonance of local problems, thus increasing their knowledge of global socio-political processes (Camilleri et al., 2012). By engaging in these often-heated debates, students may hone their critical thinking skills, develop empathy, and make informed decisions. These arguments help students grow as individuals while also preparing them for future obligations as informed, responsible citizens (Camilleri et al., 2012).

PSCD classes are meant to equip students to deal with the complexities and challenges that exist in today's environment, both locally and globally. Students can get a nuanced understanding of local issues and their global implications through these in-depth conversations, which span from LGBTQ+ rights to gender equality, environmental preservation, and migration (Camilleri et al., 2012). PSCD classes in Malta serve a greater purpose than just debating controversial topics. They provide an environment in which students are given the intellectual skills they need to critically explore and navigate today's diverse challenges. The ultimate goal is to instil in children a sense of tolerance, respect, and understanding, developing them into informed, responsible, and compassionate global citizens.

Conclusion

PSCD in Malta plays a crucial role in shaping the future generation by equipping them with the necessary tools to tackle complex issues and promote positive change. By fostering tolerance and empathy, these lessons contribute to the development of a more inclusive and sustainable society. It is through such education that we can hope to create a better world for generations to come. By encouraging critical thinking and problem-solving skills, PSCD classes empower students to actively engage in addressing social and environmental challenges. Furthermore, the emphasis on ethical decision-making helps students develop a strong moral compass, ensuring that they make responsible choices in their personal and professional lives. Ultimately, PSCD classes pave the way for a brighter future where individuals are equipped with the knowledge and values needed to create a more just and equitable society. In Malta, the significance of these classes is further amplified due to the country's rich cultural diversity and history.

The inclusive nature of PSD pedagogy allows students to explore and discuss controversial issues in a safe and respectful environment, encouraging critical thinking and open-mindedness. This approach not only prepares them to navigate complex societal challenges but also cultivates a sense of global citizenship, making Malta a shining example of progressive education. Suppose students are provided with opportunities to engage in meaningful discussions and debates. By incorporating controversial topics into the curriculum, students can develop a deeper understanding of different perspectives and learn how to articulate their own opinions respectfully. This not only enhances their critical thinking skills but also fosters empathy and tolerance, equipping them with the necessary tools to thrive in a diverse and interconnected world.

Chapter 3: Methodology

The methodology chapter is pivotal in research projects, elucidating the methods and techniques employed for data collection and analysis. This chapter presents a comprehensive and precise account of the research design, data collection methods, sampling strategy, and data analysis techniques. It is imperative to ensure the methodological approach is robust and suitable for addressing the research question. Furthermore, it is essential to acknowledge and address any limitations or potential biases within the methodology. This thorough examination of limitations and biases is crucial for maintaining the validity and reliability of the research findings.

The Research Questions and Main Aims

When it comes to discussions in the PSCD classroom, even the most well-run classroom may sometimes encounter complex issues. This is especially true when discussing themes that might be controversial. This research intended to explore how educators deal with such difficult circumstances in the secondary school classroom, both predictably and unexpectedly. The research questions for this study were:

- 1) What do adolescents see as controversial issues that should be discussed in the PSCD classroom?
- 2) How do professionals perceive controversial issues adolescents bring to the PSCD classroom?

The questions were fundamental to this research study because they explored how well teachers are prepared to deal with such issues, which inevitably arise during their teaching careers. Furthermore, this study was particularly interesting to me since, surprisingly, there is very little local research dealing with controversial issues in the PSCD classroom. Locally, Camilleri and Bezzina's (2021) study was the closest to dealing with contentious topics in PSCD classrooms.

Epistemology

Epistemology, at its core, explores how we acquire and understand knowledge (Burr, 2003). This field challenges us to examine how we perceive our surroundings. While some scholars posit that an external reality shapes our understanding (Weber, 2004), my study leans towards an interpretive stance, which prioritises the subjective experiences and meanings individuals assign to their realities. To truly grasp Professionals' perspectives in

secondary settings, I believed it was crucial to focus on their daily interactions and narratives. Often, broader studies overlook the deep, intricate stories of those actively involved in educational settings. To bring these voices to the forefront and capture genuine moments and perspectives, I opted for a qualitative approach (Fossey et al., 2002). Selecting the most fitting research method often requires careful consideration (Griffiths, 1998), and in my quest to amplify the voices of PSCD educators, this methodology was paramount.

Choosing the Research Methodology

As presented in Chapter 1, throughout my research, I gravitated towards the interpretative framework, distinguishing my approach from the more conventional positivist paradigm (Mack, 2010). This perspective, rooted in Hermeneutic philosophies, illuminates the intricate human narratives within mixed-gender educational settings, particularly when addressing controversial topics in the PSCD classroom (Cohen, 2007). It deepened my engagement with educators, revealing the intricate ways societal contexts influence their experiences.

My primary objective was to explore educators' strategies for handling controversial issues. Recognising the depth and nuance required for such an exploration, I opted for a qualitative approach. This method is uniquely positioned to grasp teachers' attitudes, beliefs, and perspectives on contentious subjects. To gather detailed and sensitive insights, I conducted individual semi-structured audio-recorded interviews with six participants.

The qualitative approach fostered a space of trust and rapport between participants and me. This trust was crucial in ensuring the authenticity and accuracy of the data collected (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). My focus was on truly understanding educators' lived experiences rather than just statistical analysis. This approach prioritised genuine, heartfelt interactions (Brown, 2017; Griffiths, 1998), capturing moments of revelation that more quantitative methods might overlook (Browne, 2015; Wellington, 2006).

In essence, my goal to deeply understand educators' strategies in the PSCD classroom when navigating controversial topics naturally led me to choose semi-structured interviews as my primary research tool.

Strengths, Limitations and Challenges

Qualitative research holds numerous strengths. Its emphasis on a comprehensive, in-depth understanding of phenomena, opinions, or behaviour distinguishes it as a practical research approach. This depth enables the discovery of the what, where, and when of

decision-making, but more importantly, it uncovers the how and why (Cropley, 2019). Beyond this, qualitative research thrives on context. It can extract data about the human side of an issue - offering a more nuanced view of people's emotions, behaviours, and experiences within their natural environment (Bryman, 2012). Furthermore, the design of qualitative research displays inherent flexibility. This adaptability enables researchers to delve into unforeseen areas of interest that surface during the study, thus enriching the quality of the research (Maxwell, 2012).

One of the most notable challenges in qualitative research involves the significant time and resources required. Transcription, data analysis, and interpretation can be resource-intensive and time-consuming (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007). Another inherent limitation is the potential of not addressing subjectivity in the data analysis and interpretation phases. The researchers' personal standpoints and viewpoints can inadvertently influence the research findings (Maxwell, 2005). Some consider that the context-specific nature of qualitative research findings can limit their generalizability; however, this is the very nature of qualitative research. The data are specific to particular contexts and participants it may not apply to the broader population (Bryman, 2012).

Beyond these strengths and limitations, employing a qualitative study also presents unique challenges. For instance, achieving data saturation can be complex. Determining when new data no longer bring fresh insights (Fusch & Ness, 2015) can be challenging. Additionally, conducting qualitative research requires a specific set of skills and training. Researchers must develop rapport with participants, implement effective questioning techniques, and master data analysis and interpretation methods (Patton, 2002). Lastly, ethical issues can pose challenges in qualitative research. Researchers must grapple with issues such as maintaining confidentiality, securing informed consent, and managing sensitive issues that may arise during the research process (Orb, Eisenhauer, & Wynaden, 2001). These are all crucial considerations when embarking on a qualitative study.

The Research Design

The foundation of any robust research lies in the meticulous design of its methodology. In this study, the chosen avenue for data collection is the semi-structured interview, a methodology highly regarded in the social sciences for its versatility and depth. This approach is particularly suited to exploring the nuanced realities of individuals, offering a window into the complex tapestry of human experience. Such interviews are more than mere data collection tools; they are conversations that respect and value the insights of each participant (Abutabenjeh & Jaradat, 2018).

Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews are a popular choice for data collection within the social sciences due to their inherent flexibility and capacity to yield rich, detailed information (Bryman, 2012). Aligned with the interpretive methodology, they facilitate an exploration of participants' subjective realities, capturing the intricacies of individuals' lived experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Geertz, 1973).

They are combining this method with an interpretive approach allowed for a deeper dive into participants' perspectives. This interview style is akin to a respectful conversation (Corbin & Morse, 2003) and not only fosters trust but unveils deeply insightful perspectives on the subject. Such an approach ensures that diverse viewpoints are acknowledged, enriching the research (Smith & Osborn, 2003). Importantly, semi-structured interviews, with their blend of direction and flexibility, enable the capture of intricate details while forging a genuine bond with participants. It positions both the interviewer and the interviewee as collaborators with shared expertise on the topic (Pathak & Intratat, 2012). This dynamic encouraged participants to thoughtfully reflect on and share their experiences in mixed-gender educational environments (Murawski, 2014).

In this research, I employed semi-structured interviews as my primary data collection tool, embracing their open framework conducive to in-depth and reciprocating discussions. The rationale for this choice lies not just in their adaptability but also in the natural flow of information they facilitate (Arksey & Knight, 2012). While I did not adhere to a standardised set of questions, I leaned on an interview guide as informed by the literature and the research questions, ensuring that vital topics and themes pertinent to the research were covered. This guide offered the dual benefit of providing direction while granting participants the freedom to share openly (Arksey & Knight, 2012).

While qualitative research does not rely on a fixed set of questions, like its quantitative counterpart, a focal point or guideline is indispensable. Such a guideline serves as a mnemonic aid and offers a structured approach to navigating the conversation (Hine & Carson, 2007).

The Participants

Participants had to be PSD professionals willing to attend a one-hour, individual, audio-recorded interview and had to be employed in a public, church, or private/independent secondary school. They also had to accept to keep their camera on, if interviewed online.

Recruitment

Using social media (see Appendix A) as a recruitment tool resulted in six interested teachers reaching out directly to me to express their interest in participating in the study. These interested participants were then emailed an information letter (see Appendix B) and a consent form (see Appendix C).

The Interview Process

Six comprehensive audio-recorded interviews were conducted in person with PSCD secondary educators in alignment with their communication preferences. In light of their professional expertise and academic credentials, the interview guide (see Appendix D) was formulated solely in English to match their linguistic competence. However, it was emphasised that participants could opt to speak in either English or Maltese to facilitate comfort in their expression.

During these discussions, I meticulously followed Egan's (1975) SOLER framework. This encompassed a direct facing orientation towards the interviewee, an open postural stance, a slight forward inclination, consistent eye engagement, and a relaxed yet focused presence (as cited in Murphy & Dillion, 2013). This methodological approach underscored my genuine interest and commitment to understanding their perspectives.

Pilot Study

A preliminary interview was conducted with one PSCD secondary school teacher in order to ascertain the absence of any ambiguities in the questions. Consequently, this enabled me to ensure optimal questioning techniques and, consequently, assisted me in gathering facts of superior quality.

The pilot study, which involved a preliminary interview with a PSCD secondary school teacher, proved to be highly effective and informative. This initial engagement served as a crucial step in validating the interview methodology and refining the questions. The feedback received was integral in fine-tuning the interview guide, ensuring its alignment with the research objectives and enhancing its clarity and comprehensibility. As a result of this successful pilot study, the interview guide, detailed in Appendix D, was finalized. This final version, incorporating the insights and suggestions from the pilot study, became well-equipped to facilitate in-depth and meaningful data collection for the main research phase. The initial interview functioned as a pilot study. The importance of a pilot study is essential in qualitative research. Collecting data through interviews or other qualitative methods is especially crucial. A study test can be seen as a preliminary iteration of the data collection process, serving as a preparatory exercise. The purpose of this trial is to verify the appropriateness of the selected research instruments and procedures, as well as to identify any potential obstacles prior to commencing the primary data collection phase (Gani et al., 2020).

The pilot enabled me to refine the interview questions, assuring their clarity, comprehensibility, and relevance to the objectives of the research. Modifications may be made in response to input, resulting in the revision, elimination, or inclusion of specific inquiries (Yeong et al., 2018).

Data Analysis

This research employed Reflexive Thematic Data Analysis (RTA) as its core method. RTA, a user-friendly and flexible approach, aids in analysing themes within data. Its structure can be traced back to Braun and Clarke's (2012) discussions. Their pivotal 2006 study popularised thematic analysis (TA), leading to various strategies for teaching assistants (TAs) and an evolution in methodology perception (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Byrne, 2022).

Braun and Clarke (2006) described TA as more than a tool for data clarity and structure. The method starts with extensive engagement with the data corpus, followed by coding. As it progresses, patterns emerge and are refined, leading to a detailed report. This report contrasts interview data with academic literature, offering insights and critiques (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

By 2019, Braun and Clarke felt the need to refine their terms, introducing reflexive thematic analysis. This shift highlighted the researcher's introspective role. While many TA

varieties exist, the reflexive label differentiates it by its unique features. Though optimal for qualitative research, it is less suited for quantitative studies. Coding offers insights into a researcher's interpretation. In RTA, themes are not predetermined but arise from aligning similar codes or foundational ideas. Braun et al. (2022) likened themes to celestial bodies: unique but linked by common ideologies. Their method prompts scholars to delve deeper than surface-level interpretations.

Ethical Considerations

Ensuring the integrity of ethical principles throughout the research process is imperative when working with human subjects or animals. Recognizing the intricate nature of ethical concerns (Ciuk & Latusek, 2018), my commitment extended beyond the mere acquisition of initial ethical clearance to encompass the seamless integration of a comprehensive ethical framework throughout the study.

Commencing with the introduction of the research concept to the Faculty of Education, this initial step was pivotal in aligning research objectives with the ethical standards of the academic community. Subsequently, seeking and obtaining ethical clearance from the Faculty of Education's Research Ethics Committee (FREC), as detailed in Appendix E, represented a foundational commitment to compliance with established ethical guidelines. Rigorously applying the ethical principle of informed consent during the data collection phase ensured participants were well-informed about the study's purpose and potential implications, using consent forms to secure voluntary participation and withdrawal rights.

Data privacy and confidentiality were upheld through anonymization and secure storage, preventing unintended disclosure of personally identifiable information. Ethical reflections persisted throughout the research process, allowing for prompt adjustments to protocols as unanticipated ethical issues arose, thereby ensuring continual adherence to ethical standards. The transparent reporting of findings not only acknowledged any encountered limitations or ethical dilemmas but also detailed the steps taken to mitigate potential biases or harms (Arifin, 2018).

Importantly, the ethical commitment extended post-research, involving the responsible dissemination of findings and addressing implications for participants and society at large. This comprehensive approach underscores a dedicated adherence to the highest ethical standards, reflecting not only compliance but a proactive and continuous

commitment to the well-being and rights of all involved parties in the research process (Arifin, 2018).

Identifiability

Qualitative inquiries provide a glimpse into the individual dimensions of experiences, knowledge, thoughts, perceptions, and values (Babbie & Rubin, 2010). According to Babbie and Rubin (2010), safeguarding participants' identities stands out as the primary concern in ensuring their well-being and interest during survey research. A notable ethical dilemma arises from the insufficient number of PSCD teachers on the island, making it challenging to guarantee non-identifiability of participants. In addressing this concern and upholding ethical standards, various protective measures were contemplated.

Strategies were implemented to ensure anonymity and confidentiality, even though the written consent encompassed all requisite information. To safeguard participant identities, any explicit references to names, locations, or identifiable individuals were meticulously removed from the study. Participants were explicitly instructed not to divulge specific personal or client-related experiences but rather to articulate incidents in generic terms. Moreover, avenues for additional support or clarifications were made accessible to participants post-interviews, emphasizing a commitment to addressing any concerns that may have arisen during the research process.

Given that gender was not a participation criterion and that in the local context most PSCD teachers are female, non-binary pseudonyms and the pronouns they/there were used throughout the work to further address pseudonymity. The participants were also given the option to choose their own non-binary pseudonyms. The transcripts also only used pseudonyms. The verbatim transcripts only used pseudonyms, and I referred to the participant by their pseudonym throughout the interview such that the audio-recording does not include their real name. Further, and the participants' type of school they work in is not identified in this work.

Any participants' identifiable data were removed or fictionalised. Additionally, participants were made aware of the plans for the retention and destruction of the records upon completion of the research. However, until the completion of the study, the information from the interviews, including the recordings, were kept in a pseudonymised format in password-encrypted files on my password-protected computer (Babbie & Rubin, 2010)

Data Collection

The data collected were treated with sensitivity, as all personal information was regarded as confidential. The audio-recorded, individual interview was performed as a single occurrence and took place at a mutually convenient time and location. The participants were informed of their entitlements under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and relevant national laws, which include the right to access, correct, and, if applicable, request the deletion of their personal data. Out of the six interviews held, four were held face to face while two were held online (refer to Appendix B).

In addition, participants were afforded the autonomy to discontinue their involvement in the study at their discretion, without being obligated to furnish any justification or facing any adverse consequences. In the event of such an occurrence, the data in question would have been promptly eradicated and rendered unfit for utilisation in the study endeavour. As previously mentioned, this was also explained in the information letter (see Appendix B) and the consent form (see Appendix C) which were sent to the participants prior to the interview and also discussed on the day of the interview.

Storage of Data

The data of the participants were securely maintained in soft copies that were encrypted and password protected. Additionally, hard copies of the data were kept in a secure, locked location only I had access to. The audio recordings and verbatim transcripts were then irrevocably eliminated at the conclusion of the research process. The participants were granted the legal entitlement, as per the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and relevant national laws, to exercise their rights of access, rectification, and, if applicable, request the deletion of their personal data. I did not receive any requests from anyone.

Credibility and Trustworthiness

In the realm of quantitative research, crucial components include reliability, validity, and neutrality. However, these components require enhanced focus and clarity in qualitative research. Qualitative researchers prioritise the establishment of the study's trustworthiness, concentrating on facets such as authenticity, verification, stability, and applicability (Günbayi & Sorm, 2018). Conducting a rigorous assessment of the study's quality is imperative for assuring that the outcomes are not only credible but also capable of contributing effectively to theoretical advancements and practical applications (Spencer et al., 2004).

At the commencement of research planning, foundational strategies are devised to fortify the integrity of the study. Recognising and assessing both internal and external variables is fundamental, and researchers should engage in self-reflection regarding their prior knowledge and engagement with the subject matter to mitigate the influence of individual biases. The analytical objective is to meticulously discern and extrapolate meaning from the gathered data, fostering the derivation of legitimate inferences (Bengtsson, 2016). It is of paramount importance that readers perceive the presented data as a true and unbiased representation of the participants' expressions and insights.

In research, components like reliability, validity, and neutrality are crucial in both quantitative and qualitative studies. However, their emphasis is heightened in qualitative research, where trustworthiness is a primary concern. Researchers in qualitative studies prioritize authenticity, verification, stability, and applicability (Günbayi & Sorm, 2018) to ensure credible outcomes contributing to theoretical advancements and practical applications (Spencer et al., 2004).

Foundational strategies are devised at the research planning stage to fortify the study's integrity. Recognizing and assessing internal and external variables requires researchers to engage in self-reflection, mitigating biases. The analytical objective is to discern and extrapolate meaning from gathered data, fostering legitimate inferences (Bengtsson, 2016), ensuring a true and unbiased representation of participants' expressions.

Credibility, Dependability, Transferability, and Confirmability, identified by Denzin and Lincoln (1998), are crucial for a study's trustworthiness. Establishing credibility involves active engagement in discussions with a supervisor and seeking feedback from colleagues (Yardley, 2000). Maintaining an audit trail records research phases, with the interview guide and transcript excerpts as primary tools. Ensuring congruence with participants' original data includes substantial verbatim excerpts for critical assessment (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

In qualitative studies, the researcher acts as the instrument for data collection and analysis, drawing on counselling experience to establish rapport and encourage self-disclosure. Emphasizing transferability, in-depth interviews align with participants' perspectives, allowing readers to transfer findings to their experiences if resonant (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Evaluating findings based on impact and importance, the study provides interesting, significant, and useful information (Yardley, 2000).

Personal Reflection

Qualitative methodology allows for a nuanced exploration of diverse perspectives, which is particularly crucial when dealing with controversial issues. It provides a framework that fosters a deeper understanding, enabling the researcher to tap into the richness of individuals' experiences and viewpoints. Through interviews, observations, and document analyses, I was able to access a spectrum of insights and emotions that quantitative methods might not capture as vividly.

Commencing the planning phase of a research project establishes the groundwork for its credibility. It is imperative to acknowledge both internal and external factors, and researchers should critically assess their own familiarity with the subject to minimize potential personal biases. The analytical process is directed towards categorizing and deriving significance from gathered data, intending to formulate plausible conclusions (Bengtsson, 2016). Ultimately, the audience should be assured that the research faithfully reflects the data in accordance with the perspectives of the participants.

Adopting a qualitative approach also encourages a level of empathy and sensitivity towards the participants, which is vital in discussions filled with potential biases and strong opinions. It allowed for the creation of a safe space where participants felt comfortable sharing their authentic thoughts and feelings despite the controversial nature of the topics.

However, challenges emerged, chiefly concerning ensuring objectivity and neutrality. The subjective nature of qualitative research occasionally made it challenging to maintain a balanced view, especially when navigating emotionally charged topics. Consequently, a conscious effort was required to minimise personal biases and preconceptions to preserve the study's integrity and credibility.

Additionally, the qualitative methodology demanded a meticulous approach to data analysis. Patterns, themes, and narratives had to be carefully extracted and interpreted from the rich, qualitative data (Cassell & Bishop, 2019; Dierckx de Casterlé et al., 2021). This required not only rigorous attention to detail but also a consideration of the broader implications and contexts of the findings (Alase, 2017).

Conclusion

The use of qualitative methods in this study offered an intimate glimpse into the complexities of addressing controversial topics in educational settings. Through in-depth interviews and participant observations, we were able to delve into the lived experiences of

educators, capturing the subtleties of their daily interactions and the climate of their classrooms. This approach enabled us to grasp the emotional undertones and the intricate dynamics at play when complex subjects are broached.

The richness of the qualitative data shone a light on the personal convictions and struggles teachers face and the care they take to navigate these sensitively with their students. It was like peering through a keyhole into the microcosm of the classroom, where every nuance and shade of opinion was given space to breathe and be understood. The candid narratives shared by participants painted a vivid portrait of the educational frontline, where teachers act as both knowledge-bearers and mediators of debate.

Certainly, this path was not without its bumps. The depth we sought came with its set of hurdles—from ensuring a trusting atmosphere for participants to share openly to interpreting the dense tapestry of qualitative information we collected. Yet, the resulting insights have been nothing short of enlightening, offering a valuable lens through which we can view the pedagogical landscape with fresh eyes and a deeper sense of compassion.

What is unearthed through this qualitative journey goes beyond academic interest; it touches the core of how we, as a society, can better equip our educators to foster environments where difficult conversations are not just possible but are engaged thoughtfully and constructively. This study, therefore, stands not just as a scholarly endeavour but as a heartfelt exploration into the art and soul of teaching contentious issues with empathy and insight.

Chapter 4: Findings and Discussion

This chapter outlines key findings from interviews, detailing main themes and sub-themes as presented in Table 1 and Appendix G, which presents these themes and subthemes supported by participant quotes. It delves into educators' views on divisive subjects that spark debates among students, focusing on topics with varied viewpoints and no definitive answers, influenced by personal beliefs (Cassar et al., 2021; Flensner, 2020).

Table 1

Main Findings

Main Themes	Sub-Themes
1. Understanding Controversial Issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Interpretations of 'Controversial Issues' b. Nature & Characteristics of Controversial Issue c. Sensitivity and Societal Reflection d. Dynamic Evolution e. Guidelines to Define Contentious Issues
2. Importance of addressing controversial issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Significance of Discussing Controversial Topics b. Critical Thinking and Empathy c. Current Controversial Issues in Malta d. Outcomes of Addressing Controversial Issues
3. Challenges and Complexities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Challenges when Teaching Controversial Issues b. Student Experiences and Backgrounds c. Emotions and Power Dynamics d. Avoidance of Controversial Issues e. Repercussions of Avoiding Controversial issues
4. Strategies and Approaches	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Pedagogical Methods used b. Maintaining a Respectful Learning Environment c. Professional Perspectives and Approaches
5. Student Perspective and Engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Issues Adolescents believe should be Discussed. b. Ensuring an Inclusive Classroom Environment c. Evaluating Students' Engagement
6. Ongoing Efforts and Future Directions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Curreant Initiatives in Malta b. Future Research and Practices

Theme 1: Understanding Controversial Issues

“What is controversial? It is a difficult concept to explain... because what is controversial for me might not be controversial to you... It's subjective, no?” (Charlie). “This is something that they generally don't agree on so that's what I think that's what comes to mind and I think about controversial issues they don't agree with each other” (Miller).

“Different societies will have different meanings of what controversial issues are” (Lory)

This theme addresses participants' understanding of the term CI. How one interprets or defines a topic as controversial varies significantly. The fact that there is no unanimous understanding of what constitutes a CI in the PSCD educational context reflects the inherent challenges in curriculum development (Dearden, 1981; Oulton et al., 2004).

Interpretations of CI

Participants presented a multifaceted understanding of what qualifies as a controversial issue within the PSCD curriculum. Their interpretations, while varied, converged on the notion that controversial issues inherently evoke strong, often polarised, responses and are typically characterised by a lack of consensus underpinned by societal, cultural, and individual nuances (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015). The findings stress the complex and multifaceted nature of controversial issues within the PSCD curriculum. Such issues are portrayed as dynamic, sensitive, and rooted in societal and individual contexts, marked by diverse opinions and a lack of clear consensus (Salomon & Nevo 2005).

Participants' insights suggest that:

Controversial issues don't stay the same - they change as we change, as what we hold important changes. So, in class, when we talk about these hot potatoes, we've got to stay on our toes, ready to adapt, because what was controversial yesterday might not be tomorrow (Lory).

Thus, the educator's role emerges as crucial in navigating these complexities:

We need to make sure we're keeping the door open for all sorts of opinions in class, respecting each other while we're at it. It's about getting our students to think deeply and reflect, considering all the different angles (Lory).

Understanding the diverse interpretations of controversial issues is essential, as it can guide educators in approaching, planning, and facilitating discussions, ensuring they are relevant, engaging, and supportive of students' learning and development (Brookfield, 2015).

Nature and Characteristics of CI

Participants explained that CI unveil a tapestry of subjectivity and diverse perspectives. Charlie's insights delineated these topics as domains marked by potent divergences and the absence of monolithic correct answers.

They are issues, subjects, topics that tend to be controversial, which means that they are meant to or could bring up strong divided responses from different students. Issues where there is no correct answer and issues which are a matter of opinion (Charlie).

Likewise, Dana reflected that these contentious topics are epicentres of robust debate, "issues that create debate". Essentially, they embody multiplicities, heralding a diversity of viewpoints and a conspicuous absence of unanimous consensus. This landscape thus becomes a fertile ground for stimulating discussions and vigorous debates, invigorating the educational environment with a dynamism rooted in diversity (Parker, 2016).

Sensitivity and Societal Reflection

Matt characterised controversial issues as "topics that might be delicate issues, maybe white elephants in the country, so that might be a bit delicate to tackle" (Matt). Lory's interpretation augments this perspective by anchoring controversial topics in the societal matrix. They emphasised that "controversial issues are socially based" (Lory). They emphasised their reflective quality, mirroring the prevailing beliefs, values, and paradigms that permeate the societal fabric whereby "different societies interpret controversial issues uniquely, influenced by varied values, beliefs, upbringings, and social contexts" (Lory). In Lory's narrative, these issues unveil themselves as dynamic entities, their interpretations and relevance fluidly aligned with societal contexts and temporal shifts.

Dynamic Evolution

Cade echoed the essence of dynamism, encapsulating controversial issues as "evolving entities" and "those issues which we meet on a daily basis". Cade suggested that their character is sculpted by the temporal currents and the evolving societal tapestry. His narrative, enriched by examples such as abortion and LGBTQ+ marriages, illustrates the vibrant immediacy and relevance that these issues command within classroom discussions.

Navigating through the diverse perspectives unveiled by the participants, it emerges that controversial issues are multifaceted entities. They are marked by subjectivity, sensitivity, societal reflections, and a dynamic essence that evolves with time. They are

realms of robust discussion, reflective mirrors of societal paradigms, and evolving landscapes that morph in resonance with temporal and societal tides (Davies et al., 2005). This rich diversity fosters a climate conducive to an enriched, dynamic, and multifarious educational discourse (Hess, 2008).

Guidelines to Define Contentious Issues

The educators outlined various approaches and considerations in defining and handling contentious issues within the PSCD educational framework. Their responses highlighted flexibility, student respect, a safe environment, continual learning, and facilitation as central tenets in managing such topics. Charlie stresses “the importance of having a consistent way of dealing with contentious issues, from identifying to discussing them” (Charlie). Charlie concentrates on topics that are likely to “stir up strong and varying opinions and emotions”. Lory, however, presented a noteworthy idea and proposed “having talks with an open and fair mind, without thinking ahead of time that a subject is controversial”. According to Lory, “We should look at these issues as chances to learn, not just as things to argue about or stir up trouble”.

Miller viewed the inclusion of controversial issues in the syllabus as fundamental. “It shows them that learning is more than just structured subjects and encourages them to think for themselves, come to their own conclusions, and see things from a wider viewpoint than what their family or the media tells them”. Dana highlighted the importance of respecting others’ opinions, promoting a communication style that emphasises personal beliefs without generalisations, and ensuring a respectful and inclusive discussion environment. Cade emphasised “making sure that kids feel safe and respected so that they can share their thoughts”. “Respecting each other all the time, even when you disagree, is important for keeping a healthy, constructive conversation environment”. Cade also highlighted the “It’s important to keep up with current events, social media, and students’ language and worlds so that conversations are relevant and clear”. Matt downplays the controversy aspect, viewing the discussion of these issues as “a natural, necessary part of education”, emphasising the teacher’s comfort and preparedness in addressing these issues.

The teachers’ ideas outline a detailed method for identifying and managing sensitive issues in PSCD education. The main ideas include “respect, acceptance, and making a safe place where honest and open talks can happen are all important”. (Charlie). This allows for a variety of opinions to be shared and encourages deep thinking and individual conclusions.

Continuous learning is also seen as very important. Teachers believed it necessary to stay current, flexible, and ready to talk about different issues that are meaningful in the students' lives. This way, discussions are "not only educational but also help widen students' viewpoints, improve their thinking skills, and develop their ability to think independently" (Miller). So, the main guidelines focus on creating a rich educational environment that is also respectful and supportive. This approach carefully handles sensitive issues, making sure they are relevant and treated with care (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018).

Theme 2: Importance of Addressing Controversial Issues

I believe that it is very important, it provides a safe space for students to discuss difficult topics, especially when communication becomes challenging during puberty as students grow older and in secondary school we find that when students reach a certain age, they hit puberty and start withdrawing from their parents and certain discussions between parents and children become harder at a certain age and that is exactly when PSCD comes in to give that safe space for the students to be able to discuss these issues (Charlie).

The curriculum's goal is not just to impart knowledge but also to shape a holistic individual. Addressing controversial topics provides students a platform to engage critically with current events, especially those pertinent to Malta's socio-cultural landscape (Zimmerman & Robertson, 2017).

Significance of Discussing Controversial Topics

The educator-participants perceived discussing controversial topics in the classroom as an essential aspect of education (Godfrey & Grayman, 2014). Their perceptions revolve around providing a safe space for discussion, encouraging respect and responsibility, embracing diversity, and preparing students for real-life situations (Banks, 2013; Parker & Lo, 2016; Rom, 1998).

Charlie emphasised the crucial role of PSCD in providing a "safe space for students to discuss difficult topics, especially when communication becomes challenging during puberty". The classroom becomes an essential forum for open discussion where a facilitator ensures that conversations remain respectful and meaningful. Lory emphasised the significance of respect and responsibility as foundational elements in classroom discussions. A respectful and responsible environment ensures that discussions, even on controversial topics, remain educational and constructive (Bickmore & Parker, 2014). This approach

allows students to explore various viewpoints and learn from each other's perspectives. Miller highlighted the "challenge and significance of discussing controversial topics in culturally diverse classrooms".

Educator-participants regarded such discussions as crucial for addressing prejudices and promoting a more inclusive and respectful perspective, helping students to move beyond familial or cultural biases. Cade viewed discussing controversial topics as "giving students the opportunity and chance to learn the skills they need to handle real-life situations". These discussions enabled their students to explore, discover, and learn, preparing them for informed decision-making outside the classroom (Edwards & Protheroe, 2003).

The educators collectively highlighted the significant role of discussing controversial topics in fostering a comprehensive educational environment. Such discussions are perceived as necessary for encouraging critical thinking, promoting inclusivity, and preparing students for practical life challenges. Discussion on controversial topics, guided by respect, responsibility, and a commitment to a safe and supportive environment, emerges as a powerful educational tool. It enriches students' perspectives and equips them with the essential skills and understanding to navigate the complexities of diverse societal viewpoints and challenges (Godfrey & Grayman, 2014).

Critical Thinking and Empathy

Educators agreed that discussing controversial topics offers several benefits and adds substantial value to students' educational experience by fostering critical thinking and promoting empathy among them (Endacott & Brooks, 2013).

"It is important for students to talk about controversial topics in order to improve their ability to think critically... [as] [t]hese discussions give students a chance to ask questions and learn about different points of view" (Dana) and engage in independent research, fostering a more curious and analytical mindset. "Students can understand other people better when they hear different points of view during these kinds of discussions" (Miller). Seeing issues from multiple viewpoints helps students step out of their paradigms, allowing for a richer, more empathetic understanding of topics (Andolina & Conklin, 2021). Dana also emphasised "the importance of learning to engage in respectful and open discussions". The practice of agreeing to disagree is highlighted as a vital aspect of these discussions, promoting a culture of mutual respect and openness to diverse opinions. "The

teacher's job is to stay neutral, support well-thought-out points, and make sure the classroom is a safe and respectful place to talk” (Miller). This approach helps create a space where students feel comfortable sharing their thoughts and opinions without fear of ridicule or bullying (Sayfulloevna, 2023).

The educator-participants' insights collectively underline the significant benefits of discussing controversial topics in the classroom. Such discussions emerge as powerful tools for cultivating essential life skills such as critical thinking, empathy, and the ability to engage in respectful and meaningful conversations on diverse topics (Oulton et al., 2004).

By encouraging students to explore various perspectives, ask questions, and conduct independent research, educators foster a learning environment that prepares students to navigate the complexities of societal issues with a well-rounded, empathetic, and critical perspective. The educators play a pivotal role in facilitating these discussions, ensuring they are conducted with sensitivity, respect, and a commitment to constructive and meaningful dialogue (Facione, 2000; Love et al., 2016).

What you describe here the path that every lesson should be following and how to achieve that is by working hard by building, good relationships, Building a strong base in the first few weeks is important for making things go more smoothly when talking about touchy subjects (Charlie).

Current Controversial Issues in Malta

The teachers shared their perspectives on incorporating real-world controversial issues from Malta into the curriculum, showing diverse approaches and philosophies. Charlie preferred using foreign examples over local ones when discussing controversial issues. They believed that “local controversies often become politicised, so I prefer to avoid them in classroom discussions”. Miller and Matt both believed in addressing immediate or current issues as they arise. Miller incorporated current topics like gender orientation into the syllabus if they are “immediate and relevant”. Matt preferred tackling problems immediately rather than waiting, emphasising debate and discussion over merely providing information. Dana and Matt emphasised the significance of discussing “real-world issues that students can connect with and that speak to their current lives and social experiences” (Matt). Dana highlighted the importance of discussing current, commotion-causing events, believing they hold more educational value than repeatedly discussing generic topics; and suggested “having a flexible curriculum that allows room for discussing current events and

controversies, even if they are not part of the planned syllabus”. This approach made classroom discussions more “relevant and engaging for the students”. Cade discusses the method of incorporating current controversies, suggesting ways such as open discussions or using visual aids like clips to make the learning more relatable and engaging for visual learners.

These responses indicate a general inclination towards making education on controversial topics timely, relevant and engaging. The educator-participants valued flexibility, immediacy, and relevance in choosing the topics of discussion, ensuring that the issues are pertinent to the students' lives and societal context (Zimmermann & Bisanz, 2019). Using foreign examples, addressing immediate concerns, making content relevant, ensuring flexibility in the curriculum, and employing various methods of discussion emerge as diverse strategies that educators use to navigate and incorporate real-world controversial issues into the curriculum effectively (Hand & Levinson, 2012)

Outcomes of Addressing Controversial Issues

The aftermath of these discussions, as highlighted, can be multi-fold. From influencing attitudes to possibly reshaping behaviours, the ripple effect of addressing controversial issues can be profound.

The educator-participants recounted personal experiences and anecdotes that demonstrated the impact of classroom discussions on students' attitudes and behaviours, especially concerning sensitive topics like gender issues, stereotypes, abortion, and xenophobia. These instances revealed a transformation in students' perspectives, attitudes, and behaviours resulting from exploring and discussing these topics in a supportive and respectful classroom environment (Alexakos et al., 2016).

Charlie shared that “classroom discussions were particularly helpful for talking about gender problems”. Charlie noticed that “these discussions not only facilitated individual students but also enhanced the overall classroom environment, fostering a space where students felt comfortable sharing and discussing gender-related challenges”. Charlie’s observations showed that the students became more supportive of each other due to these discussions, emphasising the value of a communal learning environment in fostering empathy and mutual understanding.

Miller noticed a shift in attitudes, particularly related to gender stereotypes and patriarchal beliefs. They observed that “there were clear changes in students' views after

many talks, especially among those who had initially held patriarchal views". "The discussions helped the students look at problems from different points of view", contributing to a broader and more nuanced understanding of gender roles and stereotypes.

Dana highlighted the discussions around controversial topics like abortion. They noticed that while students might maintain their initial stance, "The discussions made people more accepting of different points of view and life situations". The emphasis was "not necessarily on changing people's minds, but on making the school a place where students felt less judged and more willing to understand and accept other points of view". (Dana).

Matt shared an anecdote emphasising the long-term impact of discussions. Matt recounted the transformation of a "previously xenophobic student who, over time, became more empathetic and supportive of immigrants". This experience underscores the potential of classroom discussions to effect enduring changes in attitudes and behaviours, even if these transformations are not immediately observable (Blazar & Kraft, 2017).

The personal experiences shared by the educators underscore the profound influence of classroom discussions in shaping students' attitudes and behaviours (Gillies, 2016). The discussions facilitate a transformative learning environment where students are encouraged to reconsider pre-existing beliefs and become more empathetic, respectful, and supportive of diverse perspectives and experiences. While the impact might not always be immediate, the educators' insights affirm the enduring influence of these discussions in fostering personal and communal growth and understanding.

Theme 3: Challenges and Complexities

"Sometimes they don't know how to speak and discuss they just quarrel with each other" (Miller).

The challenges that I find are narrow-minded students Who at all cost they try to replicate what are other people say and there's no way to reason with these students for me that is one of the most challenging aspect (Matt).

Teaching controversial issues is not without its pitfalls. Not only can it stir emotions, but it can also inadvertently reinforce biases or alienate students from minority backgrounds. Educators might be cautious or even avoidant because of these potential challenges (Ho et al., 2017).

Challenges when Teaching Controversial Issues.

Teachers elucidated various challenges they face when teaching controversial topics, showcasing a spectrum of difficulties arising due to students' diversity and individual differences (Cho, 2018). "Students are at different stages of growth and readiness. Some students might not be ready or feel comfortable talking about certain things in class" (Charlie), necessitating a teaching approach that respects each student's individual growth stage.

"Disagreements in the classroom can be very challenging" (Miller). Some students strongly believe their opinion is right, making discussions difficult as they might not be open to considering different viewpoints. Lory brought attention to the teacher's mindset, suggesting that "labelling topics as controversial might be enhancing their controversial nature". "How a teacher approaches a subject can affect how students understand and talk about it in class" (Lory). Dana pointed out that "because my school is all boys, it's especially hard to talk about sexuality problems like transgender issues because of the homophobic attitudes that are common there". Matt identified the challenge of dealing with "narrow-minded students" who rigidly adhere to replicated viewpoints. "It's hard for me to talk to and reason with these students" (Matt). "What I find challenging is dealing with students who are not open to listening or accepting different opinions, making discussions less productive and more conflict-prone" (Cade).

The array of challenges presented underscores the complexities involved in teaching controversial topics. They hinge primarily on the students' attitudes, readiness, and openness to engage in discussions, as well as the teacher's approach and the nature of the topics themselves, particularly those related to sexuality and personal beliefs (Hess, 2009).

A mindful and nuanced approach that considers students' readiness promotes open-mindedness, fosters a respectful debate environment, and carefully navigates controversial topics seems essential in effectively teaching challenging subjects. Thus, educators are encouraged not to allow these challenges to deter them from engaging students in meaningful discussions on controversial topics (Zimmerman & Robertson, 2020).

Students' Experiences and Backgrounds

Navigating the multifaceted landscape of diverse student experiences, backgrounds, and beliefs in classrooms presents educators with unique challenges (Kim-Bossard et al.,

2018). Educator-participants pivotal themes in understanding the challenges faced by educators in this domain.

Charlie articulated the fundamental necessity of establishing robust classroom management and group cohesion before delving into controversial issues. They posited that this strategic approach, introducing sensitive topics later in the academic year, fosters a conducive environment for discussing divisive or controversial subjects. "I think this keeps the educational experience safe for everyone and makes sure there are no unpleasant conversations" (Charlie). Miller underscored the pervasive influence of media, particularly platforms like YouTube, in shaping and solidifying students' perspectives. The omnipresence of various media forms presents an added layer of complexity as educator-participants grapple with ingrained mindsets and misinformation. The task is to subtly guide discussions, enabling students to discern between varied viewpoints and cultivate a more nuanced understanding of the topics at hand (Barton & McCully, 2007).

Dana and Lory emphasised teachers' influential role in steering classroom discussions. "It's important for teachers to be very self-aware and make sure that their own views don't openly or covertly affect the way students talk in class" (Dana). Lory agreed, pointing out that:

People sometimes bring their own personal or social biases into class discussions without meaning to. This can make things more difficult because they make people talk about their own feelings or the way society works instead of the educational topic we're supposed to be talking about (Lory).

Matt and Cade addressed challenges emanating from the diverse backgrounds of students. Cade pointed out that "When it comes to politics, especially, students often talk about things they have heard from other people because of their families". Matt, conversely, focused on the role of educators in normalising and facilitating discussions around varied student experiences, suggesting that "challenges often lie more with the teacher's comfort and approach with a topic" rather than the students' receptivity or participation.

The convergence of these insights paints a nuanced portrait of the educational landscape, spotlighting the multifactorial challenges educators face in managing diverse student experiences, backgrounds, and beliefs (Gay, 2018; Sleeter, 2018). The synchronised strategies, as echoed by the participants, revolve around robust classroom management,

tactical introduction of controversial topics, navigational adeptness amidst media influences, self-awareness of personal biases, and a sensitive approach towards the diverse experiential backgrounds of students. The cumulative aim is to foster an educational ambience where open, respectful, and enlightening discussions can flourish, promoting a holistic and enriched learning experience (Hess & McAvoy, 2015).

Emotions and Power Dynamics

It is pivotal to understand that discussions around controversial topics are not just intellectual exercises but deeply emotional. Navigating these emotions and inherent power imbalances requires finesse and a well-structured approach (King, 2009).

Potential conflicts emerge when addressing controversial topics, especially in light of varying emotions and inherent power imbalances. A synthesis of participants' inputs revealed many challenges and conflicts encountered in addressing controversial topics within the classroom setting. The interplay of varying emotions and inherent power imbalances was underscored as primary factors influencing the discourse and classroom dynamics (King, 2009).

Charlie highlighted the heightened emotions and potential clashes arising from polarised viewpoints among students. “Such emotional intensity occasionally leads to discussions becoming heated, reflecting a lack of empathy or understanding towards peers' differing perspectives and personal experiences” (Charlie).

Miller underscored the importance of establishing ground rules at the outset, a foundational aspect of managing conflicts proactively. A well-defined framework of guidelines mitigates immediate quarrels, fostering a respectful and conducive environment for addressing divisive topics.

Lory emphasised the diverging capabilities of students in handling disagreements and accepting differing opinions, suggesting these variations mirror broader societal and familial patterns. A skill Lory feels pivotal to be nurtured through PSD is the ability to embrace varying viewpoints, fostering respectful discourse.

Dana touched on the nuanced balance required in encouraging student expression. “Making sure that different opinions are heard is hard because students might not want to share their thoughts, especially if they feel insecure or left out because they hold a minority view” (Dana).

Matt stressed the criticality of sensitivity and awareness of students' backgrounds, which is essential for navigating discussions, particularly when they border on personal and potentially distressing subjects. A nuanced understanding of students' circumstances is crucial for framing questions and steering conversations cautiously.

Cade delved into the complexities of power dynamics, both between students and between teachers and students. Cade underscored the significance of maintaining a balanced classroom atmosphere, where undue influence from powerful figures or groups doesn't overshadow the collective learning process.

Educator-participants agreed that navigating controversial topics necessitates a multifaceted approach that duly considers the emotional vulnerabilities and power dynamics prevalent within the classroom (King, 2009). A conscientious strategy, grounded on sensitivity, inclusivity, and respect, is imperative to foster an environment conducive to meaningful and empathetic discourse. Effective strategies such as the establishment of clear ground rules, fostering empathy, and nurturing a balanced power dynamic are crucial for navigating the complexities inherent in discussing controversial topics (Meyer, 2023)

Avoidance of Controversial Issues

Professionals dealing with PSD subjects grapple with the decision to address or sidestep controversial issues in their teaching environments. Their decisions often stem from various considerations and realities that are influential in the context of their teaching environment (Barton & McCully, 2007).

The educator-participants expressed a perspective emphasising the importance of avoiding controversial issues in a PSD setting. Charlie articulated that "ignoring controversial topics, which are essential parts of the learning objectives, would make the education less complete". Lory added a unique perspective by emphasising "the role of culture and the need to normalise controversial issues in order to prepare students for social problems they will face in the real world". Matt emphasised the importance of the PSD classroom as a "space where controversial matters can be discussed openly", seeing it as a facilitator's role rather than a conveyor of fixed information (Collins-Emery, 2011).

Dana and Cade also shared sentiments that stress the necessity of engaging with controversial issues, viewing them as catalysts for discussion and critical thinking. Cade regarded the PSCD classroom as a "safe space where students can openly discuss and

explore these issues”, stressing the detrimental effects of avoiding such topics on students’ learning experiences.

Miller's perspective presented the challenges related to the cultural diversity and sensitivity of the students. Miller illustrated scenarios where cultural backgrounds, such as religious beliefs, influence the level of participation and openness of students in discussing certain controversial topics, which sometimes leads to uncomfortable situations requiring administrative interventions.

A common emerging theme is the professionals' adaptability and readiness to engage with controversial topics (Milner & Laughter, 2015). Lory and Cade emphasised the necessity of being open, adaptable, and prepared to navigate various controversial topics. Cade particularly noted that it is “okay for educators not to have all the answers and to show vulnerability in their lack of knowledge by committing to finding and delivering the right information later”.

The educator-participants advocated for a student-centric approach where students' questions and curiosities are valued and addressed with sincerity (McKean, 2014). They emphasised the authenticity of interactions and educators' responsibility to provide accurate information and facilitate rich, constructive discussions.

Educator-participants’ voices suggest that, while there are challenges, including cultural sensitivities and personal discomfort, there is a robust professional conviction towards engaging with controversial issues within the PSD context. The educators underlined the importance of a responsive, adaptable, and student-centric teaching approach that values open discussion and critical thinking despite the complexities and challenges presented by controversial topics (Alsaleh, 2020; Brookfield & Preskill, 2016; Freibott & Carey, 2018).

Repercussions of Avoiding Controversial Issues

In exploring the potential repercussions of overlooking controversial topics within the curriculum, educator-participants presented diverse insights, emphasising the significance and the consequences of such omission.

Charlie underscored the essentiality of addressing controversial topics explicitly listed within the learning objectives, pointing out that “ignoring them compromises the curriculum's comprehensiveness and integrity”.

Miller expressed discomfort with the idea of bypassing controversial subjects, noting that the absence of guided discussion within the educational context leaves students reliant on potentially misleading or erroneous media information. Miller emphasised the educator's role in clarifying misconceptions and guiding students through the maze of information prevalent in the media.

Lory brought in a cultural perspective, asserting that cultural norms and taboos could impact the willingness and comfort in addressing certain topics. Lory advocates for "making controversial issues seem normal and encouraging teachers to get the training they need to lead open, non-judgmental conversations about them", blending various topics to align them with everyday realities.

Dana highlighted the necessity for realism in educational discussions, suggesting that "a classroom that is too peaceful is created by avoiding difficult topics". Dana illustrated the challenges that come with navigating sensitive subjects, emphasising the shift in teacher roles from primarily delivering information to steering discussions and managing classroom dynamics.

Matt discussed the disservice to students when educators sidestep controversial topics. They believe that "students can't engage effectively if they avoid these kinds of conversations", proposing that mechanisms such as "anonymous question boxes could facilitate more comfortable student participation, especially in discussing sensitive topics like sexuality".

Cade focused on the students' loss when educators evade controversial discussions. They suggested that "staying away from these situations could cost students important chances to connect, relate, and get more information about different problems", emphasising the role of educators in fostering a relatable and responsive educational environment.

These findings indicate that avoiding controversial topics in the curriculum could have various repercussions, ranging from compromised curriculum integrity to an inhibited ability for students to navigate misinformation, cultural taboos, and real-world relevance (Cowan & Maitles, 2012). Participants advocated for a more open, realistic, and student-centric approach, emphasising the educator's role in facilitating well-rounded, relevant, and supportive discussions to foster a responsive and relatable learning environment.

Theme 4: Strategies and Approaches in Teaching Controversial Issues

“Perhaps students will feel more comfortable discussing certain topics and groups of three or four rather than the whole class and then move it forward to the whole class. It is important to hear everyone’s opinion” (Charlie). The success of any educational endeavour lies in its delivery. Given the sensitivity of controversial issues, the pedagogical techniques employed play a pivotal role in ensuring a balanced, respectful, and inclusive discussion (Divéki, 2018).

Pedagogical Methods Used

This section synthesises the various pedagogical strategies that participants employ to foster engagement and facilitate rich discussions in the classroom. The teachers brought forward a rich tapestry of approaches, reflecting a nuanced understanding of the classroom dynamics and a thoughtful application of methods that were conducive to engaging discussions.

Charlie and Miller emphasised the use of smaller groups as an initial step in the discussion. They believed that “students feel more comfortable expressing their opinions in a more intimate setting” (Charlie). Charlie particularly mentioned strategies such as the ‘hands up approach’ to ensure diverse participation, “making every student feel involved and attentive since any of them might be asked to share their thoughts at any moment”. On the other hand, Miller valued group work, where students are given different topics based on the main subject, allowing them to reach their conclusions before sharing them with the class.

Miller introduced using games, like question games, to engage students actively. Another notable method was introduced by Matt, who utilised a “question box” for writing topics on the whiteboard and encouraging students to ask any questions related to the subject. This strategy is instrumental as it tailors the discussion to the student's curiosity and needs instead of pre-emptively deciding what the students should know or learn.

Lory emphasised the role of reflection, observation, and listening in discussions. They presented an approach encouraging students to listen actively and reflect on what they and their peers say. Lory also valued the fishbowl technique and role-play, “pushing students beyond their preconceived notions and allowing them to view issues from different perspectives, ensuring a comprehensive discussion” (Lory). Lory focused on creating balance

and harmony in class discussions, encouraging calm, respectful exchanges of opinions and ideas.

Emphasising the teacher's role, Cade believed in staying updated and knowledgeable as a vital part of preparation. They stressed creating a safe environment where students feel comfortable sharing their opinions. Cade's approach is centred around the idea that a teacher's preparedness and the environment they cultivate play crucial roles in facilitating meaningful discussions.

The participants demonstrated diverse pedagogical tools and methods, each fostering a conducive environment for open, engaging, and reflective discussions. The emphasis was on student-centred techniques, such as small group discussions, role-plays, and question games, which aim to make students comfortable, engaged, and reflective, enabling them to explore various topics profoundly and broadly. The teacher's role, as highlighted by the participants, is pivotal in guiding, facilitating, and ensuring that the discussions are respectful, informed, and engaging (Bezzina & Falzon, 2022; Brookfield & Preskill, 2016; Camilleri et al., 2012).

Maintaining a Respectful Learning Environment

Educator-participants highlighted various methods they implement to maintain a respectful yet open and dynamic learning environment, including setting clear boundaries, encouraging open-mindedness, establishing rules, and promoting respectful dialogue (Freiberg, 2005).

Charlie emphasised the significance of building good relationships and setting clear boundaries and expectations from the onset: "Building a strong base in the first few weeks is important for making things go more smoothly when talking about touchy subjects" (Charlie). Similarly, Matt also mentioned "setting clear rules before starting lessons to guide behaviour and discussions during controversial issues". Matt is strict about these rules as "they help keep the classroom a safe and respectful place to learn, making sure that everyone feels safe and valued" (Matt).

Lory reiterated the essential aspect of respect and responsibility, not just in discussing controversial topics but as a foundation for interaction in society. Establishing respect and responsibility as fundamental values from the beginning of the year is crucial in shaping the conduct of discussions and debates in the classroom.

Dana and Miller both touched on the challenge posed by students' preconceived views. They noted the importance of promoting “open-mindedness, where students are encouraged to listen to and think about different points of view, even if they do not change their initial thoughts” (Miller). Dana emphasised the need for “balance, allowing students to express themselves freely, yet guiding them towards respectful and mindful” expression. The emphasis here is on enabling students to think independently, moving beyond the influences and biases they might have absorbed from their surroundings.

Matt and Cade are focused on creating a learning environment where every student feels safe and is allowed to express their views without fear or ridicule. Matt, for instance, has set strict rules that “promote a safe space where everyone feels comfortable participating in discussions”.

Maintaining a balance between respecting students' viewpoints and fostering a respectful learning environment is nuanced. The teachers' insights reveal a multifaceted approach that includes setting clear expectations, promoting essential values like respect and responsibility, encouraging open-mindedness, and fostering a safe and inclusive environment. These strategies collectively work towards ensuring that discussions, particularly on controversial topics, are handled with sensitivity, openness, and a deep sense of respect and understanding (Bezzina & Falzon, 2022; Brookfield & Preskill, 2016; Camilleri et al., 2012; Gay, 2018).

Professional Perspectives and Approaches

How professionals, especially those moulding the curriculum, perceive and address these topics can set the tone for PSCD education. How professionals, ranging from teachers to policymakers, perceive and tackle controversial issues presented by adolescents. In analysing the perceptions and strategies utilised by professionals, ranging from teachers to policymakers, in addressing controversial issues presented by adolescents, several themes emerged from the participants' insights.

Charlie highlighted a gap in the administrators' awareness and understanding of what transpires within the PSCD classrooms. They noted a tendency among administrators to “have little idea on what goes on in the PSCD classroom and what topics are discussed and the methodology that is used so normally they wouldn't know how to handle it”.

Miller emphasised “the importance of being current and relevant in addressing adolescent controversial issues”. They stressed that “educators, regardless of age, need to be technologically savvy and up to date with trends and discussions that resonate with the adolescents’ experiences and curiosities”.

Lory critically examined the system's responsiveness to students' voices and concerns, particularly those related to controversial issues. “There is a lack of genuine engagement and action from the administration despite the presentation of students' projects and voices”. Lory felt that there was a systemic issue where important matters raised by students often went unaddressed.

Dana offered a candid perspective on the limited influence of students' voices in decision-making processes. They observed a disparity between the engagement rhetoric and actual policy implementation, feeling that “the students’ inputs are often just left to formalities or box-ticking exercises”.

Matt was “very sceptical about the policymakers' effectiveness in addressing and implementing strategies that genuinely respond to controversial issues faced by adolescents”, indicating a disconnect or lack of alignment in policy enactment.

Cade discussed the influence of personal or institutional agendas on the handling of controversial issues. Cade suggested that the approach to these issues might be skewed or limited based on predetermined agendas or biases, affecting the breadth and depth of the discussions.

Educator-participants paint a picture of a system where the handling of controversial issues is influenced by varying levels of awareness, preparedness, and openness among professionals, from teachers to administrators and policymakers (Hess & McAvoy, 2014). The findings suggest a need for improved alignment, responsiveness, and genuine engagement across the educational ecosystem to ensure that controversial issues presented by adolescents are addressed comprehensively, empathetically, and effectively (Malti et al., 2016).

Theme 5: Students Perspective and Engagement

First of all, we've got to figure out how we're knowing when they start getting curious, you know? Usually, if people aren't interested, they'll just keep quiet or maybe crack a joke or something. But, on the other hand, most of them start firing

off lots of questions, right? To me, that's a sure sign they're interested, that's what I think (Matt).

Educator-participants insisted that a student-centric approach is paramount.

Understanding their perspectives and ensuring their engagement can lead to more fruitful discussions and better learning outcomes (Barber, 2021).

Issues Adolescents Believe Should be Discussed.

The interviews brought forth a rich diversity of viewpoints regarding the issues that adolescents believe should be discussed in the educational setting. Based on the participants' responses, it is apparent that controversial issues encompass a broad spectrum, ranging from societal norms and politics to personal and intimate aspects such as relationships and family structures.

Charlie emphasised the responsiveness to the immediate and emergent issues that students find relevant:

you need to be ready to deviate from the lesson plan to address any urgent problems that a large part of the class brings up. This will help you make sure that the topics you talk about are relevant and interesting for the students (Charlie).

Miller highlighted family issues such as separation, divorce, and gender roles within families as pivotal points of discussion. They noticed a considerable inclination among students to discuss personal and intimate issues, reflecting on their lives and experiences. Dana and Cade also echoed this sentiment, pointing towards subjects like abortion, consent, and relationships as areas of interest and controversy among students. Cade specifically noted that some topics, “like relationships and pornography, are introduced quite late in the curriculum”, suggesting a need for timelier initiation of these discussions.

Lory and Matt opined that some controversial topics are highly contextual and evolving. “Topics like sexuality and identity, which were controversial in the past, have become more open to discussion” (Lory). Matt, on the other hand, mentioned politics and corruption as areas of interest, possibly reflecting the broader societal discourse and the influence of prevailing national narratives on students' interests and concerns.

Miller also brought attention to issues related to lifestyle choices, such as dietary preferences, influenced by media and broader societal trends. This highlights the dynamic nature of what is considered controversial, showing responsiveness to global trends and media influences.

From the data gathered, it is evident that the range of issues adolescents find worth discussing is vast and multifaceted, reflecting both their personal lives and broader societal influences (Dahl, 2004). There is a notable emphasis on real-life issues such as family matters, relationships, societal norms, and lifestyle choices, indicating a desire among students to discuss topics that resonate with their experiences and current life situations (Rodgers & Scott, 2008; Sadowski, 2021). It underscores the importance of an adaptive and responsive educational approach that can cater to the evolving interests and concerns of the students, ensuring relevance and engagement in the learning process (Bryson & Hand, 2007; Bundick et al., 2014; Parsons & Taylor, 2011; Sadowski, 2021).

Ensuring an Inclusive Classroom Environment

Ensuring an inclusive classroom environment where every student feels valued and heard is a predominant theme that emerged from the interviews. Several strategies and approaches have been highlighted by the participants to foster inclusivity, each emphasising different facets of student engagement and participation.

Charlie emphasised a “no-hands-up approach” and the importance of being non-judgmental towards students' contributions. Their strategy involved “giving equal attention to all students and respecting their comfort boundaries, promoting an environment where students feel safe to express their thoughts without fear of judgement” (Charlie). Cade also touched on the idea of creating a supportive environment, clarifying “that being inclusive doesn't always mean agreeing, but rather creating a space where different points of view are valued and encouraged”.

Miller underscored the principle of equal participation, “where every student, including the shy ones, is encouraged to contribute to discussions”. Their approach entailed setting ground rules that promote turn-taking and equal opportunities for participation, ensuring that every student's voice is heard and valued. Lory, on the other hand, highlighted the challenge of “dealing with students at different maturity levels”, advocating for adaptive strategies that simplify complex topics to ensure that everyone in the class can understand and engage in the discussions.

Matt focused on the mutual learning aspect of teaching. He emphasised “listening to students and appreciating their perspectives, promoting a two-way learning process”. They shared that this approach not only values students' inputs but also acknowledges the

valuable insights that they bring to the discussion, fostering a sense of respect and mutual understanding between the teacher and the students.

Dana spoke about the diversity of thoughts and ideas that students bring, which keeps the learning environment vibrant and dynamic; “I love hearing what the students have to say, listening to fresh perspectives that students offer; this diversity is a valuable asset in the learning environment”.

Educator-participants suggested a multifaceted approach to ensuring inclusivity in the classroom. Emphasising respect, mutual learning, equality, and support appears to be central to fostering an environment where all students feel comfortable expressing their thoughts and opinions. These strategies collectively contribute to a rich, diverse, and inclusive educational experience, where both teachers and students can learn and grow from each other's perspectives and experiences (Ferguson & Nusbaum, 2012; Karten, 2009).

Evaluating Students' Engagement.

Educator-participants detailed that they use to assess students' comprehension, involvement, and responses during and after discussions on controversial topics. They employed different techniques to evaluate the effectiveness of discussions, ensuring that students not only comprehended the materials, but also felt engaged and comfortable participating in the conversations.

Charlie emphasised the role of questions and feedback in evaluating students' comprehension. They employed a strategy that involved “asking questions and referring to success criteria, allowing students to self-assess their understanding of the discussion”. Likewise, Cade, who also relied on questioning, aimed to understand students' perspectives and reactions in various situations without dominating the conversation.

Lory highlighted “For me, it is observation” as a pivotal tool. Their approach was multifaceted, involving the monitoring of “both verbal participation and non-verbal cues, such as silence and body language”. This technique allowed for a nuanced understanding of students' comfort and engagement levels, enabling the teacher to adapt and offer support on an individual basis when necessary.

Miller encouraged reflective exercises at the end of lessons. Students were given time to reflect on the discussions, enabling them to process and consolidate their learning. This method provided an opportunity for students to organically conclude their thoughts and demonstrate their understanding and involvement in the topics discussed.

Dana utilised case studies and role-playing to challenge students' perspectives and gauge their comprehension. "By assigning roles contrary to students' beliefs, I am able to facilitate an environment where students could explore different viewpoints, enhancing their understanding and empathy towards various stances on controversial topics".

Matt focused on assessing students' engagement levels through their reactions during discussions. Matt considered the quantity and quality of questions asked by students as indicative of their interest and comprehension, using these cues to measure the effectiveness of the discussions in stimulating students' thought processes.

Thus educator-participants revealed a spectrum of methods used by educators to assess students' comprehension, involvement, and responses in discussions (Brookhart, 2017). Techniques ranged from questioning and feedback to observation, reflective exercises, case studies, and role-playing. These methods collectively contribute to a nuanced evaluation strategy that assesses not only the cognitive but also the affective and empathetic dimensions of students' learning experiences, ensuring a rich and supportive environment conducive to open, thoughtful discussions on controversial topics (Bezzina & Falzon, 2022; Cefai, 2020; Popham, 2014).

Theme 6: Ongoing Efforts and Future Directions

"Any ongoing efforts or initiatives in Malta to improve the teaching and learning of controversial issues?... To my knowledge, no" (Cade). "Not that I know of and if it is done, then, it is not done correctly" (Matt). This section discusses the educator-participants' awareness and perceptions regarding the existing initiatives in Malta aimed at enhancing the teaching of controversial issues. A consensus emerged among participants, reflecting a general lack of awareness or the perceived absence of effective initiatives in this area. The educator-participants consistently indicated a lack of knowledge regarding any initiatives in place. This unanimous response underscores a significant gap in communication or the possible lack of prevalent initiatives focusing on the enhancement of teaching controversial issues.

Current Initiatives in Malta

Dana, while also expressing uncertainty about the existence of such initiatives, elaborated further, critiqued the nature of the seminars that do exist. They highlighted that "current seminars seemed to be mostly about sharing information and didn't offer any

useful tips for dealing with controversial topics in the classroom”. Likewise, Matt questioned the correctness and effectiveness of the execution of any initiatives that might be in place.

The findings convey a discernible gap in the presence or awareness of robust initiatives aimed at bolstering the teaching of controversial issues in Malta. The participants’ responses collectively signal a need for more pronounced efforts, better communication, and a shift towards more practically oriented strategies that equip educators to navigate the complexities of teaching controversial subjects effectively (Poplin & Rivera, 2005).

Future Research and Practices

The narratives provided by the participants painted a cohesive picture regarding their perspectives on future research and practices that could potentially enhance the PSCD curriculum and classroom experience, with a focus on handling controversial issues.

A common thread across the responses was a notable lack of awareness or existence of substantial research and initiatives aimed at improving the PSCD curriculum, particularly in dealing with controversial topics. Charlie, Miller, Lory, Matt, and Cade all explicitly mentioned having no knowledge of any such existing research or initiatives.

Dana offered a bit more insight, hinting at a potential area that future efforts could target for improvement. Dana expressed that the seminars, which presumably are part of existing efforts, seem more inclined towards information provision, missing out on strategies and methods to address controversial issues directly in the classroom.

Given the unanimous lack of awareness or existence of targeted research and practices, there is a clear indication that more needs to be done in the realm of PSCD education, with a focus on controversial issues. The feedback from participants highlights a pathway for future efforts, suggesting a need for initiatives that go beyond mere information dissemination.

Practical strategies, real-world approaches, and robust discussions on handling controversies in educational settings should be fostered. This could pave the way for a more dynamic, responsive, and effective PSCD curriculum that resonates more profoundly with the student’s experiences and the realities of the contemporary world.

Concluding Reflection

The reflections gathered from participants underscore the critical role of PSCD in fostering an educational environment that encourages students to engage deeply with complex and often controversial subjects. This engagement is facilitated through a

curriculum enriched with critical thinking and problem-solving exercises that are not merely academic but closely tied to real-life situations.

Integrating real-world scenarios within PSCD allows students to apply theoretical knowledge to practical situations, thereby understanding the relevance of their learning to the world around them. Strategic methodologies such as case studies, role-playing, and simulations serve as pedagogical tools, enabling educators to create dynamic learning experiences. These methodologies promote active learning and ensure that students are not passive recipients of information but active constructors of knowledge.

Moreover, by incorporating dynamic discussions into the curriculum, educators can create a participatory classroom atmosphere where diverse perspectives are shared and debated. This inclusivity in discourse encourages students to scrutinise varying viewpoints and to develop empathy and understanding of different life experiences and cultural backgrounds.

Such an educational strategy does more than just prepare students to handle contemporary challenges; it empowers them to be confident individuals capable of influencing and reshaping societal constructs towards greater inclusivity and equity. With the ability to question and critically examine prevailing societal norms and prejudices, students are positioned as emerging advocates for social justice.

Furthermore, PSCD courses are pivotal in helping learners refine their analytical skills — to dissect arguments, identify biases, and evaluate evidence. As they embrace diverse viewpoints, students also learn to synthesise information and formulate balanced, well-reasoned opinions. In addressing intricate issues, they are encouraged to think outside the box and develop innovative solutions that may challenge the status quo.

This holistic approach to education sets the groundwork for students to become thoughtful, informed, and proactive citizens. It primes them to contribute meaningfully to their communities and to foster environments where dialogue, collaboration, and respect for diversity are the norms. Ultimately, the reflections from the participants point towards a PSCD curriculum that not only prepares students for the future but also inspires them to actively shape it for the betterment of society.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

This chapter presents a synthesis of the crucial findings obtained from the interviews and delves into the possible constraints of this study, offering recommendations for future research aimed at building on these outcomes. The dissertation culminates in sharing final observations and exploring the potential impacts of this research on the educational sector.

Main Conclusions

This study aimed to explore how professionals address and experience contentious issues in the classroom. The main conclusion of this study is that professionals indeed face numerous challenges when addressing contentious issues in the classroom. These challenges include navigating differing perspectives and opinions, managing potential conflicts among students, and ensuring a safe and inclusive learning environment. It is crucial for future research to delve deeper into specific strategies and interventions that can help educators effectively address these challenges and promote constructive dialogue in the classroom. Additionally, exploring the impact of addressing contentious issues on students' critical thinking skills and social-emotional development would further enhance our understanding.

This research has the potential to contribute to the improvement of educational practices and create a more inclusive and tolerant learning environment for students. Furthermore, examining the role of teachers' own values, biases, standpoints, and beliefs in facilitating productive discussions on controversial topics would provide valuable insights into their professional development needs. Moreover, investigating the long-term effects of fostering open-mindedness and empathy in students through these interventions could have far-reaching implications for fostering a more harmonious and democratic society (Lawlor, 2016).

Lal and Vinod Kumar (2023) found that students who participated in a mindfulness-based intervention showed increased levels of empathy and open-mindedness even six months after the intervention ended. This suggests that these interventions have the potential to create lasting positive changes in students' attitudes and behaviours, which can contribute to building a more inclusive and tolerant society. By understanding the specific barriers that professionals face, policymakers and educators can work together to implement targeted training programs and allocate resources to address these challenges.

This collaborative effort can lead to the development of effective strategies and tools that can empower professionals to effectively address sensitive topics and foster respectful discussions among students.

Moreover, the insights gained from this research can inform the creation of comprehensive policies and guidelines that promote diversity, equity, and inclusion in educational institutions. By promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion in educational institutions, we can create an environment where all students feel valued and supported (Ainscow, 2020). This can lead to improved academic outcomes and a more inclusive society as a whole. Additionally, implementing these strategies can help dismantle systemic barriers and promote social justice within the education system. Furthermore, the findings of this research can inform the development of policies and guidelines that promote diversity and inclusion in educational settings, ultimately fostering a more equitable and respectful society.

Limitations of this Study

The qualitative data unearthed valuable insights into teachers' perspectives on addressing controversial issues in the PSCD classroom. While the incorporation of quantitative methods was recognized as a potential avenue for more comprehensive data (Kinn & Curzio, 2005), the intentional use of audio recordings during the study raised concerns about participants potentially avoiding discussions on sensitive aspects. To confront this, bracketing was systematically applied to recognize and set aside the potential impact of audio recordings on participants' candid discussions regarding their experiences, curriculum, and personal and professional realms. The potential influence of my presence during data collection on participants' responses was another limitation explicitly addressed through bracketing (Tufford & Newman, 2012). Recognizing the possibility that my presence might have affected the participants' openness and honesty, bracketing ensured that this potential impact was acknowledged and controlled for in the interpretation of the data (Fischer, 2009; Gill et al., 2008). Furthermore, the acknowledgment of the influence of the researcher's expertise on the quality of research and its susceptibility to personal biases and peculiarities was an additional area addressed through bracketing (Sorsa et al., 2015). This approach allowed for a conscious separation of the researcher's subjectivity from the research process, particularly in ensuring, assessing, and validating research rigor in complex contexts (Cypress, 2017).

The labour-intensive nature of analysis and interpretation in qualitative research, coupled with the potential challenges in acceptance and recognition by the scientific community in comparison to quantitative research, was openly acknowledged through bracketing. This approach facilitated a transparent discussion of the inherent limitations of a qualitative methodology, including the challenges in maintaining pseudonymity and confidentiality in presenting findings. The visual representation of qualitative findings was also recognized as a challenge, and bracketing served to systematically address and manage these difficulties, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of the study's limitations and the interpretive process (Ngulube, 2015).

Recommendations

Future research in the educational sector should prioritize a more student-centric approach, aiming to capture and understand student perspectives on engaging with controversial topics in the classroom. This approach is vital to better grasp their needs and experiences. Alongside this, there is a need to delve into how cultural and societal norms influence classroom discussions on contentious issues. Such research would offer deeper insights into crafting more effective dialogue strategies. Additionally, conducting comparative studies across various geographic and socio-economic settings would shed light on how different contexts influence the dynamics of these discussions. Integrating quantitative methods into future research could broaden our understanding and lend more weight to qualitative findings. Moreover, longitudinal studies are crucial to track the long-term effects of educational interventions on students' critical thinking and empathy skills.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study was not based on a specific geographic area but rather conducted with PSCD secondary school teachers. While the findings offer valuable insights into the perceptions and experiences of these educators, it is crucial to acknowledge the limited scope of the study. A potential avenue for further research could involve expanding the participant pool to include teachers from various subjects, allowing for a more comprehensive exploration of diverse perspectives.

The qualitative data from this study underscored the need for additional research to delve into the perspectives of students. Understanding how students navigate and interpret controversial issues can significantly contribute to shaping effective open dialogue strategies in the classroom. Future studies should consider incorporating student perspectives to enrich the overall understanding of challenges and potential solutions in fostering open communication within educational settings.

Moreover, the study's focus on a specific group of teachers raises questions about the generalizability of the findings to other educational contexts. To address this limitation, future research endeavours should explore different educational settings, ensuring a more inclusive and nuanced understanding of the challenges associated with open dialogue. This expansion beyond the current scope can provide a broader foundation for educational practices and policies.

Furthermore, the dearth of literature related to controversial issues within the local context highlights a critical gap in knowledge. Future research should aim to fill this void, offering insights into how open dialogue is navigated and understood in various cultural and societal settings. Exploring the impact of these factors can contribute valuable information for educators and policymakers seeking to enhance open dialogue strategies in diverse educational environments. In conclusion, while this study provides valuable insights, it serves as a starting point for more extensive and varied research in the realm of promoting open dialogue in classrooms.

Recommendations for Training

In terms of training, there is a pressing need to develop programs that enhance teachers' facilitation skills, enabling them to guide productive and respectful discussions. Equally important is training educators in conflict resolution techniques, which are essential for managing disagreements and maintaining a positive classroom environment. Training should also extend to cultural competence, preparing educators to be sensitive to their students' diverse backgrounds. Enhancing teachers' emotional intelligence is another key area, equipping them to better understand and respond to students' emotional and psychological needs. Continuous professional development should be encouraged to keep educators abreast of the latest teaching strategies and research in education.

Recommendations for Policy and Practice

This study underscores the importance of a whole school approach, starting from kindergarten, in embedding open dialogue practices within educational settings. Policymakers and educators are advised to prioritize the implementation of these practices as a fundamental aspect of the educational curriculum. The key to this approach lies in developing an inclusive curriculum that nurtures critical thinking and fosters respectful discussions on controversial topics from the earliest stages of education.

In parallel, it is crucial for educators across all grade levels to receive comprehensive training and ongoing support in facilitating open dialogue. Such training should focus on equipping teachers with the skills and knowledge necessary to create and maintain a safe and inclusive environment. In these environments, students of all ages feel comfortable and empowered to express their opinions and engage in meaningful conversations.

Policymakers play a vital role in this initiative. They should consider allocating adequate resources towards initiatives that bolster open dialogue practices. This includes providing funding for professional development programs tailored to educators at different stages of the spectrum and creating comprehensive guidelines for schools to effectively implement these practices.

Investing in the training and support of educators is a strategic move. It ensures that teachers, right from the kindergarten level, are well-prepared to facilitate open dialogue, thereby laying a foundation for these skills early in a child's educational journey. Promoting open discussion in classrooms, especially from a young age, is instrumental in developing critical thinking skills and nurturing empathy among students. This holistic approach prepares them for success in a world that is increasingly diverse and interconnected, fostering a generation of well-rounded, empathetic, and critically engaged individuals.

Final Thought

Promoting open dialogue in the classroom benefits students academically and helps them develop necessary social and emotional skills. By encouraging respectful and constructive conversations, educators can foster a sense of empathy and understanding among students, preparing them for success in an increasingly diverse and interconnected world. Additionally, by prioritising open dialogue, schools can create a culture of critical thinking and active participation, empowering students to become informed citizens who can respectfully engage with differing perspectives. Furthermore, promoting open dialogue in schools allows students to develop their unique voices and opinions, helping them to

build confidence and self-expression. This enhances their overall communication skills and prepares them for future challenges where they may need to advocate for themselves or others.

Ultimately, prioritising open dialogue in education equips students with the necessary tools to navigate complex social issues and contribute positively to society. As Lory so poignantly put it:

You see, in our schools, having an open conversation isn't just about teaching students how to think critically and show empathy; it's also about teaching them how important it is to accept differences and value different points of view. Creating an environment where everyone feels welcome is like taking care of a garden—it grows a generation of caring, well-rounded people. When these kids get older, they learn how to make smart choices, and they have the power to make the world a better place. It's not just about schooling; it's about making people around the world responsible and caring.

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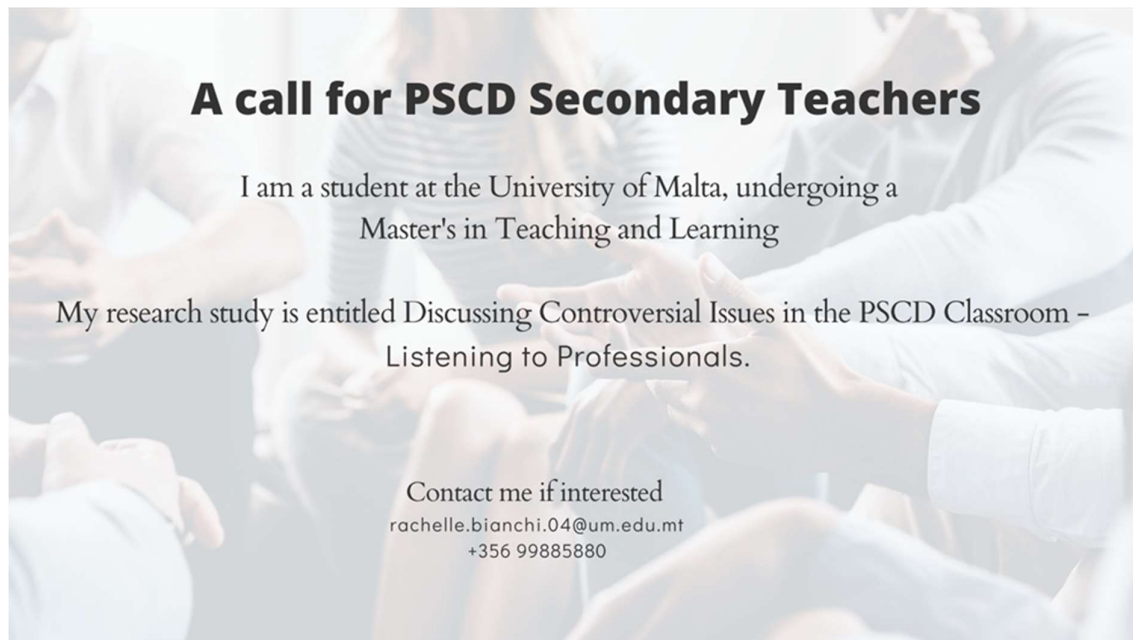
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Appendix A: Social Media Blurb to Recruit Participants

I am a student at the University of Malta, presently reading for a Master in Teaching and Learning in PSCD. I am presently conducting a research study for my dissertation titled 'Discussing controversial issues in the classroom – Listening to professionals.

The aim is to explore PSCD teachers' experiences when dealing with controversial issues in the classroom. This dissertation is being supervised by Prof. Ruth Falzon. This poster is an invitation to participate in this study. Your participation in this study would help contribute to benefit society. Should you need information, do not hesitate to get in touch with me via Facebook, email rachelle.bianchi.04@um.edu.mt or mobile number +356 99885880. Thank you for your time and I hope to hear from you soon.



Appendix B: Information Letter for Participants

Information Letter for Participants

Discussing Controversial Issues in the PSCD Classroom - Listening to PSCD Teachers

Dear Sir/Madam,

My name is Rachelle Bianchi and I am a student at the University of Malta, presently reading for a Masters in Teaching and Learning in Personal Social Career Development. I am presently conducting a research study for my dissertation titled; Discussing Controversial Issues in the PSCD Classroom - Listening to PSCD Teachers. This is being supervised by Prof. Ruth Falzon. This letter is an invitation to participate in this study. Below you will find information about the study and about what your involvement would entail, should you decide to take part.

The aim of my study is to explore PSCD teachers' deal with Controversial issues which arise in the PSCD classroom. Should you choose to participate, you will be asked to respond to questions during a semi-structured interview carried out face-to-face or through an online platform, according to participants' preference or the health situation of the island at the time. If held online, the platform ZOOM would be used, and the session would only be audio-recorded. Since audio-recording is essential in this project, please do not come forward if you do not wish to be audio-recorded. Questions will be related to your own experiences as a PSCD teacher regarding controversial issues in the classroom. Whilst the interview questions will be in English, you may choose to speak in English or Maltese. Should you choose to contact me, kindly note that the choice of professional participants will be solely on a first-come-first-served basis, namely the first six who contact me. Participation in this study is entirely voluntary; in other words, you are free to accept or refuse to participate, without needing to give a reason. You are also free to withdraw from the study at any time, without needing to provide any explanation and without any negative repercussions for you. Should you choose to withdraw, any data collected from your interview will be deleted.

If you choose to participate, please note that there are no direct benefits to you. Your participation does not entail any known or anticipated risks. However, your voice will be of benefit to the students we serve and to the community of educators.

There are not enough PSCD teachers on the island to be able for me to claim that you will not be identifiable. However, to protect your identity, data collected through audio-recording will be pseudonymized and solely used for the purpose of the study. Your gender will not be divulged and a gender-neutral pseudonym, and the pronoun they will be used throughout the work. Further, your type of school, your locality, and the forms that you teach will not be divulged. Any incident, which you mention, will be fictionalised/alterd in order to ensure confidentiality of professional data and make you non-identifiable to the reader. You will be given the opportunity to choose your own pseudonym.

Your personal data will be safely stored in encrypted password-protected soft copies and/or locked in a safe space known only to me if hard copies. Please also note that, as a participant, you have the right under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and national legislation to access, rectify and where applicable ask for the data concerning you to be erased. Therefore, kindly be aware that you can choose review extracts from the interview transcript that I would like to reproduce in research outputs before these are published. All data collected will be erased following the completion of study.

A copy of this information sheet is being provided for you to keep and for future reference. The consent form is also in this document for your perusal and information in order to help you make a fully informed decision.

Should you wish to participate in this study, kindly contact me via email on Rachelle.bianchi.06@um.edu.mt or via phone +356 99885880. Furthermore, do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions or concerns. You can also contact my supervisor via email on ruth.falzon@um.edu.mt or by phone +356 7909 2910.

Thank you for your time and consideration. Sincerely,

Rachelle Bianchi

rachelle.bianchi.06@um.edu.mt

+356 99885880

Prof. Ruth Falzon

ruth.falzon@um.edu.mt

+356 7909 2910

Appendix C: Consent Form

Discussing Controversial Issues in the PSCD Classroom - Listening to PSCD Teachers

I, the undersigned, give my consent to take part in the study conducted by Rachelle Bianchi. This consent form specifies the terms of my participation in this research study.

1. I have been given written and/or verbal information about the purpose of the study; I have had the opportunity to ask questions and any questions that I had were answered fully and to my satisfaction.
2. I also understand that I am free to accept to participate, or to refuse or stop participation at any time without giving any reason and without any penalty. Should I choose to participate, I may choose to decline to answer any questions asked. If I choose to withdraw from the study, any data collected from me will be erased as long as it is technically possible (for example, before it is anonymised or published) unless erasure of data would render impossible or seriously impair achievement of the research objectives, in which case it shall be retained in an anonymised form.
3. I understand that I have been invited to participate in the interview in which the researcher will ask questions to explore how PSCD teachers deal with controversial issues which arise in the PSCD classroom. I am aware that the interview will take approximately one hour. I understand that the interview is to be conducted in a place and at a time that is convenient for me.
4. I understand that my participation does not entail any known or anticipated risks.
5. I understand that there are no direct benefits to me from participating in this study/there are the following direct benefits to me.
6. I understand that, under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and national legislation, I have the right to access, rectify, and where applicable, ask for the data concerning me to be erased.
7. I understand that all data collected will be stored in a pseudonymised form.
8. I have been provided with a copy of the information letter and understand that I will also be given a copy of this consent form.
9. I am aware that I may ask to be given the opportunity to review relevant extracts of the transcript of my interview before the results of the study are published. I am also aware that I may ask for changes be made if I consider this to be necessary.
10. I am aware that, if I give my consent, extracts from my interview may be reproduced in the research work using a pseudonym, which pseudonym I will be given the opportunity to choose.
11. I am aware that, by marking the first-tick box below, I am giving my consent for the interviews to be audio recorded and converted to text as it has been recorded (transcribed).

MARK ONLY IF AND AS APPLICABLE

- I agree to this interview being audio recorded.
- I do not agree to this interview being audio recorded.

12. In the case of participants who may be identifiable:

I am aware that, by marking the first tick-box below, I am asking to review extracts from my interview transcript that the researcher would like to reproduce in research outputs, before these are published. I am also aware that I may ask for changes to be made if I consider these to be necessary.

MARK ONLY IF AND AS APPLICABLE

- I would like to review extracts of my interview transcript that the researcher would like to reproduce in research outputs before these are published.
- I would not like to review my interview transcript extracts that the researcher would like to reproduce in research outputs before these are published.

13. Due to COVID-19, there is a possibility that interviews will be held online; the researcher will use Zoom and will activate the Require Encryption for 3rd party endpoints SIP/H-323 function. The researcher will only audio record the session.

14. I am aware that my data will be pseudonymised, i.e., my identity will not be noted on transcripts or notes from my interview, but instead, a code will be assigned. The codes that link my data to my identity will be stored securely and separately from the data, in an encrypted file on the researcher's password-protected computer, and only the researcher [if applicable, add academic supervisor/s and examiners] will have access to this information. Any hard-copy materials will be placed in a locked cabinet/drawer. Any material that identifies me as a participant in this study will be stored securely for the duration of the study (until December 2023) and thereafter permanently destroyed.

15. I am aware that my identity and personal information will not be revealed in any publications, reports or presentations arising from this research.

I have read and understood the above statements and agree to participate in this study.

Name of participant: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Rachelle Bianchi

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Prof. Ruth Falzon

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Appendix D: Semi-Structured Interview Questions

Discussing Controversial Issues in the PSCD Classroom - Listening to PSCD Teachers

1. What do you understand by the term controversial issues?
2. Would you ever consider avoiding a controversial issue? Why?
3. Do the learning outcomes address controversial issues?
4. What are some examples of contentious issues that adolescents in the PSCD classroom believe should be addressed? How did you gather this information?
5. How do you perceive the importance of discussing controversial issues in the PSCD classroom? What benefits do you believe it brings to students?
6. According to your experience, what challenges arise when addressing contentious issues in the PSCD curriculum? How do you navigate these challenges?
7. How do you define contentious issues in the context of PSCD education? Are there any specific criteria or guidelines you follow?
8. In your opinion, why do some professionals avoid or ignore controversial topics in the PSCD curriculum? What are the potential consequences of doing so?
9. How do professionals, including teachers, administrators, and policymakers, view and address the controversial issues brought up by adolescents in the PSCD classroom? Are there any common approaches or strategies?
10. What are some considerations and potential conflicts that arise during dialogues on controversial issues in the classroom, especially when it involves emotions and power dynamics?
11. From your perspective, why are controversial issues challenging to teach? How do these challenges impact students' learning experiences?
12. What strategies and approaches do you use to facilitate discussions on controversial issues in the PSCD classroom? Can you provide examples of successful implementation?
13. How do you incorporate current controversial issues in Malta into the PSCD curriculum? How do you ensure that these issues are addressed appropriately and sensitively?

14. How do you understand and appreciate the perspectives of teenagers when discussing contentious topics? How do you create an inclusive and supportive environment for their voices to be heard?
15. Are there any ongoing efforts or initiatives in Malta to improve the teaching and learning of controversial issues in the PSCD classroom? What are the future directions for research and practice in this area?
16. In your opinion, is it possible to strike a balance between respecting students' viewpoints and ensuring a safe and respectful learning environment during discussions on contentious topics? How do you achieve this balance?
17. How do you assess students' understanding and engagement when discussing controversial issues? Are there any specific assessment methods or tools that you find effective in this context?
18. Can you share any personal experiences or anecdotes that highlight the impact of addressing controversial issues in the PSCD classroom? How have these discussions influenced students' attitudes and behaviours?

Appendix E: Acceptance Issued by the Faculty Research Ethics Committee (FREC)



Faculty of Education

University of Malta
Msida MSD 2080, Malta

Tel: +356 2340 3058/2932
educ@um.edu.mt

www.um.edu.mt/educ

17th November 2022

RE: Application for Research Ethics Clearance EDUC-2022-00085 Rachele Bianchi

Dear Rachele Bianchi,

With reference to your application EDUC-2022-00085 Rachele Bianchi for Research Ethics clearance, I am pleased to inform you that **FREC finds no ethical or data protection issues in terms of content and procedure.**

You may therefore proceed to approach potential informants to collect data using the tools/documents outlined in this application.

You are reminded that it is your responsibility - under the guidance of your supervisor - to distribute Information Letters and Consent/Assent Forms that are written in appropriate and correct English and Maltese.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "J. Gravina".

Dr Joseph Gravina
Chairperson Faculty Research Ethics Committee
Faculty of Education

Appendix F: Table 1 Themes with Supporting Quotes

Theme 1 - Understanding Controversial Issues

What is controversial? It is a difficult concept to explain... because what is controversial for me might not be controversial to you... It's subjective, no?. (Charlie)

This is something that they generally don't agree on so that's what I think that's what comes to mind and I think about controversial issues they don't agree with each other. (Miller)

"Different societies will have different meanings of what controversial issues are. (Lory)

Sub-theme 1a - Interpretations of 'controversial issues'

Controversial issues don't stay the same - they change as we change, as what we hold important changes. So, in class, when we talk about these hot potatoes, we've got to stay on our toes, ready to adapt, because what was controversial yesterday might not be tomorrow (Lory). We need to make sure we're keeping the door open for all sorts of opinions in class, respecting each other while we're at it. It's about getting our students to think deeply and reflect, considering all the different angles. (Lory)

Sub-theme 1b - Nature & Characteristics of Controversial Issue

They are issues, subjects, topics that tend to be controversial, which means that they are meant to or could bring up strong divided responses from different students. Issues where there is no correct answer and issues which are a matter of opinion. (Charlie)

These are issues that create debate and that a number of students might agree or disagree on. (Dana)

Sub-Theme 1c - Sensitivity and Societal Reflection

Topics that might be delicate issues, maybe white elephants in the country, so that might be a bit delicate to tackle. (Matt)

Different societies interpret controversial issues uniquely, influenced by varied values, beliefs, upbringings, and social contexts. Usually controversial issues are socially based controversial issues are socially based. (Lory)

Sub-Theme 1d - Dynamic Evolution

Evolving entities, those issues which we meet on a daily basis. (Cade)

Sub-Theme 1e - Guidelines to define contentious issues

The importance of having a consistent way of dealing with contentious issues, from identifying to discussing them. (Charlie)

Maybe because they stir up strong and varying opinions and emotions, I don't think it is possible to ignore controversial topics when these are specifically listed in the LOs (Charlie)
Having talks with an open and fair mind, without thinking ahead of time that a subject is controversial. (Lory)

We should look at these issues as chances to learn, not just as things to argue about or stir up trouble. (Lory)

It shows them that learning is more than just structured subjects and encourages them to think for themselves, come to their own conclusions, and see things from a wider viewpoint than what their family or the media tells them. (Miller)

Making sure that kids feel safe and respected so that they can share their thoughts (Cade)
Respecting each other all the time, even when you disagree, is important for keeping a healthy, constructive conversation environment. (Cade)

It's important to keep up with current events, social media, and students' language and worlds so that conversations are relevant and clear. (Cade).

A natural, necessary part of education. (Matt)

respect, acceptance, and making a safe place where honest and open talks can happen are all important. (Charlie)

Not only educational but also help widen students' viewpoints, improve their thinking skills, and develop their ability to think independently. (Miller)

Theme 2 - Importance of addressing controversial issues

I believe that it is very important, it provides a safe space for students to discuss difficult topics, especially when communication becomes challenging during puberty as students grow older and in secondary school we find that when students reach a certain age, they hit puberty and start withdrawing from their parents and certain discussions between parents and children become harder at a certain age and that is exactly when PSCD comes in to give that safe space for the students to be able to discuss these issues. (Charlie)

Sub- Theme 2a - Significance of discussing controversial topics

Safe space for students to discuss difficult topics, especially when communication becomes challenging during puberty. (Charlie)

Challenge and significance of discussing controversial topics in culturally diverse classrooms. (Miller)

Giving students the opportunity and chance to learn the skills they need to handle real-life situations. (Cade)

Sub-Theme 2b - Critical thinking and empathy

It is important for students to talk about controversial topics in order to improve their ability to think critically... [as] [t]these discussions give students a chance to ask questions and learn about different points of view. (Dana)

Students can understand other people better when they hear different points of view during these kinds of discussions. (Miller)

the importance of learning to engage in respectful and open discussions. (Dana)

The teacher's job is to stay neutral, support well-thought-out points, and make sure the classroom is a safe and respectful place to talk. (Miller).

Sub-Theme 2c -Current controversial issues in Malta

Local controversies often become politicised, so I prefer to avoid them in classroom discussions. (Charlie) immediate and relevant. (Miller)

Real-world issues that students can connect with and that speak to their current lives and social experiences. (Matt)

Having a flexible curriculum that allows room for discussing current events and controversies, even if they are not part of the planned syllabus. (Dana)

Relevant and engaging for the students. (Dana)

Sub-Theme 2d – Outcomes of addressing Controversial issues

Classroom discussions were particularly helpful for talking about gender problems (Charlie) these discussions not only facilitated individual students but also enhanced the overall classroom environment, fostering a space where students felt comfortable sharing and discussing gender-related challenges. (Charlie).

There were clear changes in students' views after many talks, especially among those who had initially held patriarchal views. The discussions helped the students look at problems from different points of view. (Miller)

The discussions made people more accepting of different points of view and life situations (Dana). Not necessarily on changing people's minds, but on making the school a place where students felt less judged and more willing to understand and accept other points of view (Dana).

Theme 3 – Challenges and Complexities

Sometimes they don't know how to speak and discuss they just quarrel with each other.

(Miller)

The challenges that I find are narrow-minded students Who at all cost they try to replicate what are other people say and there's no way to reason with these students for me that is one of the most challenging aspect. (Matt)

Sub-Theme 3a - Challenges when teaching Controversial Issues

Students are at different stages of growth and readiness. Some students might not be ready or feel comfortable talking about certain things in class. (Charlie)

Disagreements in the classroom can be very challenging. (Miller)labelling topics as controversial might be enhancing their controversial nature. (Lory)

How a teacher approaches a subject can affect how students understand and talk about it in class. (Lory).

Because my school is all boys, it's especially hard to talk about sexuality problems like transgender issues because of the homophobic attitudes that are common there. (Dana)

narrow-minded students. (Matt)

It's hard for me to talk to and reason with these students. (Matt)

What I find challenging is dealing with students who are not open to listening or accepting different opinions, making discussions less productive and more conflict-prone. (Cade)

Sub-Theme 3b. Student experiences and backgrounds

I think this keeps the educational experience safe for everyone and makes sure there are no unpleasant conversations. (Charlie)

It's important for teachers to be very self-aware and make sure that their own views don't openly or covertly affect the way students talk in class. (Dana)

People sometimes bring their own personal or social biases into class discussions without meaning to. This can make things more difficult because they make people talk about their own feelings or the way society works instead of the educational topic we're supposed to be talking about. (Lory)

When it comes to politics, especially, students often talk about things they have heard from other people because of their families. (Cade)

Challenges often lie more with the teacher's comfort and approach with a topic. (Matt)

Sub-Theme 3c. Emotions and Power Dynamics

Such emotional intensity occasionally leads to discussions becoming heated, reflecting a lack of empathy or understanding towards peers' differing perspectives and personal experiences.

(Charlie)

Making sure that different opinions are heard is hard because students might not want to share their thoughts, especially if they feel insecure or left out because they hold a minority view. (Dana)

Ignoring controversial topics, which are essential parts of the learning objectives, would make the education less complete. (Charlie)

the role of culture and the need to normalise controversial issues in order to prepare students for social problems they will face in the real world. (Lory)

space where controversial matters can be discussed openly. (Matt)

safe space where students can openly discuss and explore these issues (Cade)

okay for educators not to have all the answers and to show vulnerability in their lack of knowledge by committing to finding and delivering the right information later (Cade)

Sub-Theme 3d. Avoidance of Controversial Issues

Ignoring controversial topics, which are essential parts of the learning objectives, would make the education less complete. (Charlie)

The role of culture and the need to normalise controversial issues in order to prepare students for social problems they will face in the real world. (Lory)

Space where controversial matters can be discussed openly. (Matt)

Safe space where students can openly discuss and explore these issues. (Cade)

It is okay for educators not to have all the answers and to show vulnerability in their lack of knowledge by committing to finding and delivering the right information later. (Cade)

Sub-Theme 3e. Repercussions of Controversial issues

Ignoring them compromises the curriculum's comprehensiveness and integrity. (Charlie)

making controversial issues seem normal and encouraging teachers to get the training they need to lead open, non-judgmental conversations about them. (Lory)

a classroom that is too peaceful is created by avoiding difficult topics. (Dana)

Students can't engage effectively if they avoid these kinds of conversations anonymous question boxes could facilitate more comfortable student participation, especially in discussing sensitive topics like sexuality. (Matt)

staying away from these situations could cost students important chances to connect, relate, and get more information about different problems. (Cade)

Theme 4 - Strategies and Approaches

Perhaps students will feel more comfortable discussing certain topics and groups of three or four rather than the whole class and then move it forward to the whole class. It is important to hear everyone's opinion. (Charlie)

Sub-Theme 4a. Pedagogical methods used

Students feel more comfortable expressing their opinions in a more intimate setting (Charlie)

Making every student feel involved and attentive since any of them might be asked to share their thoughts at any moment. (Charlie)

question box (Matt)

Pushing students beyond their preconceived notions and allowing them to view issues from different perspectives, ensuring a comprehensive discussion. (Lory)

Sub-Theme 4b. Maintaining a respectful Learning environment

Building a strong base in the first few weeks is important for making things go more smoothly when talking about touchy subjects. (Charlie)

Setting clear rules before starting lessons to guide behaviour and discussions during controversial issues. (Matt) They help keep the classroom a safe and respectful place to learn, making sure that everyone feels safe and valued. (Matt)

Open-mindedness, where students are encouraged to listen to and think about different points of view, even if they do not change their initial thoughts. (Miller)

Balance, allowing students to express themselves freely, yet guiding them towards respectful and mindful. (Dana)

Promote a safe space where everyone feels comfortable participating in discussions. (Matt)

Sub-Theme 4 c. Professional perspectives and approaches

Have little idea on what goes on in the PSCD classroom and what topics are discussed and the methodology that is used so normally they wouldn't know how to handle it. (Charlie)

The importance of being current and relevant in addressing adolescent controversial issues. (Miller)

Educators, regardless of age, need to be technologically savvy and up to date with trends and discussions that resonate with the adolescents' experiences and curiosities. (Miller).

There is a lack of genuine engagement and action from the administration despite the presentation of students' projects and voices. (Lory)

The students' inputs are often just left to formalities or box-ticking exercises. (Dana)

Very sceptical about the policymakers' effectiveness in addressing and implementing strategies that genuinely respond to controversial issues faced by adolescents. (Matt)

Theme 5 - Student Perspective and Engagement

First of all, we've got to figure out how we're knowing when they start getting curious, you know? Usually, if people aren't interested, they'll just keep quiet or maybe crack a joke or something. But, on the other hand, most of them start firing off lots of questions, right? To me, that's a sure sign they're interested, that's what I think. (Matt)

Sub-Theme 5a. Issues adolescents believe should be discussed.

You need to be ready to deviate from the lesson plan to address any urgent problems that a large part of the class brings up. This will help you make sure that the topics you talk about are relevant and interesting for the students (Charlie)

Like relationships and pornography, are introduced quite late in the curriculum (Cade)

Topics like sexuality and identity, which were controversial in the past, have become more open to discussion. (Lory)

Sub-Theme 5b. Ensuring an inclusive classroom environment

No-hands-up approach. (Charlie)

Giving equal attention to all students and respecting their comfort boundaries, promoting an environment where students feel safe to express their thoughts without fear of judgement. (Charlie)

That being inclusive doesn't always mean agreeing, but rather creating a space where different points of view are valued and encouraged. (Cade)

Where every student, including the shy ones, is encouraged to contribute to discussions. (Miller)

dealing with students at different maturity levels. (Lory)

listening to students and appreciating their perspectives, promoting a two-way learning process (Matt)

I love hearing what the students have to say, listening to fresh perspectives that students offer; this diversity is a valuable asset in the learning environment (Dana)

Sub-Theme 5c. Evaluating students' engagement

Asking questions and referring to success criteria, allowing students to self-assess their understanding of the discussion. (Charlie)

For me, it is observation. both verbal participation and non-verbal cues, such as silence and body language. (Lory)

You see, in our schools, having an open conversation isn't just about teaching students how to think critically and show empathy; it's also about teaching them how important it is to accept differences and value different points of view. Creating an environment where everyone feels welcome is like taking care of a garden—it grows a generation of caring, well-rounded people. When these kids get older, they learn how to make smart choices, and they have the power to make the world a better place. It's not just about schooling; it's about making people around the world responsible and caring.(Lory)

By assigning roles contrary to students' beliefs, I am able to facilitate an environment where students could explore different viewpoints, enhancing their understanding and empathy towards various stances on controversial topics. (Dana)

Theme 6 - Ongoing Efforts and Future Directions

Any ongoing efforts or initiatives in Malta to improve the teaching and learning of controversial issues?... To my knowledge, no. (Cade)

Not that I know of and if it is done, then, it is not done correctly. (Matt)

Sub-Theme 6a. Current initiatives in Malta

Current seminars seemed to be mostly about sharing information and didn't offer any useful tips for dealing with controversial topics in the classroom (Dana)

Appendix G: Audit Trail 1 - Transcript of Charlie

1. What do you understand by the term controversial issues?

They are issues, subjects, topics that tend to be controversial, which means that they are meant to or could bring up strong divided responses from different students. Issues where there is no correct answer and issues which are a matter of opinion.

2. Would you ever consider avoiding a controversial issue? Why?

Avoiding a controversial issue really and truly the easiest thing to do but it is not within the scope of the PSCD subject; so no you cannot avoid a controversial issue, while it might be tempting to avoid the controversial issue - no definitely not the right thing to do

3. Do the learning outcomes address controversial issues?

Yes I believe they do, do they. There are a number of learning outcomes that do. The new L/O- Most of them are still reflective of the old topic so really and truly we haven't seen any new topics or subjects being introduced in the PSCD syllabus.

4. What are some examples of contentious issues that adolescents in the PSCD classroom believe should be addressed? How did you gather this information?

I'm trying to think because really and truly I believe we cover all aspects. I don't think I've come across a situation where the students wanted to discuss a controversial issue and it was not addressed in the syllabus. That said you need to be ready to deviate from the lesson plan to address any urgent problems that a large part of the class brings up. This will help you make sure that the topics you talk about are relevant and interesting for the students. if it would ever come up sort of there and then as an immediacy issue, you would address it there and then anyway so I wouldn't mind diverging off the lesson plan to address an issue that is common to the whole class - that said not to just one student. Common to at least part of the class.

5. How do you perceive the importance of discussing controversial issues in the PSCD classroom? What benefits do you believe it brings to the students?

I believe that it is very important, it provides a safe space for students to discuss difficult topics, especially when communication becomes challenging during puberty as students grow older and in secondary school we find that when students reach a certain age, they hit puberty and start withdrawing from their parents and certain discussions between parents and children become harder at a certain age and that is exactly when PSCD comes in.

Appendix H: Audit Trail 2- Transcript of Miller

6. According to your experience, what challenges arise when addressing contentious issues in the PSCD curriculum? How do you navigate these challenges?

Yes, I think sometimes there are disagreements in the classroom. Disagreements in the classroom can be very challenging. They start disagreeing with each other. It's a challenge. No it's not like that. I think that my opinion is right- this is a challenge. This kind of reasoning is a challenge for me. So what I do is, I put them in groups to discuss the topics and then we will see each group what they came up with or the conclusion. It depends on the classroom however because one class cannot do the same topic the same like put them in groups. For example, every class is different, it has to be different - you can't do the same thing with all the classes. Because each class and each student is different, so you have to treat them differently-there is the quiet class who accept everything and then there are those classes which are very challenging so as a teacher, you have to adapt, and to get the discussing going - you have to challenge them and with activities, there are certain activities that can help not only discussions because sometimes they don't know how to speak and discuss they just quarrel with each other so you can give them case studies so depends upon which class you're dealing with really.

7. How do you define contentious issues in the context of PSCD education? Are there any specific criteria or guidelines you follow?

Education, yes well in education, I think it is a good idea to put it in controversial issues in the syllabus and the syllabus as an education so that they realize that education is not only structured Mathematics or English because you're going to have something that you need to deal with that you need to speak about and you're going to get the right conclusion really. Because they have to realize that they need to think right, not that they have to think about what their family or media thinks. because they have to come to their own conclusions. With the help of the facilitator with my help, they have to reach their own conclusions. For example, they are speaking about abortion as a facilitator you try to help them think about the pros and cons, and they come to their own conclusions. So in education, I think it is important that there are these issues especially in Pscd.

Appendix I: Audit Trail 3 - Transcript of Lory

11. From your perspective, why are controversial issues challenging to teach? How do these challenges impact students' learning experiences? From your perspective via controversial issues, challenging to teach

Because we make them challenging, we make them challenging. We bring our own agendas in class and social agendas. In fact, we are usually shocked when students do not react the way we expect them to react. If however I had to mention one thing which would be beyond my control then that would be dealing with students at different maturity levels

12. What strategies and approaches do you use to facilitate discussions on controversial issues in the PSCD classroom? Can you provide examples of successful implementation?

I like pushing students beyond their preconceived notions and allowing them to view issues from different perspectives, ensuring a comprehensive discussion. I do not use any particular I mean I like listening and observing I listen and observe a lot sometimes when you have a good relationship with the class which is not a way that easy you know what to expect because of the dynamics we just mentioned because of the characters People not being people not having their say in their opinion then they're going to be the aggressive tie because you don't agree with them so you know what you're going to expect, and that is where you come in as a teacher, the ability of creating harmony, no creating a balance, and the students listen to what they are saying what others are saying what they themselves are saying so sometimes even me as a teacher I actually tell them listen to yourself reflect on what you are saying. Would this have a consequence if you would have to say this outside the classroom, and this is the most important thing I think to observe to listen, and to let the students reflect, I like telling the students in fact to try to see themselves in a mirror the way they are talking, the way they are shouting on the offending. What happened outside, what would be the consequences of your actions? There's no need to offend, there's no need to be loud, there's no need to get into arguments. All we need to do is to speak calmly with respect and to say why we don't agree, why we agree with each other. It's as simple as that.

Appendix J: Audit Trail 4 - Transcript of Dana

14. How do you understand and appreciate the perspectives of teenagers when discussing contentious topics? How do you create an inclusive and supportive environment for their voices to be heard?

I have been teaching for 12 years and I enjoy teaching my job because of this because they always bring something new to the table and it's something so interesting for me and it keeps me young as well. It keeps my brain thinking all the time and it really excites me as a person. I love their mind, I love the way they think. I love hearing what the students have to say, listening to fresh perspectives that students offer; this diversity is a valuable asset in the learning environment

15. Are there any ongoing efforts or initiatives in Malta to improve the teaching and learning of controversial issues in the PSCD classroom? What are the future directions for research and practice in this area?

Not really, current seminars seemed to be mostly about sharing information and didn't offer any useful tips for dealing with controversial topics in the classroom

16. In your opinion, is it possible to strike a balance between respecting students' viewpoints and ensuring a safe and respectful learning environment during discussions on contentious topics? How do you achieve this balance?

It is important for students to talk about controversial topics in order to improve their ability to think critically. These discussions give students a chance to ask questions and learn about different points of view. This is the most difficult to reach this balance because as I said you want them to voice out but on the other hand you have to be careful of the way they speak. Because sometimes the way they talk, and again you have to let them free to talk the way they want to but you have to also help them understand that there is a way and a way to talk – no this way of talking is not respectful enough – but this can be done by repeating and by modeling by behavior – never by condemning. And by praising the students when they discuss well – prosit et tara kif irnexxielek - they need to be trained and unfortunately we lack this from pre grade – we don't know how to talk, how to discuss. Its us or them in our society – in everything – its black or with or blue or red – another big challenge is trying to help them to think with their minds rather than from what they hear at home because at

Appendix K: Audit Trail 5 - Transcript of Matt

7. How do you define contentious issues in the context of PSCD education? Are there any specific criteria or guidelines you follow?

I don't see any issues I think for me it's more the teacher who would have issues addressing these issues I think because we are called to discuss these issues. It is something which has to be done. There's no question asked.

8. In your opinion, why do some professionals avoid or ignore controversial topics in the PSCD curriculum? What are the potential consequences of doing so?

First and foremost, I believe that if a student asked the question, I believe that it has to be answered, students can't engage effectively if they avoid these kinds of conversations, if a teacher feels uncomfortable maybe, anonymous question boxes could facilitate more comfortable student participation, especially in discussing sensitive topics like sexuality and it is our duty as teachers to answer to those questions if you don't have the answers to those questions you can write it down and try to find information and then address it for the next lesson and that is one of the fears that I think teachers have when addressing these issues because they feel that they don't have enough information however, PSD, it is skill based through the experiential life cycle, would you learn from each other you are there to facilitate so you bring out the information from the students so let's say, for example, if you addressing Daphne's murder, I say listen what do you know about information what happened and people start trying to get information and sharing their information and then obviously I try to if they say something which wasn't true or if they are trying to manipulate the facts I try to give the right information but ultimately it is a student centered lesson. It is not teacher centered and teachers feel that they have an obligation to give information when it's not like that which is not the case in my opinion especially in the case of Pscd if you're teaching say social studies then yes you need to give facts, but Pscd I don't feel that we need to give facts unless they are saying something that is completely untrue and then yes in that case you have to give the facts

Appendix L Audit Trail 6 -Transcript of Cade

9. How do professionals, including teachers, administrators, and policymakers, view and address the controversial issues brought up by adolescents in the PSCD classroom? Are there any common approaches or strategies?

Depending on the agenda, if their agenda is for example abortion is good and I want to push my agenda abortion, if his teacher is going to do a lesson – human beings are What they are because of their values- controversial issues very much depends on the person teaching it on their point on views. I try to tell my students everything – I put everything on the table and then the decision is theirs

10. What are some considerations and potential conflicts that arise during dialogues on controversial issues in the classroom, especially when it involves emotions and power dynamics?

Pscd is a safe space where students can openly discuss and explore these issues. Sometimes a student might cry or get angry- the emotions kick in- it is important to always remain calm- we also need to teach the children that its ok to let our emotions out- and that it doesn't mean that your argument is now invalid because maybe you let yr emotions take the better of you- the worst thing is power dynamic- the teacher is usually looked up-to but when you have a student who has a lot of power and the other students listen more to that student and not the teacher, then yes that can be a problem. In this case I would first tackle the power group

11. From your perspective, why are controversial issues challenging to teach? How do these challenges impact students' learning experiences?

An example of this is politics; When it comes to politics, especially, students often talk about things they have heard from other people because of their families. They are challenging because the students didn't pass through or go through certain experiences yet on the other way round – they passed through certain experiences which I can't begin to imagine – we need to enter their world and try to understand their world- another challenge is that they speak not out of their experience but from what they hear at home – an example is politics- my family all support blue or red so I am the same.