

# TEACHERS' PERCEPTION OF DEVELOPING STUDENTS' CRITICAL THINKING THROUGH CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES DISCUSSION

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**Abstract:** This project sought to explore the perception about processes used by four teachers in Australia and Indonesia on their use of controversial discussions in developing critical thinking in everyday teaching. The comparative case study data were collected using guided interviews and analyzed by a thematic analysis. Analysis was validated by feedback from the subjects. The research found that there were variations in Indonesian and Australian teachers' perceptions about developing critical thinking in students through discussing controversial issues. Adequate pre-service and in-service training was necessary to provide teachers with the confidence and skill to open up discussion of difficult and divisive community issues.

**Keywords:** teachers' perception, critical thinking, controversial issues, citizenship education.

The teaching of critical thinking in schools has nation building as well as personal development dimensions. It benefits individuals, families, and communities in many ways including economic, social, cultural and governmental. In the past, controversial issues were thought inappropriate for classroom discussion because of their divisive nature, but nowadays they are regarded in many educational forums as the perfect fodder for the development of thinking in students; in addition, schools are seen as ideal venues to touch each person in society with the skills and processes of refined, logical and analytical thinking (Ennis, 1990; Paul, 1990). Schools have community and personal development functions – creating the environment and fitting people with the skills for the development of responsible citizenship.

This paper continues a discussion of critical thinking which was commenced in an earlier paper (Hanurawan & Waterworth, 2004) in which we outlined a number of ideas and practical suggestions on using controversial issues to develop critical thinking. Hanurawan and Waterworth (2004: 5) defined critical thinking as:

The capacity of individuals to acquire and assess information, to objectively analyse information

and arguments, to use reason with clarity and precision, to make justifiable judgments and reach considered conclusions, while at the same time being able to monitor their own thinking processes.

In that paper we suggested that there were at least four views of the nature of controversial issues as they apply to classroom discussions:

1. Issues upon which people disagree on the basis of different ideological positions or world views (Stradling, 1984);
2. Issues which could generate reflective dialog in the classroom and result in the construction of democratic forms of discussion between learners (Harwood & Hahn, 1990);
3. Issues that raised passions or emotions and required the discipline of rationality to discuss (Flinders University, 2001);
4. Issues that required the exercise of critical thinking strategies (Flinders University, 2001).

We regarded critical thinking as an essential element of the curriculum as a means of refining thinking skills and fitting students with strategies to help them in productive ways in the future. Critical thinking skills need to be learned, practiced and applied in ways such as in controversial discussions in the classroom.

This paper reports on a research project with four teachers in Indonesia and Australia that was conducted in an attempt to compare and contrast the basic philosophy and practical approaches taken by teachers in two very different cultural settings. Our focus was on the perceptions of critical thinking strategies used by each teacher rather than the content or value positions developed in controversial issues discussions. We recognized the fact that the value positions of teachers would be very different and that the environment of open discussion of politically, religiously and ideologically focused issues would vary from place to place. However, this did not deter us from our objective to examine and analyse the teaching implications of the similarities and differences we were to discover.

The Indonesian education system operates according to national policy within a national curriculum and a centralized national examination system. Local control through provincial education authorities ensures that national priorities are met but that local needs and local curricula are also adequately represented. The curriculum, as published, encourages approaches to teaching and learning on active learning, student participation and the use of discussion and critical thinking in classrooms. Whether the system is able to accommodate these approaches is, however, compromised by other constitutional and statutory requirements and practical considerations.

The Indonesian national and constitutional commitment to a unified political and social philosophy is codified in the Indonesian state ideology, Pancasila, which highlights and promotes harmonious fair relationships in society. But, in practice, the philosophy may serve to neutralize the discussion of controversial issues within society (and therefore in the school) and institutionalize non confrontational ways of handling them (Hanurawan & Waterworth, 1999). The centralized national examination system operates at every level of primary and secondary education, and applies to the subjects most normally associated with the teaching of critical thinking, namely, Social Studies as well as Pancasila and Citizenship Education. The examination system focuses mainly upon the memorization of facts or the performance of foundational skills and is criterion rather than norm referenced.

However, the state doctrine and the examination system on their own may not be sufficient reason to explain the lack of teaching of critical thinking skills or of vigorous discussion of controversial

issues in schools. There are also a number of practical and cultural factors which might be considered impediments to the teaching of critical thinking in the classroom. Firstly, there is a heavily prescribed competency based curriculum which excludes skills of critical thinking and emphasizes knowledge rather than attitudes and skills. Then the curriculum is closely tied to the examination system and tends to bind teachers' choices of topics from day to day and limit their approaches to lessons. Teachers are fearful of omitting essential subject matter or of misrepresenting it, so they base their teaching on state prescribed text books. There are texts at every grade level and in every subject area.

Teaching, therefore, tends to be teacher and subject dominated. Teachers are regarded highly in the community as the source of wisdom and knowledge and as the guardians of academic quality. This encourages teachers to consider themselves as the dispensers of knowledge rather than the facilitators of learning or as arbiters in discussions of a controversial nature. Such an opinion is reinforced by educational leaders at regional and school level who monitor the ability of teachers to stick closely to the national curriculum and reward teachers for compliance with educational standards.

A report on the capability of the education system to respond to change stated that "in the Indonesian classroom, the teacher never left open any opportunity for students to argue" (Advocacy Work, 2001: 58). If anyone tried to ask questions or argue, the teacher would consider him or her to be a disobedient student who didn't pay attention to the lesson – and the rest of the classmates would consider the student to be stupid. The culture definitely obstructed students from thinking critically. As in other paternalistic cultures, older people, religious people and traditional leaders were trusted to decide for the 'goodness of their people', and it was very difficult to argue with them.

However, there is always an element of choice in teachers' approaches to their teaching. Many teachers include segments in lessons which allow for the development of critical thinking skills or encourage the discussion of controversial issues which they consider would assist students to grasp better what they are learning. These teachers exhibit confidence in their own abilities to understand the curriculum and to interpret it and a self belief that they can cope with the classroom dynamics that will arise as a result of these approaches. But many teachers lack such confidence and lack the training that

would enable them to explore alternative curricular approaches. They consider themselves to be under a very real pressure to conform to the curriculum requirements and to fit every lesson into an already demanding schedule. With a crowded curriculum, teachers may often feel that the basic foundations must be covered first and that any 'extras' – such as critical thinking – if covered at all, be left till later.

In the last two decades, Australian teachers have increasingly recognized the desirability and necessity of enabling their students to develop critical thinking skills. Prior to that, no deliberate teaching about thinking processes had been undertaken in a very serious way. In the realm of values teaching, Australia's education system has had a checkered history. Within the state systems of education, teachers were at one stage required to refrain from giving or allowing to be given any comment of a political, religious or sexual nature. That situation has changed now. Teachers are encouraged to introduce controversial issues into classroom discussions but are expected also to find a balanced way of presenting opinions or allowing discussion. Teachers should maintain a balance in discussion, to refrain from giving their own opinions in highly sensitive matters and take into consideration the age and level of intellectual maturity of their students. Schools in some states now have specialist teachers in religious education and sex education, relieving normal classroom teachers of responsibilities for teaching in the more sensitive areas of community values. Private and independent schools (which also happen to receive supplementary government funding) are able to teach from a predetermined and clearly defended values position.

In the last ten years (and particularly in the last five) there has been a rapid escalation in the teaching of critical thinking skills and a greater willingness to tackle more controversial topics because of, one suspects, a slow transformation in the Australian community and a more open acceptance of a variety of points of view. The major stimulus for change has come from the realization that Australian students need to be better fitted to analyse issues, weigh evidence and come to defensible conclusions in order to survive in a complex multicultural society. In addition, government education policy has shifted and there now seems to be a greater need to develop citizenship education in order to develop Australian society by enhancing public debate, reducing intercultural conflict and providing a more aware and responsible citizenry. Many schools have

introduced special programs to enhance the development of critical thinking skills, particularly through professional development programs for teachers in such as metacognition, problem based learning, the thinking curriculum, dimensions of learning programs, and de Bono thinking hats.

## METHOD

The purpose of this research was to explore teachers' perceptions about developing critical thinking in students through discussing controversial issues. We adopted an interpretive or qualitative approach (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000) using comparative case studies (Hanurawan & Diponegoro, 1995). We chose two teachers from Indonesia and two teachers from Australia. Data were collected by using guided interview in June-July 2005. Through guided interview techniques, the researchers can obtain all information required about developing critical thinking in students through discussing controversial issues from teachers' subjective world, while at the same time allowing the important freedom of response and rich description to illustrate the concepts as necessary. The guided interview was tape-recorded and the responses were transcribed and analysed after the end of the interview (Field & Morse, 1993). The collected data were analysed using a thematic analysis technique focusing on identifiable themes and patterns of behaviour. As the results of the research were assembled, a conclusion was validated by the feedback from the subjects (Connole Smith, & Wiseman 1993). In this context, subjects were asked to check transcribed interviews and the conclusions of the research. The interview was developed and refined in the English language and translated into Indonesian for the Indonesian fieldwork. The interviews were conducted in only the first language of teachers and the Indonesian data were translated into English by the research assistant. The analysis of data was conducted both in Indonesian and English.

## RESULTS

### The Teachers

The four teachers (see Table 1) were selected from Indonesian and Australian schools on the basis of their experience in dealing with controversial issues in the classroom and their understanding of curriculum requirements in critical thinking in their various countries.

**Table 1. Teachers' Personal Identity**

Case No.	Name*	Country	Age	Sex	Level taught	Ages taught	Years exp.	Subject
1	Ibu Ani	Indonesia	33	F	K 1-3	15-18	3	Indonesian Language
2	Ibu Wati	Indonesia	43	F	K 2-3	17-18	19	State Philosophy and Citizenship
3	Saul Brown	Australia	55	M	Yr 9-12	14-18	32	Legal Studies and Commerce
4	Jenny White	Australia	50	F	Yr 5-6	10-12	29	All primary school subjects

\* Names were altered to shield the identity of participants.

Both Ibu (Mrs) Ani and Ibu Wati are teachers at SMK Berkembang – a private Islamic vocational pesantren boarding school with a number of students from orphaned or destitute families who receive sponsorship from a charitable fund established by the school's owners – located on the outskirts of the East Javanese city of Malang. Their classes were small by Indonesian standards with 25 to 27 students in each – affording the opportunity for classroom discussion and the tailoring of the curriculum to the individual needs of students than would normally be expected.

Ibu Ani entered the teaching profession recently as a mature age entrant and has been teaching for only three years. She believes that she makes good provision for the expression of diverse opinions in her classroom and is pleased with her students' willingness to openly discuss aspects of their experiences. The discussions she introduces tend to be closely geared to the curriculum, which is common in the teaching of Indonesian, where the use of oral language skills contributes strongly to the development of superior thinking and expressive skills. Ibu Ani gives the impression that she uses controversial issues discussions to help cover basic content in the curriculum rather than as a means to promote critical thinking or to develop independence of thought. She says that she 'finds it difficult to convince children of the truth' – implying that she feels that even through controversial discussions, she has the responsibility to reach a particular conclusion on a topic that accords with the curriculum. Her overriding concern, however, is to adequately prepare her students for the national exams – a task in which the display of critical thinking skills is far from relevant.

Ibu Wati teaches a subject unique to Indonesia called 'Pancasila and Citizenship' in which the exercise of logic and clear thinking might be expected. But she holds the same view of her role as the dispenser of knowledge as Ibu Ani and uses almost the same language as her colleague when she says she finds it difficult 'to convince children of the truth by using valid textbooks and newspapers', also indicating an uncritical reliance on sometimes ques-

tionable sources. Ibu Wati was trained and taught during the Suharto era and may have been influenced in her approach by the philosophy of the 'new order'. The same could not be said of Ibu Ani who was trained and gained her entire teaching experience during the 'reformasi' periods. The 'new order' generated a sense of national commitment to consensus as defined by the government while the 'reformasi' period opened the gates to democratic thinking and to freedom of expression in public life. Ibu Wati stated that she is keen to develop democratic thinking in her students as a way of preparing them for their future roles in society.

Saul Brown is a highly experienced teacher in a well respected high achieving eastern suburban Victorian state high school in which he is the Assistant Principal as well as a classroom teacher in Legal Studies and Commerce. He reveals a frankness and self reflectiveness in his opinions not seen in the other case study teachers. He is confident in his handling controversial issues in the classroom and not afraid of allowing the open and unfettered expression of diverse, radical or unconventional opinions in his classroom provided students are able to construct rational defenses of their opinions. He shows a surprising candour in balancing his need to control the direction or process of a discussion while also not directing student thinking. 'I'm the teacher, not the lecturer. I'm not there to dictate.'

Jenny White is also a long serving teacher in state schools in Victoria and teaches senior primary school children. She has a very pragmatic opinion about raising and discussing controversial issues in the classroom – she avoids bringing them up but, when they arise, she enjoys attempting to expand her children's thinking. She sees discussion as a means of developing the children's thinking – not as a means of covering essential content or of shaping the students' opinions on important community issues. Her major concern is not 'letting my own opinion influence the students', something the Indonesian respondents are intent on attempting to do. Although she reports a large number of quite extensive professional development activities on the development of thinking skills, Jenny did not see the connection between

these activities and the intentions of the curriculum for Victorian schools.

### Purposes and Scope of Controversial Issues Discussions

The case study teachers identified a number of purposes behind controversial issues discussions in classrooms. Two of them directly mentioned the ultimate aim of developing students who had the capacity to contribute as useful citizens to the community in their future adult lives.

Jenny White (Australia): I try to build up the decision making skills of my students so that they will be able to use them later in life.

Ibu Wati (Indonesia): Teachers should appreciate the diversity of opinions coming from citizens in the class... I encourage students to be able to be expressed in a democratic world which is what we have now. The different students' points of view are united in one conclusion by discussion with other children and with me. If children's opinions are not based on facts or data, teachers should give an explanation democratically. In this context, the teacher must be careful in giving an explanation, because it can make students afraid to express their opinions in a later discussion.

Jenny White referred to the skills needed in the future and Ibu Wati talked of the students as citizens. Jenny was focusing on the individual life skills in decision making that would contribute to an individual child's life, while Ibu Wati was interested in the way free expression of opinion would contribute to the community functioning better in the future. Ibu Wati injected a cautionary note into her comments about the interventionist role of the teacher in sensitively 'correcting' the formation of opinion in students – a matter referred to later in this analysis. Ibu Wati's reference to students and teachers arriving at one agreed conclusion suggests that she may not fully understand the nature of controversial issues discussions which are chosen simply because they trigger a variety of diverse responses from students.

Ibu Ani (Indonesia): (The students) have a chance to describe controversial problems in society through studying language and I find this is very useful for the teacher and the students.

Ibu Ani took up the same theme by showing that controversial issues discussion could be an aid to other kinds of learning. Saul saw discussions of this type as a way of bringing enlightenment to the

minds of students by providing previously ignored insights.

Saul Brown (Australia): If a student says 'Oh, I've never thought of that' or 'I now see what the (news) paper is saying' or 'I don't agree with this' I feel I have achieved something.

Ibu Ani also saw the use of controversial discussions as a means of assisting students in their psychological development or as a way of helping them overcome developmental problems in their lives. Interestingly, Jenny also saw controversial discussions as a way of reducing prejudice in students and ultimately in assisting the community in developing greater tolerance for human difference. She identified religious, ethnic and disability issues as those able to be tackled in schools through discussion.

Jenny White (Australia): I think children are less prejudiced now than they were in the past. We have Muslim students at our school – they are well respected. We've had disabled students in the school for the last 20 years and this has helped. We try to bring people from the community to our school. We've had Aboriginal and disabled speakers.

Ibu Wati (Indonesia): The school tries to promote harmony or unity of opinion. Where students are critical, teachers should guide their thinking towards constructive ways of thinking... The Department of Education's curriculum is a blueprint for teaching. The teacher's role is to apply it in the classroom.

In a similar vein, Ibu Wati considered the school as a venue for promoting social harmony in the community. She took this thought a step further than might have been reasonable in Australia, by saying that unity of opinion is a desirable outcome of a controversial issues discussion as much as any other type of instruction and that critical thought should have strong constructive elements. Further, she linked this educational goal to the intentions and requirements of the Department of Education.

Topics selected for controversial issues discussions were fairly similar across the two nationalities. They arose out of the topics being covered in the curriculum which they taught (Ibu Ani and Saul Brown), from the problems, issues and concerns of teenagers (Ibu Ani), from current affairs relating to topics covered in the curriculum (Ibu Wati, Saul Brown, and Jenny White), from issues on which the community is naturally divided such as in politics and the law (Ibu Wati, Jenny White and Saul Brown) and from moral issues which

demonstrate diversity of community opinion (Saul Brown and Jenny White). For all teachers, the selection of topics was closely aligned to curriculum requirements although the Indonesian teachers appeared to want a more direct link to the curriculum while Australian teachers seemed to be able to inject greater discretion into their choice of topics. The construction of the curriculum and Department of Education expectations of how the curriculum was to be implemented seemed to affect this level of choice teachers made.

The purposes of controversial issues discussions were expressed in general by both Indonesian and Australian teachers as: creating thoughtful participating citizens of the future; providing life skills in logical thinking and decision making; creating a community of thought where diversity of opinion might be readily accepted – the essential environment for a truly democratic society; providing better insights or tools for learning; enabling students to openly discuss issues confronting young people and thus aid them in the processes of psychological, emotional and social maturation; assisting in prejudice reduction in students and in the wider community and creating social harmony in the school and the community in general.

The Indonesian and Australian teachers' perception appeared to differ on a number of issues. The Australian teachers saw controversial issues discussions as an integral part of the learning process – as a way of developing skills in thinking and as an appropriate means of improving learning. The Indonesian teachers tended to see controversial issues discussions as a perhaps less controllable way of contributing to learning even though the ultimate outcomes of the approach were equally supported by both groups. The Indonesian teachers were concerned about controlling the outcomes of a discussion as a means of gaining particular content objectives in the curriculum. Their focus was on the knowledge outcomes of the curriculum whereas the Australian teachers were more interested in the process outcomes. The Indonesian teachers appeared to be more confined by the curriculum and the Department of Education and controversial discussions were regarded as a useful but less productive addition to the normal approaches teachers use.

### Strategies and Techniques

All of the case study teachers used a similar range of teaching strategies and techniques in introducing controversial issues into students' work. The main technique was whole-class discussion al-

though this was supported by a number of other strategies including writing tasks, small group discussion, individual assignment work and student oral presentations to the whole class or a combination of these activities. There were however, different mixtures of strategies between the teachers and these highlighted the distinctiveness of each teacher's approach.

The teachers used a number of strategies to develop a safe discussion environment and to encourage the free expression of opinion. We particularly focused on how the teachers encouraged shy and passive students to participate and to spread participation more evenly through the class.

Ibu Ani (Indonesia): I involve shy and passive students through providing motivating writing tasks which students have to complete individually. I also give students a chance to ask critical questions in class or to give their opinions individually

Saul Brown (Australia): I like to gain the confidence of the students by building a strong personal relationship with each student. They are happier to express their opinions when they feel they are in a secure discussion environment. If students are shy I use those who are willing to contribute first and also direct (simpler) questions to the shy kids.

Teachers seemed to use the more forthright or confident students in a positive way as a means of establishing a discussion or drawing out particular points of view. Student confidence in the teacher was seen as a key strategy by Saul who thought this contributed to student willingness to join a discussion. Writing tasks and group tasks were seen as valuable in building confidence and establishing something worth saying. Simple questions were also used as a means to start discussions and establish the basic parameters of topics.

The Australian teachers' perception appeared to have a broader range of strategies available to them in injecting greater interest into discussions or in using variety to maintain student attention and focus.

Saul Brown (Australia): I play a devil's advocate role to help students to construct a more powerful response to an issue. I try to get students to develop a 'for' and 'against' list on each significant issue. I also use debating to help students develop an argument with sometimes formal debates and sometimes informal such as through brainstorming. The school has a strong student debating club. I use the tools of the Thinking Curriculum such as De Bono's thinking hats.

Jenny White (Australia): I use 'think-pair-share' with a larger group of children. Children's confidence in sharing ideas with the whole class takes time to build – they can do it more easily in a small group first. Eventually we develop all the children to a level where they can join in a whole class discussion... We use a number of teaching techniques including activity based studies, role plays, co-operative learning, the 'human graph' (where children place themselves on a graph representing their opinion and then have to justify why they chose that position), moral dilemmas where children have to decide what they would do in a challenging situation. For example, if you were at a party and the person to drive you home was drunk, what would you do?

It seemed that professional development activities gave teachers greater scope to choose activities that would develop student thinking. Thinking skills emerged as a high priority in the Australian teaching practices and curriculum and helped to generate more scope for activities. Cooperative groups involving heterogeneous and random group membership were strongly used by the Australian teachers as a means of promoting an appreciation of the diversity of student frames of reference and for encouraging inter group tolerance.

Saul Brown (Australia): I form groups cooperatively and randomly. The confidence of students grows as the year progresses. I also try to link student presentations to assessment.

The opportunity to build critical thinking skills into assessment at senior school level also lent great weight to the use of controversial issues in the classroom. The basic classroom strategies such as whole class discussions, small group and cooperative group work, writing tasks and oral presentations were used by all teachers. The Indonesian teachers depended mostly on whole class discussions while the Australian teachers used these approaches and added other strategies focusing on critical thinking skills.

### The Role of the Teachers

The teachers had a number of perception about their role in introducing, managing and concluding controversial issues discussions. Ibu Wati talked about the teacher having the responsibility to reveal 'the truth' in controversial issues discussions (see quote below) and to control 'stubborn' or 'disagreeing' students. This gave the impression that she introduces issues which are either non-controversial

or about which the teacher is obliged to provide the final opinion. Ibu Ani provided a similar view.

Ibu Ani (Indonesia): I find it difficult to know how to convince children about the truth. Although students can study their topics through discussion based on careful consideration of the facts from books, the process should be controlled and directed by me so that it can run smoothly. I need to monitor discussion so that I can improve the efficiency of the discussion and keep to the curriculum... I give a direction and conclusion to the discussion. I think the teacher has the responsibility to provide the conclusion.

On the other hand, the Australian teachers said they attempted to do the opposite – to refrain from influencing student opinion.

Jenny White (Australia): (One problem I struggle with is not) letting my own opinion influence the students. I don't put my own point of view strongly.

Saul Brown (Australia): I try to let the discussion flow first. I try to cultivate a classroom atmosphere where students will show respect to people giving an opposite opinion to their own. I control the discussion and will not allow a confident or passionate student to dominate a discussion. I also plan the discussion using the Thinking Curriculum tools (such as an issues sheet)... I'm the teacher, not the lecturer. I'm not there to dictate.

The four case study teachers suggested that they needed to manage discussions and not allow them to get out of control. Two teachers wanted to exercise this control as a part of discipline strategies but Saul wanted to shape discussions to maximize student thinking skills. Saul's control was not associated with shaping the student views but Wati and Ani's were.

### Problems in Introducing Controversial Issues

Certain issues were troubling to teachers in introducing controversial discussions. Amongst these was a concern for the capacity of students to develop open-mindedness. An unwillingness to openly debate issues may come, therefore, from prejudices generated from home or other places or from lack of interest or motivation to become informed about current community issues. These two factors could, of course, be interrelated. Saul suggested that personal experiences could also prevent or stifle open discussion and that teachers needed to be sensitive

to the psychological burdens some students might be bearing. The emotional hang ups of a few students or even one student could affect the capacity of the whole class to dispassionately consider certain controversial issues. Jenny confirmed this view:

Jenny White (Australia): Another issue is dealing with a topic about which some students might be sensitive. If we talk about smoking and students' parents smoke, it can become hard, especially if we need to talk about dying from smoking... Younger children sometimes want to talk about private family issues such as an alcoholic father. That can become difficult.

Both the Indonesian teachers raised concerns about the constraints of the crowded curriculum, implying that controversial issues discussions were more likely to be sacrificed when there was not time to cover the essential curriculum. This opinion gave further strength to the belief that Indonesian teachers considered controversial issues discussions as an optional extra rather than as an integral part of any teaching.

Ibu Ani (Indonesia): While the school is in favour of developing students' capabilities to think, the constraints of the examination system (national exams are sat by all students) reduce the time available for the study of controversial issues. Our school is attempting to increase the percentage of students who pass – which is only 80-90 % at the moment so this is the focus of our attention. The national exams demand the provision of the right answers which students must memorise and this eliminates the need for the expression of opinions.

The exam system, at all levels of Indonesian education, seemed to dominate the setting of priorities in schooling and to have an oppressive effect on the development of independent thinking in students.

### **Teacher Support and Guidelines in Dealing with Controversial Issues**

The Australian teachers both held a very cynical opinion about the quality of their initial teacher training in preparing them to manage controversial issues discussions. On the other hand, they were commendatory in their opinion of professional development training to give them an understanding of how to develop critical thinking in students.

Saul Brown (Australia): It was really an inadequate teacher training. Even now I find that student teachers are very reluctant to lead

discussions. They avoid them, often, I think, because they feel they cannot control the students in discussion sessions.

By contrast, the Indonesian teachers felt their training was quite adequate in fitting them to handle controversial issues discussions.

Ibu Ani (Indonesia): My training was good enough. It contributed well to my ability to handle controversial topics. A general understanding of methods of teaching and learning was also helpful. My basic training provided me with an understanding of the psychological development of students and their levels of maturity to think.

The Indonesian teacher training was sensitive to the cultural requirement of the education system and the developing Indonesian society. The Indonesian teachers did not receive professional development on the thinking curriculum or critical thinking. The Australian teachers had numerous and comprehensive in-service training sessions on it.

Saul Brown (Australia): The Thinking Curriculum in-service has been done by all staff... Our staff reviews are now related to whether we teach using Thinking Curriculum ideas.

The emphasis upon the development of critical thinking skills was reinforced at Saul's school by an insistence upon teachers demonstrating to the school administration how they were incorporating critical thinking into their normal classroom practices, as a condition for teacher promotion.

Saul felt that the curriculum gave good scope for the inclusion of critical thinking activities such as controversial issues discussions in the classroom while Jenny was unaware of this emphasis in the new curriculum. This was in contrast to the opinion of the Indonesian teachers about the restrictions of the Indonesian curriculum and, by implication, its incapacity to foster critical thinking.

### **DISCUSSION**

The teachers were chosen for the case studies because they were committed to the belief that children's education is promoted through the study of critical thinking and they all attempted to encourage the practice of critical thinking skills through the discussion of controversial issues in the classroom. Analysis of the case studies revealed a high level of similarity between the teachers even though they worked in vastly different cultural and educational contexts. They all shared the view that one of



the major purposes of training students in critical thinking was to prepare students for citizenship within a society where diversity of opinion was readily accepted. They felt that classroom discussions of these kinds were of assistance to students in their personal, psychological and social development and that controversial discussions often helped students to clarify their thoughts and readily articulate their values. The teachers from both countries chose similar types of topics – those that promoted diversity of opinion and all used a range of teaching strategies in their classrooms. They all sensed the tension between needing to manage classroom discussion (to keep discussions on track) and allow the free ranging expression of opinion within the safety and acceptance of the classroom. They faced similar issues in dealing with difficult topics and allowing for the diverse sensitivities of the students.

There were however some differences between the teachers from the two countries. The Indonesian teachers thought that a major purpose of controversial issues discussions was to promote social harmony and develop constructive conclusions which added to the sense of a united community of thought. While the Australian teachers may not have disagreed with this, they thought that the major purpose of controversial issues discussion was to develop in students the capacity and willingness to use critical thinking skills and that this capacity had consequences for the development of a democratic society where injustice might be more readily challenged. So while the Indonesian teachers emphasized the knowledge or content aspect of controversial issues discussions, the Australian teachers were more interested in process outcomes.

It also seemed that the classroom teachers in Australia had greater discretion in the choice and development of topics than their Indonesian counterparts. They were more likely to use a variety of teaching strategies rather than just whole-class discussion. The Indonesian teachers felt a stronger limitation by the curriculum and the Department of National Education to follow a tighter schedule of lessons. Their teaching was strongly guided by the examination imperative – a limitation the Australian teachers felt far less. The Indonesian teachers had a far greater responsibility to develop or shape the views of their students in line with government priorities – something the Australian teachers would have questioned. There was little discernible difference in the 'new order' trained and 'reformasi' trained Indonesian teachers in their perception of the objectives and processes of encouraging critical thinking.

These case studies demonstrated a number of essential components of controversial issues discussions which, by their nature, incorporate critical thinking processes. In our opinion it is important for teachers to train their students in appropriate behaviors in the discussion of controversial issues. Students should be encouraged not to raise their voices (even when they want to show some passion for their opinion), to avoid abusive, coarse, derogatory or personal remarks, and avoid interrupting each other or their teachers. They should be trained to listen respectfully to ideas which they strongly oppose or which are contrary to commonly held beliefs and to handle situations in which ideas are expressed in highly emotive ways. They should be trained to recognize and challenge stereotypes, even those commonly held by their own communities and families. In these ways, students may be introduced to the behaviors and conventions of dispassionate and discursive debate where it is possible to refine and develop ideas which are sound, defensible and constructive – necessary prerequisites to our democratically based systems.

These case studies demonstrated to us the importance of teachers being willing to allocate time to train their students in discussion techniques and collaboratively determine with their students the protocols for interaction and whole class discussion. Teachers need to recognize that they have a vital role in providing access to adequate information resources (Hanurawan & Waterworth, 2004).

## CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

Teaching is set within a geographical and cultural context and an examination of teaching beliefs and practices from different places is virtually a study of differing cultural formations. This research found that there were variations between Indonesian and Australian teachers on developing critical thinking in students through discussing controversial issues. However, one of the chief advantages of teaching critical thinking is that it puts into the hands of students the capacity to critically examine their own thinking and to search for objective and justifiable ways of thinking. It therefore has transformative potential in seeking for better solutions to community problems and promoting understanding of the social, ideological and political structures that divide the world. We would argue that the teaching of critical thinking should be promoted and developed in both countries.

As final remarks, we would suggest that Indonesian and Australian teachers develop further strategies in developing critical thinking in students

through discussing controversial issues. In addition, further research is required in assessing teacher needs of training in critical thinking skills.

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