

SPECIAL ISSUE:
Teaching Difficult Topics in Social Studies Classrooms

Editorial

In 2017, a former president of the United States, Barak Obama, visited Hiroshima, Japan, during his presidency and paid condolence to those who were sacrificed by and suffered from the atomic bombs that the country utilized during WWII. Although there were few voices to criticize the lack of apology in his speech, the Japanese media evaluated his visit highly with expressions like “historic visit” and “brave speech.” A photo of Obama and *hibakusha* (被爆者), atomic bomb survivors, hugging each other was on major newspapers’ top pages. Social studies teachers in Japan, especially in Hiroshima, talked about his visit to the city and how it might heal the wound that has existed since 1945.

In other countries, however, Obama’s Hiroshima visit was evaluated differently from Japan’s. In the United States, some people criticized his visit to the city because it could diminish the veterans’ efforts who fought to protect the country and preserve global freedom and democracy. In the countries that Japan colonized during WWII, such as China and Korea, there was strong criticism that his Hiroshima visit might emphasize the image of Japan as a victim instead of a perpetrator in Asia during WWII. Also, Korean *hibakusha*, around 10 % of the *hibakusha* who were forced to move to Japan under Japan’s colonization, argued that Obama should apologize to them for the unethical usage of the atomic bomb.

Social studies teachers in Hiroshima pay special attention when they teach what happened in Hiroshima in 1945 because it is an engraved social trauma, and the distance between their students and the historical past is quite close. However, they are not reluctant to teach it; instead, they teach it passionately, believing that their mission is to educate students who can deliver the message “No More Hiroshima” to create a more peaceful world. For social studies teachers in Hiroshima, Obama’s visit might provide good teaching material to heal students’ social trauma and educate them as agents to pursue peace.

However, social studies teachers in Hiroshima may have gone through different difficulties if they had encountered evaluations of Obama’s Hiroshima visit from the United States, China, Korea, and Korean *hibakusha*. The perspectives of “Rightful Usage of the Atomic Bomb” or “Japan’s War Responsibility in Asia” would complicate their narrative plot of “Trauma and Heal.” Teachers might find it difficult to capture the whole view of the event, navigate their students between the competing evaluations, and request their students to interpret Obama’s Hiroshima visit as ethical agents.

Aligning with the literature on teaching difficult knowledge (Cha, 2022; Garrett, 2017; Pitt & Britzman, 2003; Zembylas, 2014), difficult history (Kang, 2023; Epstein & Peck, 2017; Gross & Terra, 2018; Harris et al., 2022; J. Kim & Ono, 2022), and controversial issues (Hess, 2009; Hung, 2019; J. Kim et al., 2018; Misco et al., 2018; Oh, 2019; Pace, 2021), the aforementioned case of teaching Obama’s Hiroshima visit illustrates that difficult topics:

- have a complicated structure due to competing narratives.
- are closely related to students.
- accompany potential risks about introducing alternative perspectives and unheard voices of the topic.
- request ethical representation for teachers and students.

Also, the case implies that teaching difficult topics is challenging but possible. Although difficult topics involve social trauma in the communities and discussing them in an open setting might carry risks, social studies teachers can overcome the obstacles and achieve the lofty goal of teaching difficult topics, which is living with others together (J. Kim & Ono, 2022; Hess, 2009). Based on the above definition of difficult topics, which is an umbrella concept including difficult knowledge, difficult history, and controversial issues, and the necessity to teach them, this special issue aims to explore the complexity of narrating difficult topics (Katayama), teachers' understanding and approaches to teaching difficult topics (Cha; Iwasaki & Tatara; Hyun & Hayase; E. Kim; Ono & Yamamura), and how to educate teachers to teach difficult topics (Jang).

Additionally, considering one of this journal's distinctive features, which emphasizes the Asian context, this special issue aims to discuss the specific context of teaching difficult topics in Asia. One factor that makes teaching difficult topics in Asia unique is the relationship between Japan and other countries during WWII. The lingering scars from WWII have long been a source of international controversy in the post-war period. Additionally, many Southeast Asian countries were colonized by Western countries, and their paths to independence in the latter half of the 20th century were marked by wars, conflicts, and coups, which remain fresh in the current collective memory in individual communities. The other factor is the institutional and cultural context in the regions. For instance, Confucianism, which remains influential in East Asia, affects teacher-student relationships and schooling practices. Additionally, some countries maintain a strongly centralized curriculum system, posing its own educational challenges. Readers can discover the mentioned context of teaching difficult topics in Asia in individual manuscripts.

Due to the language barrier and differences in academic traditions, teaching difficult topics in Asia has not been discussed internationally and, therefore, has not been shared with international audiences. Given the importance of exploring the milieu of teaching difficult topics and diversifying communities by hearing unheard voices, this special issue aims to bridge this gap by presenting a diverse range of manuscripts from Asian perspectives, which will be compared and integrated with previous research mainly being conducted in Western countries. This is a small step toward the democratization of international social studies communities. We hope this special issue becomes a starting point for networking with those who are interested in researching teaching difficult topics within Asia, especially valuing Southeast Asian voices which we could not include in this special issue, and creating an international platform to discuss the issue beyond the context of Asia.

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