

**The Impact of Teachers Sharing Their Opinions Within a Semi-controversial Class in Japan: A Case Study on a Discussion of Lowering the Age of Candidacy in a Junior High School Social Studies Class.**

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**Abstract:**

This paper examines how teachers expressing their political views influence students' opinion formation and discussions in classrooms regarding controversial issues. We used the methods of Journell (2011) and built on the scholarship of Hess and McAvoy (2015) and Iwasaki (2021). As a case study, we observed a junior high school social studies class and the teacher's approach to a lesson on lowering the age of candidacy in Japan, especially concerning how and if the teacher's personal opinions influenced the students. Teachers' political neutrality is a growing issue of concern in citizenship education. Some Japanese educators and education authorities argue that teachers should avoid expressing their personal views on controversial issues because of how it may impact students. However, we found that teachers' opinions may have a limited influence on student opinions, thus adding nuance and insight to the existing literature. Namely, the impact of teachers' expressing political opinions in a classroom should be considered with factors such as their choice of teaching materials and methods.

**Keywords:** teaching controversial issues; political disclosure; political neutrality of educators; voter education

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<http://www.iajiss.org> ISSN: 2327-3585

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### **Identification of the problem**

A democratic society recognizes and encourages differing opinions on certain issues while also attempting to reconcile opposing opinions by building consensus (Fishkin, 2009/2011). In education, social studies serve as a foundation for training citizens. A literature review in Japan (Kawaguchi, Okumura, & Tamai, 2020) showed that, to date, research on the teaching of controversial issues through analyses of relevant curriculum and lesson structure principles is mainly U.S.-centric. Moreover, despite the increased need to teach students about controversial issues, few teachers are doing so.

Previous studies and recent media reports partially attribute this to the requirement that teachers remain politically neutral. For example, according to the teachers' guide from the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications and the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology's (MIC and MEXT) 2015 supplementary teaching resource for voter education, "Creating the Future of Japan Together," teachers should avoid advocating specific viewpoints because these opinions have been found to influence students. Furthermore, concerning discussions on whether Japan's voting age should be lowered to 18 and whether political education in high school should be increased, Japan's ruling party, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), set up a website for students and caregivers to report teachers who failed to show political neutrality in their lessons.<sup>1</sup> This political neutrality requirement affects teachers' concrete teaching methods. For example, based on 2020 MEXT survey results on voter education, 95.6% of schools report engaging in voter education for third-year high school students, yet only 34.4% reported that they engaged in real-world political discussions. In a separate study (Nishimura, 2019), it was shown that, when dealing with controversial issues in lessons, just under 70% of teachers answered that they found difficulties with "political neutrality." In relation to teachers' political neutrality, whether teachers ought to express their personal views is also an important topic in education in Japan.

The U.S. has a rich body of research on how discussing controversial issues should be realized and what kind of role teachers should play in them. However, in Japan, these U.S. studies have not significantly changed the debate on teachers' roles when teaching controversial issues. Thus,

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<sup>1</sup> This initiative attracted criticism from various media sources and those involved in education; the page has since been deleted. However, investigations have not stopped. (Huffington Post, *Is the LDP seeking anonymous tip-off with its ongoing online criticisms including "let's teach teachers who are not politically neutral a lesson"* 07/09/2016 [https://www.huffingtonpost.jp/2016/07/09/ldp-education-investigation\\_n\\_10902078.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.jp/2016/07/09/ldp-education-investigation_n_10902078.html))

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I adapted the works of Kelly (1986), Hess and McAvoy (2015), and Journell (2011) to the Japanese context and pursued survey-based research accordingly. The current consensus in Japan is that if teachers express their opinions, they will invariably cause students to hold the same opinion. Iwasaki (2021) attempted to clarify this by comparing it to the impact of teachers' political neutrality. However, their research was based on student interview data and lacked an analysis of students' reactions to teachers' opinions and an analysis of changes in students' opinions based on teachers' opinions.

Given these literature gaps, I sought to clarify the influence of teachers' political opinions on students' discussions and opinion formation during lessons on controversial and polarizing social issues. This was done by observing teaching practices in a social studies class at a public high school in Japan. For this case study, the social studies teacher is referred to as "Teacher A" and the school is referred to as "Junior High School X." The research comprised interviews with both Teacher A and the students. The topics being discussed by the class were whether the age of adulthood and candidacy should be lowered from 20 to 18 years old and whether voter education should be more widespread. This study can elucidate practices for classroom discussions on controversial and divisive social issues (also known as "controversial issue learning") that are currently under scrutiny.

### **Literature Review**

#### **The pros and cons of teachers expressing their political views while teaching controversial issues: U.S. studies.**

In the U.S., there has been an ongoing debate on the pros and cons of teachers expressing their opinions when educating on controversial issues. Kelly (1986) divided the role of teachers handling controversial issues into four categories, "exclusive neutrality," "exclusive partiality," "neutral impartiality," and "committed impartiality," preferring the last category, whereby teachers express their own opinion but ask the students to engage in balanced discussion. However, in research that clarified whether teachers handling controversial issues do in fact express their own opinions, it was shown that teachers favor "neutral impartiality" over "committed impartiality" because of their concern about reaction in the community, their intention to respect pupils' own thinking, and their concern about the impact of teachers' expression (Miller-Lane, Denton, & May, 2006). More recent research (Geller, 2020) showed that change in the political landscape has an impact on the pros and cons of teachers expressing opinions. In this regard, Kelly's (1986) framework also proved deeply contextual, nuanced, and

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rooted in teachers' professional judgments, rather than the rational and universal. In contrast, studies have also been done on teachers' judgments and attitudes toward sharing their opinions. Thus, the significance of teachers' political view disclosure is being examined from many aspects (Conrad, 2020; Journell, 2016).

Meanwhile, it has also been shown that students are not strongly affected by teachers expressing their views. Hess and McAvoy (2015) used a mixed-methods approach to study 35 teachers and 525 students who were studying a curriculum aimed at discussing controversial issues. Of the students surveyed, 79% answered that it was acceptable for teachers to express personal opinions, and 77% answered that if their teacher expressed their opinion, they would not adopt it themselves. In interviews, students expressed clear opposition to teachers imposing or forcing their own opinion. However, there were some students, particularly those with low socioeconomic status or those who do not test well (especially on political knowledge), who tend to hold the same opinion as their teachers as a result of hearing it. Thus, whether a teacher ought to express personal views is a matter of professional judgment, accounting for "aim," "context," and "evidence." Meanwhile, Journell (2011), based on an investigation conducted around the time of the U.S. presidential election in 2008, found that teachers expressing their opinions had a positive significance, and teachers not expressing their political opinions may impact students' perceptions even more.

**The Ministry of Education encourages teachers to refrain from political disclosure:  
Japanese context**

In Japan, many studies have used analyses of U.S. curriculums and teaching theory to demonstrate the importance of learning about controversial issues (Kuwabara, 2000; Mizoguchi, 1994; Mizoue, 1972). However, the outcomes of these studies have not necessarily been reflected in classroom practices. Misco et al. (2018) clarified the perceptions of Japanese civics teachers regarding teaching controversial issues. They showed that while theory on U.S. controversial issue learning has been introduced in Japan, and some teachers recognize its significance, other teachers are not even aware of it as a concept. As such, discussions on controversial issues are not tackled for the following reasons: instructional paradigm, lack of time, few classes, students' lack of knowledge, teachers' lack of knowledge, and a general cursory approach to classroom content (Misco et al., 2018).

Regarding the pros and cons of teachers dealing with controversial issues expressing their views, while it has been said that effective use should be made of teachers' expression of opinions

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according to the students' circumstances and the situation surrounding opposing views (Yamane, 1983), there has been broad support for the view that in social studies education in Japan, expression of opinion should be avoided. Due to concerns about how students might be influenced by teachers' opinions, the assertion that teachers ought to be cautious about expressing their opinion has dominated the conversation on the matter.

The fact that teachers expressing their views has validity as an educational approach has also been recognized in Japan as a result of exposure to the Crick Report (Kawakami, 2015) and social studies research in the U.S (Iwasaki, 2020). However, it is common to assert that caution should be exercised with regard to teachers actually expressing their views. This has been attributed to the fact that, in Japan, teachers must be exceedingly cautious because some children are conditioned to learning for exams and some have given up on learning. Another reason is that a certain number of children look at the teacher's facial expression before selecting the correct answer (Koyasu, 2013), and some teachers might express their opinion to impose a specific view (Hayashi, 2016), and they believe that this should not be done. Hess and McAvoy (2015) deem it problematic that Japanese educational circles disregard teachers' opinions as pedagogical tools.

However, some recent studies have questioned the assertion that caution should be exercised with regard to expressing views. Iwasaki (2016a) focused on research trends concerning teaching controversial issues in the U.S., stressing that when teachers express their personal views, they must exercise professional judgment that considers the lesson's learning objective; the students' grade level, school, and context; and findings from relevant research. Imaizumi (2021) presented concepts developed in German education theory as tools for dealing with controversial topics and teaching politics and controversial issues that diverge from the "political neutrality" approach. It also argued that the "neutrality" discussed in Japan is an ambiguous concept, resulting in teachers avoiding controversial issues.

In empirical studies, interviews and questionnaires were used to investigate teachers' perspectives on expressing their opinions when teaching controversial issues. Iwasaki (2016b) interviewed Japanese social studies and civics teachers about whether teachers should express their personal views during the teaching of controversial issues, and the teachers had various views regarding the impact of their opinions on students. For example, one teacher stated that teachers should not refrain from expressing their opinions just because students are affected. They also stressed that when weighing the pros and cons of expressing a given opinion, teachers should not only consider its impact on students but also assess the opinion for significance and possible contentiousness.

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There is also data indicating that students generally showed a positive reaction to teachers expressing their views. Iwasaki (2021) investigated how students felt about teachers expressing their opinions during lessons on controversial issues. One finding was that many students had positive attitudes toward it, claiming that “it made discussions livelier,” that “they encountered a variety of opinions,” and that “the teacher was also a participant in the discussion.” A few students appeared to have conformed to the teacher’s opinion, whereas a few others questioned the very idea of teachers expressing their opinion.

Thus, social studies education research includes a broad discussion of the pros and cons of teacher opinion expression and of the political neutrality requirements for teachers from both normative and empirical perspectives. However, sufficient research on whether students do, in practice, conform to the personal views expressed by their teachers, and on the impact of teachers’ opinion expression on the discussion, is lacking. While some studies used student interviews (e.g., Iwasaki, 2021), these interviews focused on students’ perceptions. As such, the actual impact of teachers’ political expression on student opinion is unknown. Accordingly, the present study analyzes a social studies lesson on whether to reduce the candidacy age in Japan. The lesson was taught by Teacher A at Junior High School X and was analyzed using the methods described below. Subsequently, Teacher A’s ability to influence students when delivering lessons that cover socially controversial issues was investigated.

## **Methods**

### **Background**

In line with Merriam (1998/2004), the present study uses a qualitative case design to clarify the impact of teachers expressing their opinions in controversial issues learning on the classroom situation and on students’ thinking. The study was guided by the research question, “How does teachers expressing the opinions in controversial issue learning impact students?” Data was collected from classroom observation, analysis of students’ worksheets, and interviews with the teacher and students. Thereafter, open coding was applied to all data, and then focused coding was applied to comments and utterances related to the impact of the teacher expressing their opinion on students and their relevant reactions (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995/1998).

In addition, the methods applied in the present study were based on Journell (2011). Students were interviewed before and after the lesson. They were questioned on their thoughts about their teacher’s opinion expression and on how they reacted to their teacher’s stance. It should be noted, however, that the present study differs significantly from Journell’s (2011) as follows:

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In the present case, the researcher and the participating teacher (Teacher A) were well acquainted, and they had a conversation about the research results. In addition, Teacher A was informed of the research topic prior to the class and agreed to clearly express his opinion during the lesson being observed. As noted by Iwasaki (2021), teachers in Japan tend to express ambiguous opinions. In such cases, students may be unable to identify the opinion the teacher is expressing, rendering any clarity about its impact impossible. Consequently, I decided to interview Teacher A beforehand to ensure clarity.

### **Investigation procedure**

This investigation, conducted with the approval of the research ethics screening committee of Okayama University Graduate School of Education, involved Teacher A and six students in a third-year class at public Junior High School X in Y Prefecture. Y Prefecture is part of the “regional areas” in Japan, and Junior High School X is situated in a mountainous part of the prefecture. The school is middle ranking in terms of academic achievement, according to a nationwide survey of academic performance. The Japanese school system encompasses six years of elementary school, three years of junior high school, and three years of high school. Third-year junior high school students are typically 15 years old. Teacher A is a male mid-career teacher with 10 years of experience who teaches several lessons featuring controversial issues each semester to foster discussion skills.

First, the researcher interviewed Teacher A about his stance on expressing his opinion when teaching controversial issues. Teacher A revealed that while he does not intend to express his own opinion in class (“it is probably not desirable to explicitly express my own position”), he does so unconsciously on occasion: “Perhaps in passing. There are perhaps times when I say something like ‘This is what I think but there is also this other position...’ I do not really consciously state my own opinion, though.”

Second, the researcher outlined previous research on teachers’ opinion expression, shared the educational significance thereof, and discussed problematic issues in the research. Teacher A agreed to clearly express his personal views while teaching the relevant lesson.<sup>2</sup> Finally, Teacher

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<sup>2</sup> Potential harm from this study was mitigated by a feedback session after the study with Teacher A. We focused on how he could utilize the experience of deliberately expressing his personal views in future lessons. In addition, the researcher also explained the purpose of the study to participating students before and after the lesson and encouraged them to consider the roles required of Teacher A during the lesson.

A identified three students likely and unlikely to be influenced by his opinions. The six participating students later received a 15-minute explanation of the study. A written agreement was obtained from the students and their guardians. Two of the students (Students C and F) were absent from the lesson (because of anti-infection measures in response to the pandemic) but watched Teacher A's opinion statement on video at a later date and participated in the post-interview. Thus, although six students were interviewed before and after the lesson, only four actually attended the relevant lesson.

Third, the researcher sat in on a political science lesson delivered by Teacher A involving a mock ballot. After the lesson, the researcher conducted an initial pre-lesson interview with the six students as a group and asked them about their thoughts on Teacher A's lessons on controversial issues, particularly on the pros and cons of Teacher A expressing his opinions during class (the pre-interview allowed me to clarify any changes in students' thoughts).

Fourth, the researcher observed the lesson, during which Teacher A deliberately expressed his opinion on the issue, "Do you agree or disagree with reducing the age of candidacy?" Finally, in addition to conducting post-lesson interviews with the students to reveal their reactions to Teacher A's opinion expression, the researcher also asked Teacher A to reflect on the day's lesson and discuss the students' reactions and his own feelings.

### **Limitations**

Broadly, this investigation had two limitations. The first is the issue of data collection. The study involved one teacher, six students (four students attended the lesson concerned), and the expression of the teacher's opinion in one lesson. Thus, compared to studies by Hess and McAvoy (2015) and Journell (2011), the present study may have an insufficient number of participants and research period due to the limited number of teachers conducting classroom discussions on controversial issues in Japan.

The second limitation relates to the subject of the class discussion being observed. Recently, lowering the age of candidacy has garnered attention in Japan due to young people's disinterest in politics and their lack of participation. During the House of Councilors election in 2022, a number of opposition parties pledged to lower the age of candidacy. Thus, while the topic is relevant, it is not necessarily controversial or divisive. This is especially true when compared to issues such as the revision of Article 9 of the constitution that prevents Japan from having armed forces or the pros and cons of nuclear power stations. Since some people involved in political education in Japan believe that teachers should refrain from expressing their opinions on

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controversial issues, I decided to keep the lesson topic relatively uncontentious to protect Teacher A from potential criticism. Despite being only semi-controversial, the issue of “lowering the age of candidacy” was important to the students and is a topic that they could seriously consider as an issue relevant to them. Regarding lessons on lowering the age of candidacy, reference was made to research by Kuwabara and Iwasaki (2021).

**Participant selection and their reactions to Teacher A’s stance**

As mentioned above, Teacher A noted three students whom he thought would be susceptible to his influence and three who would not. As a result, these students were selected and their cooperation in the study was obtained. This selection method was adopted for two reasons. First, it could reveal gaps between the teacher’s assumptions and the students’ reactions. Second, it ensured that the participating students had varying views. This was especially necessary because it was assumed that only students with a positive view of Teacher A’s lessons would be likely to volunteer for the study. The reasons why Teacher A chose each student are reported in Table 1, and the students’ thoughts on their teachers’ opinion expression, as described during the pre-lesson interview, are presented in Table 2.

**Table 1.**

*Teacher A’s assessment of the participating students’ influenceability (Here and further underlining is added by the authors for emphasis)*

| Student | Susceptible to influence | Reason for selection   |
|---------|--------------------------|--|
| A       | No                       | <u>This is a child who always has their own firm ideas</u> and who finds it easy to do whatever they do. <u>They take what I say on board but on their own terms.</u> I think this child will be alright. A teacher expressing their own opinion should be no problem for this child.  |
| B       | No                       | Unique. Yes. Impressive. <u>Even when other people express a certain opinion, this child will be the one to hold a different view.</u> This has happened often. I can’t remember in what context, but once, when almost all the children said “red,” this child said “blue.” In that sense, [this child will not be influenced]. |

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| C | No  | <u>Very able, thinks for themselves, though perhaps rather reticent. This is not the type of child who interacts a lot with me.</u> Yes. This child probably hasn't been influenced very much.  |
| D | Yes | <u>Always a good listener. This child listens well,</u> and their various opinions and feelings are deep. Recently, when I showed this child [a video about dying with dignity], the child cried and so probably tends to be [influenced].  |
| E | Yes | This child is quite sharp in some ways. They have some good ideas, but their basic ability is not that high. <u>In that sense, this child listens to what I say carefully and really figures things out.</u>  |
| F | Yes | Student F does not have a high degree of understanding. Indeed. And yet, this child has a strong sense of having to complete the task. <u>The child also probably feels that they need to listen to others in order to complete the task.</u> They listen to what I say and go along with it. |

**Table 2.**

*Students' thoughts on the pros and cons of teacher opinion expression. (See student's "pros and cons statement" below for an explanation of the symbols in the table.)*

| Student | Teacher's Opinion | Influence | Important comments   |
|---------|-------------------|-----------|--|
| A       | SA                | A         | <u>By comparing my opinion with the teacher's, I can come up with a better one.</u> If our opinions are similar, I also incorporate the teacher's opinion.   |
| B       | A                 | SD        | As the perspectives of an adult and a child are different, <u>I'm interested in hearing an opinion from an adult perspective.</u> The teacher's opinion is the teacher's opinion, and so my opinion will not change. |

|   |    |   |  |
|---|----|---|--|
| C | SA | D | I think it's good to express one's own opinion. If the teacher strongly recommends their position, I may come to have the same opinion.  |
| D | SA | D | <u>With only our own opinions, we might end up biased, so I want to also know the teacher's opinion.</u> Having said that, it's not that I want to have the same opinion as the teacher. |
| E | SA | D | As the perspectives of adults and children are different, I want to hear it. <u>Sometimes there will be persuasion to agree, but even so [it is beneficial].</u>                         |
| F | SA | D | I want to hear the opinions of others. <u>Sometimes I might be swayed slightly by others' views, but I think I am fairly unbending when it comes to my own opinion.</u>                  |

**Pros and cons statement:** It is good for teachers to state their personal opinions in lessons dealing with controversial issues.

SA: Strongly agree; A: Agree; D: Disagree; SD: Strongly disagree

**Influence statement:** If a teacher states their opinion in lessons dealing with controversial issues, I think that I might adopt the same opinion as the teacher.

SA: Strongly agree; A: Agree; D: Disagree; SD: Strongly disagree

As reported in Table 2, all six participating students saw their teachers' expressions of personal views in a favorable light. However, in contrast to Teacher A's assumptions, the three students (D, E, and F) that he thought were most susceptible to influence seemed to use his opinion as a reference for their own opinions and as an alternative perspective. They were willing to face the teacher's disclosures even though they felt they might be influenced by what the teacher had to say.

## Results

### **The lesson in practice and Teacher A's opinion expression**

The lesson observed by the researcher involved the issue of whether to lower the minimum age of political candidacy in Japan. There were 25 students in the lesson that day. The lesson flowed as follows. First, the students watched a video about a 19-year-old mayor from France. They learned that the minimum age of eligibility is higher in Japan than in various other countries, and

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they were asked to form an opinion on whether it should be reduced. Second, considering that many students favored lowering the candidacy age, Teacher A intentionally divided the students into “agree” and “disagree” camps to emphasize understanding differing views. The two camps were provided with eight resource materials to use when arguing their positions (see Table 3). Students selected items from these materials to construct their camp’s respective case, which they detailed on a whiteboard. Third, the two camps shared the whiteboards to understand the types of arguments for each side. Finally, in a revision activity, each student wrote their final opinion and shared it on a PC tablet (Tables 3 and 4).

**Table 3.**

*Summary of the lesson.*

*Do you agree or disagree that the minimum age of candidacy in Japan should be reduced?*

| Development of the lesson  | Teacher A’s questions/instructions/explanations and students’ responses (acquired knowledge)   |
|--|--|
| <p>Introduction, part 1</p> <p>Teacher A helps students learn that lowering the minimum age of candidacy has been proposed as a strategy for promoting young people’s political participation.</p> <p>Introduction, part 2</p> <p>Teacher A writes down his own ideas about the pros and cons of lowering the minimum age of candidacy on the board.</p> | <p>Students watch a video about a 19-year-old mayor in France. Teacher A informs them that under Japan’s current electoral system, a 19-year-old cannot run for office and that there is an ongoing discussion among scholars and the public about lowering the age of candidacy in Japan.</p> <p>Do you agree or disagree with lowering the age of candidacy?</p> <p>Number of students who agree: 21<br/>Number of students who disagree: 4<br/><b>(6 people absent)</b></p> |
| <p>Developing a position, part 1</p>   | <p>Summary of positions of the “agree” and “disagree” camps.</p> <p>“Agree” camp:</p>  |

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| <p>Having been divided into “agree” and “disagree” camps, students read resources on tablet PC (see Table 4) as a basis for making a case for each viewpoint and create group summaries.</p> <p>Developing a position, part 2</p> <p>Each group presents their position so that students understand the basis for agreement or disagreement.</p> | <p>It is strange that someone who has finished their compulsory education and completed their preparations for going out into society cannot run for office. Older and young people have differing values and seek different policies. It is young people who will create the future, and so I do not think it’s good to exclude their opinions.</p> <p>“Disagree” camp:</p> <p>A certain degree of experience and knowledge is necessary. Even our student council is made up of second- and third-year students. When asked whether they would run for office at 18, the majority of Japanese [young] people said that they had no intention at all of running. It is doubtful that entrusting politics to young people is a good thing.</p> |
| <p>Plenary</p> <p>Students prepare individual position pieces and publish them on tablet PC</p>  | <p>How has your opinion changed as a result of this lesson? Please record your final opinion.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Number of students who agreed: 14</li> <li>• Number of students who disagreed: 11</li> </ul> <p><b>(6 people absent)</b></p> <p>Student’s final opinion (example): I agree with lowering the age. I think it is wrong to deprive someone of the right to run for office simply because they are young. By including the views of young people, we can incorporate a broad range of different opinions. The participation of young people in politics is likely to allow us to see things that have not been seen before. (Student E)</p>  |

**Table 4.**

*Resources used during the lesson.*

|   |   |
|---|---|
| 1 | Survey: “If the age of candidacy was reduced to 18, would you stand for election?” (pie chart). |
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|---|--|
| 2 | Survey: “How interested are you in your country’s politics?” (graph showing an international comparison of teenagers’ responses).  |
| 3 | Comparison of age of candidacy in 198 countries (pie chart).   |
| 4 | The case for lowering the minimum age of candidacy (news item outlining the views of Politician A).                                |
| 5 | The case against lowering the minimum age of candidacy (extract from a blog containing the anti-reduction views of Politician B).  |
| 6 | Age breakdown of members of the House of Representatives and House of Councilors (as of 2020).                                     |
| 7 | Results of a poll before the election and of the actual election (to show characteristics of the voting behavior of young people). |
| 8 | Differences in the policies demanded from the government by the 18–29 age group and the 70-and-above age group (table).            |

Teacher A agreed that the minimum age of candidacy should be reduced. He was of the opinion that people should not be barred from standing for office because they are too young, and that candidacy should be up to the individual. He claimed that people vote for their opinion of the best candidate, irrespective of age. During the lesson, after asking the students for their initial opinions, Teacher A expressed his position, but before doing so, he asked the students whether they agreed or disagreed with the topic, through a show of hands, and asked some students to express their opinions. Teacher A said:

Incidentally, this is my view. I strongly agree with lowering the age. That’s my feeling. I think it is fine. Young people’s opinions are also necessary, and we can choose whom to vote for. If the candidate is not good, they won’t be elected, so I think it’s fine for [young people] to run for election. Looking at today’s information, I think that, in terms of discussion, the number of students who disagree with lowering the age seems slightly low. So, I want to express both opinions. I am also of the opinion that [the current age requirement] is not a good thing. There are two sides— agree and disagree. (underlining by the author for emphasis)

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Although Teacher A stated his own opinion, saying “I strongly agree” and “young people’s views are also necessary, and we can choose whom to vote for,” he also acknowledged the low number of students who took the opposing view. He explained that there were elements of the opposing view that could be agreed with, reminding students that “there are two sides—agree and disagree.” When Teacher A expressed his opinion during the lesson, no one argued against it. However, in the subsequent groupwork activities, each group took one or the other position for expediency and created a rationale and a case for that position. Thus, little debate occurred between students with differing views. Teacher A’s demonstration of his understanding of both positions was intended to promote debate from an impartial standpoint. In fact, the number of students who disagreed increased from four before the lesson to 11 after the lesson. Thus, it was not the case that the students overwhelmingly conformed to Teacher A’s opinion merely because he expressed it. This may be because the group work assigned did not solidify students’ initial opinions but rather promoted the deliberate consideration of differing positions through argument, which led students to understand the two positions in depth.

**What influenced the students?**

During the lesson, the number of students who countered Teacher A’s opinion—opposed to lowering the age of candidacy—increased. The final opinions they submitted as a part of the lesson (Table 5) and their subsequent interviews with the researcher revealed what influenced their position. In the post-lesson interview, when asked whether they were influenced by Teacher A’s opinion expression, all four of the students who attended the lesson stated that they were not influenced by their teacher. They submitted the following final opinions on lowering the minimum age of candidacy.

**Table 5.**

*Final opinions submitted by students.*

| Students | Final opinion  |
|----------|--|
| A        | I think I agree with lowering the age. In politics today, there are many older people, and young people’s <u>fresh opinions are needed</u> . Politics is said to take the perspective of older people, and to resolve this [gap], the young generation needs to [get involved]. If the age of candidacy is reduced, I think that the number of candidates running will increase. It is not just simply wanting to engage in politics, but I think it would be an experience. |

|   |  |
|---|--|
|   | Preparing to run for election and doing various [related] things will be an opportunity for young people to become aware of new things. Young people do lack experience. However, I think that [participating] in an election will be an opportunity to gain experience.   |
| B | Disagree. Because it is necessary to put the nation first, and I think that it is better if people [who hold office] know a lot about society. I think that people with a wealth of life experience will be more likely to convince voters [to vote for them]. I disagree because I would prefer that politics be handled by people who have an interest in society. |
| C | (absent)   |
| D | I disagree, but I kind of agree. Resource 6 implies that without experience, you won't get far in politics. However, if young people enter politics, they might be able to incorporate <u>the opinions of the youth into politics.</u>   |
| E | I agree. I think it is wrong to deprive someone of the right to stand for office simply because they are young. <u>By including the views of young people, we can incorporate a broad range of different opinions.</u> The participation of young people in politics is likely to allow us to see things that have not been seen before.                             |
| F | (absent)   |

In examining the four students' final opinions, Teacher A's argument that "young people's opinions are also necessary" can be seen in "the fresh opinions of young people are needed" (Student A) and "by including the views of young people, we can incorporate a broad range of different opinions" (Student E). However, there was no emphasis placed on the importance of voters' choice ("we can choose whom to vote for"). In addition, there were no comments that can be considered as assenting to the teacher's position because students' investigations into why the opinions of young people are important were ongoing. In the post-lesson interview, the students clarified that it was not the teacher expressing his opinion that influenced them to take a given position but the overall "adult influence introduced into the classroom." When they were asked about the resource or comment that most influenced them during the lesson, they replied as reported in Table 6.

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**Table 6.**

*Most impactful comment or resource*

| Student   | Comment  |
|-----------|--|
| Student A | That the younger generation has no interest [in politics]. I formed my opinion based on resources like that.   |
| Student B | Reading the words of people who oppose lowering the age. That influenced me.   |
| Student D | Well, looking at the resources about what different people had to say about it and seeing the opinions of people who agree with lowering the age, I came to this decision. |
| Student E | It was somebody's opinion. The sixth one. Someone in the disagree camp.  |

As shown in Table 4, six of the eight resources used in the lesson were graphs or diagrams on the debate of whether to lower the minimum age of candidacy, including a pie chart with the minimum ages of candidacy worldwide and a breakdown of voting participation by age group, plus two position pieces by politicians. Three other students reported being influenced most by the politicians' statements on the issue (Table 6).

Notably, Teacher A deliberately integrated the opportunity for students to gain exposure to politicians' arguments into the lesson plan. He stated that in anticipation of many students agreeing with lowering the minimum candidacy age, he set up two clear and opposing perspectives in the hope that students would use the opinions of others as a foundation to develop and establish their own opinions. This teaching method was implemented as scaffolding to facilitate students' efficient opinion formation based on established arguments, and to allow students to form a position during the limited lesson time. The results of this study indicated that the students were greatly influenced by the opinions of the politicians. Moreover, as the students were exposed to a variety of personal views in the classroom, not only the teacher's, the present study identified a pressing need to investigate the question of how students should treat the various opinions they encounter in society.

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**Document 1:** Opinions of Politicians A and B (extracts)

*Politician A:* While the [minimum] age at which one can stand for elected office is stipulated, it is possible for you to run when you are over 100 years old, when your physical strength is reduced, and people with serious impairments, etc., are likewise not barred from running. The fact that, despite this, [some] people do not have the right to run purely because they are young makes no sense at all.

*Politician B:* Is it not true that people who engage in politics on behalf of voters must have an appropriate level of life experience? In many cases, a question mark looms over the subsequent political activity of people who become members of the Diet before they have gained experience in society. In my opinion, common sense is not obtained by becoming a politician.

**Do you think it is necessary for Teacher A to express his opinion?**

No direct link was observed between the four participating students' final opinions and Teacher A having expressed his opinions in class. The teacher's opinion expression did not seem to encourage students to conform to his opinion. However, the students were divided in their feelings on the matter. In particular, they differed in their opinions on the timing of the teacher's delivery and on the manner of his expression. In the post-lesson interview, the students watched a video of Teacher A expressing his views during the lesson and were asked how they felt about it at the time. Their answers are shown in Table 7.

**Table 7.**

*How did you feel about Teacher A expressing his opinion? Comment by Students A, B and C.*

| Speaker   | Comment   |
|-----------|---|
| Student B | <u>If our teacher has come down on one side, we may think that's the correct opinion.</u><br>It's probably best if he doesn't say anything. |
| Student A | <u>If he tells us his opinion, I would want him to tell it to us clearly. If it's ambiguous, it will be confusing.</u>                      |
| Student B | If he tells us [his opinion] at the end of the class, after everyone has finished giving their opinion...                                   |

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|           |  |
|-----------|--|
| Student A | Like always.   |
| Student C | Sometimes Mr. A tells us [his opinion] before and sometimes after.   |
| I         | What do you think about how he expressed his opinion this time?  |
| Student C | First, he said that he strongly agreed, and <u>then he said he had both opinions. This seemed a bit ambiguous, when we'd been led to believe that he agreed with the people who wanted to lower the age.</u> I think it's better to not express these kinds of opinions. |
| I         | You would like it to be stated clearly?  |
| Student C | If it's said at all.   |
| Student A | I think that if it is not said correctly, it's better not to say it at all.  |
| Student B | <u>If it has to be said, I would like it to be clear.</u>  |
| I         | What would have been a better way to say it?   |
| Student B | Maybe don't say it. Better to tell us what he thinks after our opinions are expressed, after all of us have fully expressed our opinions.  |

*How did you feel about Teacher A expressing his opinion? Comment by Students D,E and F.*

| Speaker   | Comment   |
|-----------|---|
| Student D | <u>It's just like always.</u>   |
| Student E | Yes.  |
| I         | Mr. A pretty much tends to do it afterwards.  |
| Student D | Certainly, after hearing our opinions, he might say, "This is what I think."  |
| Student E | He says it in passing.  |
| I         | This time, he said it at the beginning of the lesson. This is different from giving his opinion after the lesson. I haven't really thought about it much. |

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|           |   |
|-----------|---|
| Student E | Whether he tells us at the beginning or after...  |
| Student F | I wonder. When I heard what our teacher said first, I didn't really understand. <u>I don't see much difference.</u>   |
| Student D | I am for being upfront.   |
| Student E | Me, too.  |
| I         | It's difficult. This issue. Some people say it's better to say it after. Just state your own view.  |
| Student F | Maybe after is right.   |
| Student E | <u>Upfront, you know what he thinks... You know what our teacher himself thinks, and you can then consider how your own ideas differ.</u>   |
| I         | Hearing his opinion before the thinking activity gives you context as you listen to the other people.   |
| Student E | Ah... This is similar to what our teacher said.   |
| Student D | If someone has the same opinion as our teacher, it is possible to consider it with reference to his opinion. <u>Even so, giving us his opinion after is also OK. Knowing it [before] is likely to cause a change [in our opinion formation].</u> Something like that. If you don't have a good understanding of the content... Either way is probably OK. |

Students A, B, and C thought that Teacher A's opinion expression, undertaken with impartiality in mind, was ambiguous and vague. Student B also questioned the timing of Teacher A's opinion expression. In contrast, Students D, E, and F saw Teacher A's opinion expression as "the same as always" and showed no particular objection to the opinion being expressed in the first half of the lesson. Notably, these are also the students (D, E, F) who felt that they were not susceptible to teacher influence (but whom the teacher felt were the most susceptible). Student E was also positive about Teacher A having expressed his views, and most students did not seem dissatisfied with the timing of Teacher A's delivery of his opinion.

Students A, B, and C described Teacher A's opinion expression as "ambiguous" and wanted him to express his opinion at the end of the lesson. In his pre-lesson interview, Teacher A recognized that the students can deepen their own ideas even without teacher support, describing Student A, for example, as "a child who always has their own firm ideas." Meanwhile, Teacher A describes Students D, E, and F, who were not particularly dissatisfied, as good listeners. That is, for the students (A, B, and C) whom Teacher A thought would be unsusceptible to influence, Teacher A's opinion was merely one opinion among many against which to compare their own ideas; to them, the teacher confirming his position at the end of the lesson was sufficient. However, the students (D, E, and F) whom he thought would be susceptible to his influence took his opinion expression as a reference when forming their own opinions.

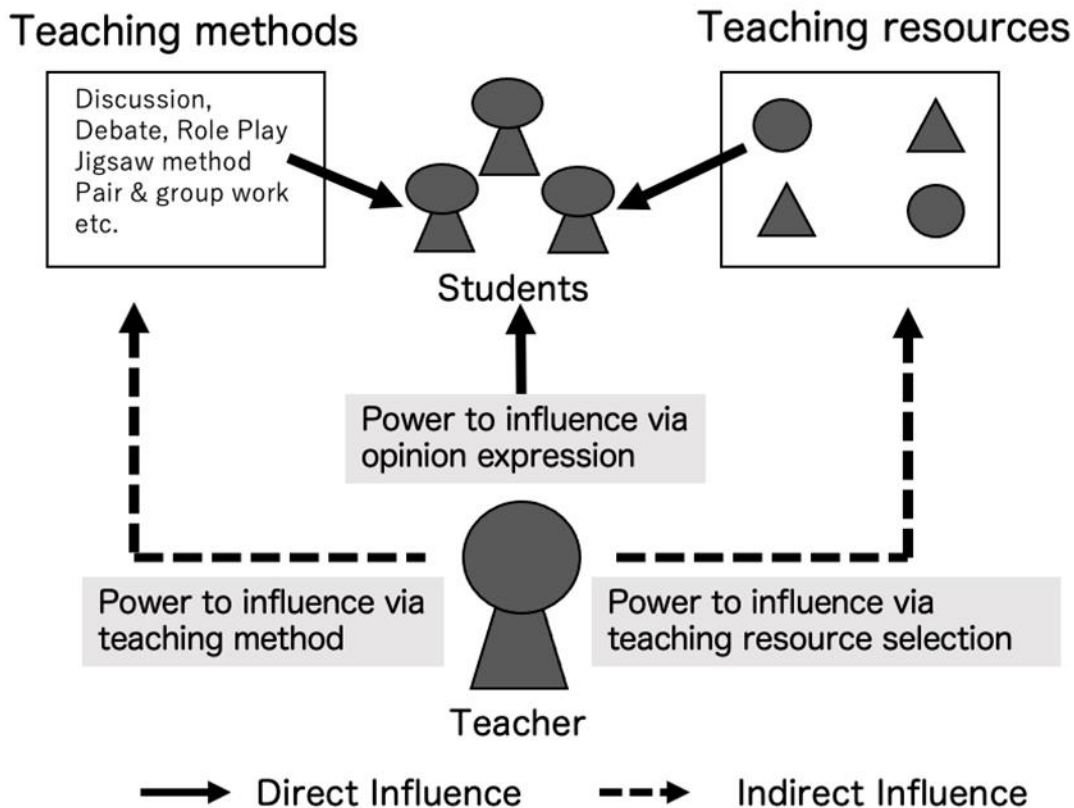
In this study, almost all of the students understood their teacher's opinion expression as necessary and positive and had various ideas on why it was necessary for the classroom. Accordingly, when teachers consider the pros and cons of expressing their opinions on controversial teaching issues, they should take into account students' need for guidance and make comments that correspond to the various aims of such disclosures, as perceived by the students. When Teacher A considered the opposing position when he expressed his own opinion, students found his position ambiguous and were left with doubts. Similarly, students in Iwasaki (2021) had doubts about their teacher's stance and could not understand why their teacher was expressing opinions in class. The present study also demonstrated that students cannot fully understand a teacher's personal stance through a single lesson or from ad hoc practice.

### **Discussion**

Past discussions on the teaching of controversial issues have almost always been related to whether teachers expressing their personal views impacts students, and typically the consensus is yes—significantly so. For example, guidelines from the MIC and MEXT (2015) claim that students are greatly influenced by recognition by a teacher, and thus teachers must avoid mentioning their own opinions. However, the present study found there are various elements involved in a teacher's ability to influence students when teaching controversial issues, in addition to teachers' opinion expression. Figure 1 summarizes the teacher's ability to influence students, as observed in this study.

Figure 1.

*Teacher's power to influence when teaching controversial issues.*



First, the teacher can influence students via their selection of teaching resources. This is because it relates to what the teacher deems relevant to the given controversial issue. Three of the four students who attended the lesson were influenced by Politician A and B's opinions. This reveals that third-party opinions presented via teacher-selected resources may have a strong impact on students. In particular, when third-party opinions are provided as a basis for opinion formation, students must be reminded that such opinions are among many, and they should be advised against accepting them without considering other viewpoints.

Second, the teacher can influence via their selection of teaching methods. In other words, how are the controversial issues taught? The final opinion formed by students during the lessons can

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differ according to whether the lesson contained discussion activities centered on their own views or role-play from different perspectives. In this research, time constraints allowed for little debate on differing views; many students took the position the teacher allocated to them. Assuming that the purpose of exploring controversial issues in the classroom is to encourage students to form ideas independently, the teaching methods and time management strategies selected by the teacher are significant elements of students' opinion formation.

Third, the teacher has the power to influence via the expression of their personal views. The participating students had a positive impression of Teacher A expressing his personal views in the classroom, but they also viewed such expression as having various aims. The students also differed over when the teacher should reveal their personal views during a lesson on a controversial issue. That being said, the influence Teacher A exerted on his students by expressing his personal views was minimal. Notably, during the interviews, none of the students claimed that they were influenced by Teacher A's expression of his views. Rather, notably, the third-party opinions used in the lesson seemed to have more impact on the students. As such, students form their own opinions not only by being exposed to teachers' opinions but also by being exposed to the opinions of other people with various positions in society and the media.

Considering the above, two points can be suggested regarding whether teachers' views impact their students. First, while the teacher's opinion may have impacted students, the degree of such impact was likely less than that of the third-party opinions they used as resources. It has not yet been clarified how pupils in Japan actually react when teachers express their views (Iwasaki, 2021). Generally, in Japanese education, because teachers are authority figures and students want to please them (e.g., by answering questions correctly), it is assumed that teachers have a great deal of influence over their students. In addition, this notion is pervasive in most social studies education research (Koyasu, 2013). However, this idea does not correlate with the findings of this research. Rather, Teacher A was perceived as providing an adult perspective rather than providing the "correct" answer. This perception could be because the students were accustomed to Teacher A's method of teaching, in which unanswered questions are discussed in various ways. Alternatively, it could be attributable to Teacher A's personality. Further research would be necessary to resolve this issue, as data are insufficient.

Second, when considering the impact that teachers have on learning about controversial issues, it is necessary to also look at elements other than "teachers expressing their views," which is what generally tends to be noted. When tackling controversial issues in the classroom and considering the impact of expressing their personal views, teachers must pay more attention to

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their ability to influence via their teaching resources (i.e., whose arguments are included and in what manner, and which aspects of an argument are being focused on) and the teaching method they apply (i.e., how students' learning is supported to facilitate expressing various views).

Even when teaching resources that promote diverse opinion formation are provided, if students do not have the opportunity to exchange views, the lesson may result in students adopting the specific views presented in the lesson, thus negating independent, autonomous opinion formation. Therefore, although teachers' opinion expression may not have a significant impact on student opinion formation, the teacher's ability to influence when teaching controversial issues is significant and unavoidable. Misco et al. (2018) found that teachers in Japan tend to see discussions as formal debating, for which class time and teaching materials are insufficient. Although Teacher A conducted a discussion lesson in 50 minutes that fully incorporated problem setting, opinion formation, discussion, and final judgment, he also limited the students' opinion formation due to time constraints, which minimized the opportunity for discussion between opposing positions and scrutinize the materials. In recent research, it has been shown that argument construction has an impact on students' opinion formation and dialogue activity (McAvoy & Lowery, 2022). However, in Japan, there seems to be a lack of understanding of the various educational strategies involved in asking students to discuss controversial issues. Perhaps, therefore, there is a need for research that clarifies the impact of teachers expressing their opinion during lessons. In addition, there may be a need for research that investigates the results, for students, of the learning methods adopted by teachers when they get students to discuss controversial issues.

### **Conclusion**

The relevance of this study is twofold. First, the study analyzed one teacher's classroom practices to clarify the impact of teachers' opinion expression while teaching controversial issues. The study found that the teacher's expression of his personal views did not lead to uniform conformity among students. The impact of the teacher's opinion expression was no greater than that of other educational inputs, such as the teaching resources and teaching methods selected by the teacher. Previous research on this topic has been deemed problematic due to the lack of analysis of classroom practices and the differences in what students considered opinion expression. As such, this analysis focused on classroom practice: Teacher A's expression of his views, his lesson plan, the students' reactions, and the students' final opinions on whether the age of candidacy should be reduced. Consequently, the pros and cons of teachers expressing

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their personal views as well as their ability to influence via opinion expression were investigated. This elucidated their impact on student opinion formation while teaching controversial issues.

Second, the study found that when students are engaged in learning about controversial issues, they are impacted by the teacher in various ways, irrespective of whether their teacher expresses their opinion or not. After an overall analysis of the lesson, the study confirmed that the teaching methods employed and the third-party source material had a stronger impact on students than when Teacher A expressed his personal views. This finding may offer suggestions for the pros and cons of the matter and offer insights into teachers' roles when dealing with controversial issues.

This paper challenges academic consensus on teachers' authority and ability to indoctrinate by expressing their views. That being said, the researcher does not suggest that teachers simply express their views without consideration. Teachers must pursue "committed impartiality" and be cognizant of their indirect influence through various educational actions. Figure 1 (as seen above)— "Depiction of a teacher's power to influence when teaching controversial issues"— is a hypothesis based on limited data that requires further verification. However, it is likely to provide a useful framework for comprehensively discussing the impact of teachers' various educational actions.

Finally, education research needs an improved method for scrutinizing the process of student opinion formation. This is especially true in terms of how students interpret influences that are internal and external to the lesson when forming their views. These results suggest that further research on teaching controversial issues, including overall teaching theory, is needed to discover which methods are important to facilitate students' expression of diverse views in the classroom and their ability to create their own arguments without blind conformance.

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supported to deal with controversial issues. Previous educational experiences include 5 years of teaching at junior high school in Japan.

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