

MANAGING CONTROVERSY

DEVELOPING A STRATEGY FOR HANDLING CONTROVERSY AND TEACHING CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES IN SCHOOLS



A tool for school leaders and senior managers for handling controversy and teaching controversial issues in schools. Developed with the participation of Austria, Cyprus, Ireland, Montenegro and the United Kingdom, with the support of Albania, France and Sweden

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A self-reflection tool
for school leaders
and senior managers

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This publication builds on the training pack for teachers – *Living with controversy: teaching controversial issues through education for democratic citizenship and human rights* – to provide a comprehensive professional development resource supporting all aspects of a school's work in this field.

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Preface

Controversy and controversial issues are at the centre of our democratic societies. This means that learning how to deal with such issues must also be at the heart of an effective education for democratic citizenship and human rights education (EDC/HRE). As Professor (Sir) Bernard Crick noted in his seminal report of 1998, *Education for citizenship and the teaching of democracy in schools*, which led to the introduction of Citizenship as a statutory subject in England in 2002:

Learning how to engage in dialogue with and respect people whose values are different from one's own is central to the democratic process and essential for the protection and strengthening of democracy and fostering of a culture of human rights. (Crick 1998)

The Council of Europe has an outstanding record in promoting education for democratic citizenship, human rights and intercultural dialogue and in fostering and teaching about the importance of democratic culture. It is therefore fitting that the Council of Europe, in partnership with the European Union, through the 2015 pilot projects scheme on citizenship and human rights education, has helped to facilitate the creation of a new professional development pack by a range of partners across European countries.

This publication is very timely. There are many issues in society, communities and everyday life that young people in Europe are keen to discuss. Yet often they are denied such opportunities in schools because the issues are seen as too challenging to teach in classrooms and too difficult to manage at a whole-school level. Rather, young people are left confused, angry and bewildered with no one to help them to make sense of these issues and to guide their understanding, dialogue and learning.

We know that opening up the school curriculum to controversial issues raises difficult pedagogical questions – such as how to protect the sensitivities of students from different backgrounds and cultures, how to prevent friction in the classroom, and how to teach contentious material even-handedly, avoiding criticisms of bias. It also raises questions about academic freedom and the role of the teacher's own beliefs and values.

We also know that for school leaders and managers it raises questions of policy – such as how to support classroom teachers in their teaching of controversial issues, how to provide additional opportunities for dialogue within the school community, for example through democratic forms of school governance, how to promote a supportive school ethos, how to monitor the overall quality of provision and how to address the anxieties of parents and others outside the school.

This publication assists at both levels. It builds on the training pack for teachers – *Living with controversy: teaching controversial issues through education for democratic citizenship and human rights* – to offer practical support to school leaders and senior managers on how to proactively manage and react to controversial issues in and beyond the school.

We and all the partners involved in this professional development pack hope that in time, *Managing controversy* will be used in tandem with *Living with controversy* to strengthen the managing of controversial issues at whole-school level, alongside the strengthening of the teaching of controversial issues in classrooms across Europe. This will benefit young people and also help contribute to more effective EDC/HRE and the protection and strengthening of our democratic societies.

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October 2016

Introduction

It is evident that the benefits of teaching controversial issues are very important and various, and that the inclusion of controversial issue content is crucial for an effective education for democratic citizenship and human rights for all young people in a modern society. (School leader, Montenegro)

We need to address the complex and challenging controversial issues arising in everyday interactions with and between students, and provide them with a safe space in which to explore ideas, question opinions and develop and master the language and art of critical thinking. (School leader, Sweden)

Controversy is an unavoidable and growing part of life, and therefore of school life, in Europe. Yet few school leaders or senior managers in European countries receive any formal training in how to handle controversial issues in school. Development programmes for future leaders and managers seldom mention it and the subject is rarely, if ever, addressed in continual professional development.

Managing controversy is a self-reflection tool for school leaders and leadership teams that has been produced to fill this gap. The tool helps practitioners reflect on the way controversy is handled in their schools and offers practical suggestions for how it might be addressed more proactively and strategically.

Its central message is that controversy is not to be feared but should be seen as a natural part of school life, and which, when managed well, has significant social and educational benefits.

What do we mean by “controversial issues”?

By “controversial issues” we mean issues that “arouse strong feelings and divide opinion in communities and society”.¹ They vary from the local to the global – from minarets to greenhouse gas emissions. They also vary from place to place. Gay marriage, for example, is relatively unproblematic in some European countries but highly contentious in others. Some controversial issues have long and protracted histories, such as “the Troubles” in Northern Ireland and the “Kurdish issue” in Turkey; while others, such as cyberbullying and the threat of the radicalisation of young people, have emerged relatively recently.

Where do controversial issues arise in schools?

Controversial issues can arise in connection with any aspect of school life. For the sake of convenience, we can break this down into three broad areas.

- ▶ **Curriculum** – when controversy arises in connection with one of the subjects, courses or activities on offer in school (whether discrete, cross-curricular, extra-curricular or a combination of these), for example in science, controversy about the teaching of evolution.
- ▶ **Culture** – when controversy arises in connection with some aspect of daily life in school (its rules and regulations, how people relate and behave, etc.), for example controversy about wearing the hijab.
- ▶ **Community** – when controversy in school arises in connection with some issue or event in the wider world (such as in relation to parents, local community groups, national and international events), for example public controversy over government immigration policy affecting the way immigrant children are treated by their peers in school.

These areas are sometimes known as “the three Cs” of education for democratic citizenship (EDC): curriculum, culture and community. Whereas each is distinct, they often overlap. In particular, the influence of conflicts and controversies originating in wider society on what happens inside schools is very considerable.

1. Kerr and Huddlestone (2015), p.8.

Controversial issues in the curriculum

The curriculum is a common source of controversy in schools. Some school subjects, such as the following, are more closely associated with controversy than others.

- ▶ **History** – contested accounts of the past
- ▶ **Religious education** – moral problems and questions on the purpose and meaning of life
- ▶ **Health education** – issues of a personally sensitive nature
- ▶ **Civic and social education** – conflicting political programmes and ideologies
- ▶ **Literature** – moral and social problems and dilemmas in fictional settings
- ▶ **Science** – competing theories and applications

Controversy is unpredictable and controversial issues can arise at any time in the teaching of almost every subject or course or in any activity in school.

Why is controversy becoming a more pressing educational issue in Europe?

While there have always been controversies in schools, the challenges associated with addressing controversial issues in school life have for a number of reasons become much more pronounced recently. These include: the rapidly increasing levels of diversity in schools; the heightened sensitivity towards questions of identity; and the rise of social media and instant electronic communication.

Rapidly increasing levels of diversity in schools

Schools in Europe have never been more diverse nor has diversity been so wide-ranging – encompassing differences not only associated with culture and religion but also with sexual orientation, special educational needs, disabilities, and several other forms of individual and group identity.

Heightened sensitivity towards questions of identity

As a result of the combination of public concern arising in the aftermath of high-profile incidents of violence and social disorder in some European countries, an increased awareness of the rights of the individual, and anxieties about growing social divisions, there is now a heightened awareness of difference in society. All of this has led to the emergence of new and unexpected forms of controversy in schools.

Rise of social media and instant electronic communication

In an age of mass media and instant electronic communication via portable devices such as phones and laptops, with instant access to the World Wide Web, students are regularly exposed to the conflicts and controversies of adult life both at home and at school. Such exposure cannot be shut off by schools.

How is controversy best approached?

Arguably, the best approach to controversy is not to shy away from it but to embrace it as a natural part of school life, one that is resolved through discussion and debate. This is the democratic way. It puts discussion and debate at the centre or heart of school life – not as a formal exercise but as the default way of resolving disputes and conflicts of opinion within the school community generally.

For students, it means recognising that discussions on controversial issues – whether they take place in classrooms, school councils, pupil parliaments, “circle time” or debating clubs – have a dual purpose. On the one hand, they are an opportunity for students to discuss and debate their views. On the other, they are a means of learning – not just academic learning but also learning how to deal with controversy and difference in school and in life in general. They are an expression of and means of learning democratic citizenship.

What are the benefits of embracing controversy in this way?

To some, the prospect of dealing openly with controversy may seem daunting. Trying to avoid or play down differences may appear to be the easier and safer option. But it is an option that is becoming increasingly

difficult to sustain and justify. Across Europe, young people are more aware of what is happening in the world than ever before, and more vocal about their right to a say in their futures. With almost universal access to social media, it is no longer feasible for schools to try to suppress controversy or to pretend it does not exist or that it takes place outside and not inside schools.

However, the main argument here is not that trying to avoid controversy in schools is no longer possible but that even if it were possible it would be undesirable. To do so would be to ignore the many positive benefits – social and educational – that come from embracing controversy openly and taking it seriously wherever it occurs in school life. These benefits include: improved curriculum learning and attainment; a safer, fairer and more respectful school; and a more just, inclusive and democratic society.

Improved curriculum learning and attainment

Controversy is already built into a number of school subjects. For example, history – where in the absence of contested accounts of past events it would be mere propaganda. Encouraging students to explore and discuss controversies that arise in or that define different subjects helps them to broaden and deepen their knowledge of the subject. It also helps students develop and practise essential cross-curricular critical thinking skills such as: recognising bias; evaluating evidence and arguments; looking for alternative interpretations and viewpoints; and engaging intelligently with online and other media sources and outlets. Finally, controversial issues make learning real and relevant. They can bring dry subjects and topics to life and motivate students to apply what they learn in class to life beyond the school.

A safer, fairer and more respectful school

Encouraging students to discuss controversies as and when they arise in school can help to defuse the tension that often surrounds such issues and to prevent them from becoming more serious. Discussion also helps solve and reduce existing school problems – for example: bullying; homophobia; discrimination; and hate speech. It encourages students to listen to and be more respectful of one other so that they come to value discussion, not aggression, as the way of solving differences they have with each other or with others in school.

A more just, inclusive and democratic society

Engaging with controversial issues helps equip students with the civic knowledge, values and skills that empower them to be informed, active and responsible citizens. This is sometimes known as “competences for democratic culture”.² They learn how to defend their own democratic rights and the rights of others, exercise their responsibilities and tackle discrimination – thus laying the foundation for a fairer, more equal and participative society.

What are the implications of this kind of approach for school management?

In Europe today, the approach to controversy in schools is largely reactive and ad hoc. Controversies are judged on their own merits, as and when they arise. Links are seldom made between different controversial issues, or between controversial issues in the curriculum and those arising from within the life of the school or in connection with external events. While discussion and debate may be seen as important aspects of academic learning, their potential use in school problem solving is often ignored. The idea of making links between classroom discussion and other forums for debate in schools, such as in student councils or pupil parliaments, is rarely considered.

While such an approach may have been acceptable in the past, the situation in Europe today suggests that the management of controversy in schools must no longer be left to chance. A more proactive approach is required. What this means in practice will vary from school to school and from country to country.

Wherever it takes place, however, different management strategies will need to be developed. These include: creating a supportive school culture; connecting curriculum, culture and community; involving the whole staff – teaching and non-teaching; managing risk; and marking out a distinct area of management responsibility.

2. www.coe.int/t/dg4/education/Source/competences/CDC_en.pdf.

Creating a supportive school culture

A school culture that encourages discussion of controversial issues is one where diversity of opinion is celebrated and where any person – staff member, student or parent – feels they can raise their opinions without fear. It is one in which the social and educational value of such discussions is widely recognised and accepted. Creating such a culture means promoting a sense of belonging and responsibility across the school community through an emphasis on inclusion, gender equality, democracy, student participation, well-being and related principles. It also involves identifying and endeavouring to reduce or counteract the factors that work to undermine these, such as the marginalisation of individuals and minority groups.

Connecting curriculum, culture and community

Handling controversy is not just about teaching certain “hot potatoes” in the curriculum – it can relate to any aspect of school life. It also means recognising that controversies often overlap different aspects of school life – the curriculum, school culture and a school’s links with the wider community (“the three Cs” of EDC). This may need to be taken into account when deciding how to deal with particular issues.

Involving the whole staff – teaching and non-teaching

It follows that if controversy can relate to any aspect of school life then it can also relate to any member of staff, teaching or non-teaching. How the school handles controversial issues is therefore relevant to all staff and all can have a part to play – for example, by reflecting diversity in their subject teaching or contributing to a more open and supportive climate.

Managing risk

Being proactive also means anticipating what might go wrong and being ready to respond. This includes the estimation of risk. A strategic approach to controversy is likely to involve a school having a set of basic procedures in place so it is ready to react quickly should a problem arise – for example, an external controversy affecting student behaviour or school morale, complaints from concerned parents or hostile media coverage.

Marking out a distinct area of management responsibility

The handling of controversial issues should be marked out as an area of school management in its own right. At a minimum, this will include setting aside some separate management time and resources, most probably also charging a particular person with overseeing this, and a drawing up a formal school policy – though not necessarily a written one. As a distinct area of management, it would be expected to take its place among others in the school’s formal review and development process.

What is the role of school leadership?

The role of school leadership in relation to any area of school policy is to develop a shared vision of what it is intended to achieve and to identify what needs to be addressed in order to fulfil that vision. In relation to controversial issues, a good way to start is by drawing up a vision statement.

A vision statement is a summary of the basic principles that underlie a policy area. The act of reflecting on what should and should not be included in such a statement should clarify thinking, even if what emerges is never actually put in writing. We offer some suggestions below, which may help to illustrate this process.

A vision statement: some suggested principles

- ▶ Controversy should not be seen as a problem but as a natural part of life in a democracy.
- ▶ Controversial issues should not be shied away from but discussed openly wherever possible.
- ▶ Controversial issue discussions are an essential part of democratic education.
- ▶ Controversial issues can arise anywhere in school at any time.
- ▶ Controversial issues are relevant to all school staff, not just a few.

Having a clear vision of the role of controversy and controversial issues in school life is essential for developing policy in this area. It provides a sound basis on which strategy can be built and concrete proposals made. In particular, it helps school leaders identify the issues that need to be addressed.

For developing policy relating to controversial issues, we have identified nine key issues that might be addressed. Each has the potential to affect in one way or another the way controversy is handled in school. The relative importance of each is likely to vary from school to school, in terms of both the situation on the ground and how the task of managing controversial issues is perceived by the school leadership.

For example, if teaching staff lack confidence handling controversial issues in class, then teaching and learning might be an important area to address. If students fail to see the point of discussion, then maybe the quality of student voice throughout the school needs to be addressed. And if discussion is marred by intolerance or prejudice, perhaps the culture of the school should be addressed.

One issue that is always likely to be important is staff development and training. This is not just another issue to address but more often than not is the means by which all other issues are addressed.

A strategic approach to managing controversy: nine key issues

- ▶ School leadership
- ▶ School ethos and culture
- ▶ Teaching and learning
- ▶ Curriculum
- ▶ Student voice
- ▶ Guidance and support
- ▶ Parental engagement
- ▶ Risk management
- ▶ Staff development and training

How does *Managing controversy* support policy development?

Managing controversy supports policy development by identifying and explaining the range of policy options open to school leaders and senior managers in relation to handling controversial issues. It acts as a sounding board to help you reflect on your assumptions and test out your ideas. It also acts as a checklist of the issues that you may need to address in leading change and setting the climate in relation to controversy and controversial issues in your school.

Using the tool

Who is this tool for?

This is a tool for school leaders and senior managers in schools in Europe.

What is it for?

It is a self-reflection tool, designed to help you think about the way controversy and controversial issues are handled in your school, and how and where you might wish to develop this further.

How is it structured?

It is divided into nine sections, each of which deals with a different area of school life that could have an impact on the management of controversy and controversial issues.

Each section contains a description of the area with which it deals, an explanation of that area's role in relation to the handling of controversial issues, a case study from a European school and a practical suggestion you can apply in your school.

It also contains a series of short stimulus questions for you to reflect on your own ideas and on the situation in your school. Central to the purpose of the tool, these questions serve to map out the major policy options open to you.

How do you use it?

You can use the tool in a number of different ways, including to:

- ▶ familiarise yourself with the major issues and thinking in this area;
- ▶ evaluate the current situation in your school;
- ▶ plan further development;
- ▶ guide professional development.

Reading the introduction and the section on school leadership, and perhaps reflecting on the stimulus questions, should be enough to acquaint yourself with the basic issues. For a more extended exploration of the issues, you should continue to other sections, reflecting on the questions as you go.

If it is being used with the leadership team as part of the school's formal review and development process, team members might wish to respond to the stimulus questions individually first, then discuss their responses with each other as a basis for discussion.

In Appendix I you will find a short checklist of practical action that school leaders and leadership teams might take in developing a strategy for dealing with controversy and teaching controversial issues. This suggested action derives from the nine sections in the tool and summarises the issues and questions raised there. It is offered as a further guide to reflection and to aid the planning process.

To understand more about the theoretical background to the tool, you may also wish to read the scoping paper in Appendix II. Alternatively, the scoping paper may be used as an initial stimulus for awareness-raising activities.

How was the tool developed?

The tool was developed through the "Human Rights and Democracy in Action" Pilot Projects Scheme, jointly organised by the Council of Europe and the European Commission. It was designed and piloted by representatives of the European countries involved in this pilot project.

The tool builds on *Living with controversy*, the professional training pack for teachers developed in the first stage of the project.³ It draws for its inspiration and aims on the Council of Europe Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education⁴ and the Declaration on promoting citizenship and the common values of freedom, tolerance and non-discrimination through education (Paris Declaration).⁵ It reflects the core values of the Council of Europe – democracy, human rights and the rule of law – and its recent work on competences for democratic culture.⁶

3. <https://rm.coe.int/CoERMPublicCommonSearchServices/DisplayDCTMContent?documentId=09000016806948b6>.
4. www.coe.int/en/web/edc/charter-on-education-for-democratic-citizenship-and-human-rights-education.
5. <http://rm.coe.int/CoERMPublicCommonSearchServices/DisplayDCTMContent?documentId=09000016806ac875>.
6. www.coe.int/t/dg4/education/Source/competences/CDC_en.pdf.

Chapter 1

School leadership

The involvement and commitment of school leaders and senior managers is the main factor affecting how controversial issues are approached in schools. Whether these issues are addressed sporadically through individual subjects or seen as part of a wider school strategy depends largely upon the school leaders and leadership teams.

In this section, you are asked to reflect on the role of school leaders and senior managers in developing a strategy for handling controversial issues.

How do you begin to develop a strategy?

The first step in developing a strategy is to raise awareness within your school community – what controversial issues are, where they can arise, why they are important and how they can be addressed. It means putting controversial issues on your school's educational agenda. This is best achieved not by "telling" people, but by stimulating conversations – providing opportunities for members of the school community to talk openly about any issues in the curriculum about which they have concerns.

In the first instance, this means raising the subject with teaching staff, either at full staff meetings or departmental or year meetings. Teachers can be encouraged to identify the topics that raise most concern for them, discuss their concerns and explain how they try to deal with them in practice. Having raised the subject and pinpointed the major concerns, groups of teachers can be encouraged to voluntarily experiment with some new forms of practice – for example, trying out some different teaching techniques or methods, collaborating with colleagues who teach different subjects or co-ordinating practice across a subject department or year.

Once this process is under way, it will be possible to raise the matter with other stakeholders, such as students and parents. They can be encouraged to identify the issues they regard as controversial and share their own experiences of how these are dealt with in school. This can then be fed back into the overall development process.

These processes, however informal, take time and need resources – especially if staff training and professional development are needed. Part of building a strategy, therefore, is to allocate at the outset an appropriate amount of time and resources. This is just one reason why, although it is not entirely necessary, the process is probably best undertaken as part of your school's formal planning and development cycle.

” In terms of your school, where would you say would be the best place to begin raising awareness of the subject of controversial issues? Why?

What kinds of things do you need to know before you set out?

Before you set out, it is important to have a clear understanding of how controversial issues are currently being handled in your school.

This means, first of all, assessing the skills and attitudes of your teaching staff – for instance, their levels of confidence and their ability to cope with conflicting opinions. But classroom teaching is only one part of the story. Handling controversy is a whole-school concern. What happens in the classroom is intimately connected to what happens in the school as a whole and also in the community beyond the school – both positively and negatively.

For example, debates in the classroom can overheat and create conflict in the school community, which in turn can create more conflict or attract attention beyond the school. Good relations between groups outside the classroom make the discussion of difference easier within it. In assessing the current situation in your school in relation to controversial issues, then, you will also need to take account of a range of wider school factors, both within and external to the school.

What do you need to know about your teaching staff?

In essence, what you need to know about your teaching staff can be reduced to three things: their attitudes to teaching about controversy; their experiences of doing so; and the current methods they use. Such information can be acquired informally in initial awareness-raising activities, or, if preferred, through responses to a short formal consultation. It is particularly important to find out, for example, if someone is clearly prejudiced about an issue and whether that person might be communicating their prejudices to students.

Teacher skills and attitudes: some possible review questions

- ▶ How familiar are teaching staff with the term “controversial issues” and its definition?
- ▶ Which issues do teaching staff currently identify as controversial?
- ▶ How well do teaching staff understand the educational rationale for teaching controversial issues?
- ▶ How confident do teaching staff feel about handling controversial issues in the classroom?
- ▶ How do teaching staff see their role in relation to conflicting views and opinions?
- ▶ What kinds of teaching methods and approaches do teaching staff currently use?
- ▶ How consistent is the approach across the school?
- ▶ What examples of good practices do teaching staff have to share?
- ▶ What examples of partnerships and collaborations do teaching staff have to share?
- ▶ What forms of training or professional development, if any, have teaching staff undertaken recently in relation to teaching controversial issues?

” Informally, how would you assess the current capacity of teaching staff in your school in relation to the teaching of controversial issues? What would you say are the main areas for review and development?

What wider school factors do you also need to take into account?

It is somewhat more difficult to specify all the wider school factors that affect the handling of controversial issues. For one thing they vary from school to school; for another, they tend to be difficult to pin down.

Asking teaching staff for their views is important; but to obtain a more complete and robust understanding, you may also wish to consult non-teaching staff, as well as students and parents, and re-read documentation on formal school policies.

Wider school factors: some possible review questions

- ▶ Does the school already have an agreed policy on controversial issues, either formal or informal?
- ▶ Are controversial issues referred to in other school policies?
- ▶ Are controversial issues mentioned in school communications, such as mission statement, statement of ethos and values, school motto or website?
- ▶ How supportive is the actual ethos and culture of the school in the handling of controversial issues?
- ▶ What part does student voice play in school governance and decision making?
- ▶ How openly do students feel they can talk about and share their differences within the school?
- ▶ What are relations like between different groups in school and in the local community?
- ▶ What issues have been controversial recently, within the school community but also locally, regionally, nationally or at a European or international level?
- ▶ Has the existence of controversial issues in the curriculum given cause for any concern about student, teacher or parental welfare recently?
- ▶ What concerns, if any, do parents have in this area?
- ▶ What concerns, if any, do community organisations have?
- ▶ Has the handling of controversial issues ever given rise to negative publicity for the school?

” What do you regard as being the most significant factors that affect the teaching of controversial issues in your school – both positively and negatively?

What leadership qualities and competences are needed to effect change in this area?

Controversial issues can touch on people’s most deeply held beliefs and values. Having these beliefs and views challenged can feel like an attack on one’s sense of personal identity or on the groups one identifies with. No one in the school community is exempt from these feelings – even school leaders and managers. Effecting change in this area therefore requires particular leadership qualities and competences.

Some key leadership qualities and competences

- ▶ Willingness to reflect on one’s own cultural assumptions and biases – how they affect the leading of change in diverse settings
- ▶ Sensitivity to diversity – understanding and respecting the values and beliefs of others
- ▶ Participative leadership – listening seriously to alternative views, and building and empowering teams
- ▶ Ability to challenge resistance without threat – preparing people for change while being mindful of their history and culture
- ▶ Ability to respond to controversy proportionately – knowing when and when not to intervene and how to respond quickly to prevent a crisis
- ▶ Leading by example – using inclusive language, being sensitive to cultural differences while staying true to one’s own values
- ▶ Knowledge of one’s school community – the range of values and beliefs it encompasses, its different interest groups and critical figures

” In terms of the leadership qualities and competences needed for effecting change in relation to the handling of controversial issues, what would you say were your main strengths and weaknesses?

Case study: New-Bridge Integrated College, Northern Ireland, United Kingdom

New-Bridge Integrated College is a mixed school for 11 to 18 year olds in Northern Ireland. The school has students from the main Catholic and Protestant traditions, and from ethnic minority groups. The need to develop a more strategic approach to handling controversial issues in the school was highlighted by a problem that emerged in the English department.

The use of the novel *The Bog Child* in English lessons aroused the suspicions of some parents and local politicians who questioned its appropriateness as a school text. The novel is set against the background of “the Troubles” and the hunger strikes in Northern Ireland in the 1980s. It was felt that the students would have conflicting views about the issues raised in the book, which could lead to tensions in the classroom and in the school in general if these were ignored.

The school principal viewed teaching and learning about controversial issues as an important way of promoting respect for diversity and inclusion in the school. Providing opportunities for students to discuss controversial issues in a supportive climate would enable them to better understand their own and others’ views. It would also enable them to develop their communication skills and learn how to respectfully disagree with others.

The principal and senior leadership team therefore identified controversial issues as an area for whole-school development in the annual school evaluation and development planning process. This was part of a broader aim to promote diversity and inclusion.

The first stage of the process was to collect information. Initially, this involved meetings with the heads of English, history, local and global citizenship and religious education. Later, other teachers and students were consulted to obtain their views on teaching controversial issues. At the same time, an audit was carried

out of practice across all subjects and the school's mission statement, aims and core values reviewed to explore how they related to the handling of controversy in school. The school self-evaluation revealed significant areas of good practice and a range of opportunities across all subjects for teaching about controversial issues. But it also highlighted a lack of common understanding about what makes an issue controversial and of consistency in the approach to teaching and learning, no explicit reference to controversial issues in school policies and that some teachers were uncomfortable or lacked the confidence and/or skills to teach particular issues.

On the basis of the review, the principal and senior leadership team identified three main areas for school development.

- ▶ Clarity about teaching procedures and teacher roles and responsibilities
- ▶ Consistency of approach across subjects
- ▶ Professional development and training

Building on the practice that already existed in the school, they introduced a series of initiatives to address the three areas. These included the following.

- ▶ Reviewing and revising school policies linked to controversial issues, for example, pastoral care
- ▶ Working collaboratively with heads of subject departments and teachers to develop a whole-school approach to teaching controversial issues, for example on creating an open and supportive classroom climate
- ▶ Developing school guidance on teaching controversial issues for teachers, students, parents and school governors
- ▶ Creating teacher-support materials, for example prompt cards on how to respond to and deal with particular issues
- ▶ Collaboration between subjects, for example linking history, English, information and communication technology and art in a project on "the Troubles"
- ▶ Providing opportunities for professional development, for example, through training days and subject department meetings⁷

Where do you start?

If you are interested in developing your professional competences in relation to handling controversial issues, a good way to start is by reflecting on your own beliefs and values and how they impact on the way you promote and lead on this area in your school. Take a moment to step back and look inside yourself. Note any prejudices you think you might have about people because of their gender, religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation or other forms of identity. Or on any issues where you have particularly strong views. An honest appraisal of your own beliefs and values is the first step towards effective leadership in this area.⁸

7. http://ccea.org.uk/sites/default/files/docs/curriculum/area_of_learning/NewBridge_CaseStudy.pdf.

8. See "Baggage check", activity 1.5 in the training pack:
<https://rm.coe.int/CoERMPublicCommonSearchServices/DisplayDCTMContent?documentId=09000016806948b6>.

Chapter 2

School ethos and culture

School culture plays a significant part in the way controversial issues are addressed in schools. Discussing controversial issues can be an uncomfortable and difficult experience for teachers and students; and, for parents, a cause for concern. Establishing an environment in which the discussion of controversial issues is actively encouraged and supported is therefore key to strengthening practice in this area.

In this section, you are asked to reflect on the role of school culture in developing a strategy for handling controversial issues.

What sort of school culture does this imply?

The sort of culture that is likely to encourage and support the discussion of controversial issues is one which is:

- ▶ safe – everyone is able to express themselves publicly without ridicule or threat of victimisation or bullying;
- ▶ welcoming – everyone is known as an individual and feels part of the school community;
- ▶ open – everyone is allowed to form their own opinions, try out new ideas and discuss and debate issues;
- ▶ inclusive – everyone can participate in all school activities, including those with disabilities and from diverse backgrounds, and receive appropriate help when needed;
- ▶ democratic – everyone has a say in school decision making and is encouraged to contribute to school problem solving;
- ▶ rights-based – everyone's rights are respected: such as the right to freedom of expression, belief and religion, equality, privacy and freedom from degrading treatment.

Case study: Löwenzahn primary school, Germany

Löwenzahn primary school, in Berlin-Neukölln, is located in an area where many immigrant families live, mainly of Turkish and Arab origin. There had been violence among its students and involving members of the local community. The school playground was open and it was easy for anyone to gain access from outside. There was also conflict among the teaching staff, particularly over what were the most appropriate teaching methods for the students in that area.

The school leadership met with representatives of the Amadeu Antonio Foundation to discuss what they might do about this situation. The Amadeu Antonio Foundation is dedicated to promoting democratic culture through the protection of minority rights. In the end the school leadership decided to do something on children's rights and school rules, with the aim of integrating students' right to participate and freedom of opinion into the process of deciding school rules.

The foundation arranged a series of workshops for different stakeholders, including parents and community members on how to introduce a more democratic approach to rule making, including more involvement by the students themselves. This included student workshops for all the year 6 (5. Klasse) classes. Each group arrived at a number of suggestions for rules through a process of democratic deliberation – voting was only used as a last resort.

The suggestions that had been arrived at in this way were fed back to the different groups. Student representatives discussed these with their classes and suggested changes where necessary. The final step was to have the rules passed by the school's governing body.

Over 40 rules were created through the discussions in these workshops. Staff and students alike welcomed the approach and reported how it had contributed to improved relations and to the development of a more open and inclusive school culture.⁹

” To what extent would you say that the culture in your school encourages the discussion of controversial issues, both arising through the curriculum and in the school community itself?

Are there any areas of controversy which the prevailing culture in your school discourages people from discussing – either students or staff? If so, which issues and why?

How do you determine the present status of your school's culture?

School culture consists of the values, beliefs, attitudes and behaviour that characterise a school. Although these are not always easy to identify precisely, there are various methods you can use to gain a general sense of what the situation is in your school. It is an issue you can raise with teaching staff when initially introducing the area of controversial issues, either informally or, if preferred, through responses to a short formal consultation.

So as not to get a one-sided picture, it is also important to have the perspectives of students and parents. Student attitude surveys are widely available, as are measures of school ethos. However, unless you are embarking on a full-scale review of school culture, it will probably be simpler to focus on aspects most directly related to controversial issues. (A full-scale review could even come out of this). This means selecting a small number of pertinent questions that might apply to all stakeholders and collecting responses to these either informally in a small focus group or individually in writing.

School culture: some possible review questions

At this school:

- ▶ How are you treated by others?
- ▶ How safe do you feel?
- ▶ When there is a problem do you know who to turn to?
- ▶ How well do you feel that you are listened to?
- ▶ What opportunities do you have to express your opinions?
- ▶ How often do you have the chance to discuss your opinions with others?
- ▶ What say do you have in school rules and decisions?
- ▶ How well do you think students from different backgrounds mix?
- ▶ How welcoming is it for people with disabilities, of different genders or sexual orientation, or from different ethnic or religious groups?

What kind of values can schools legitimately promote?

While schools are generally required to remain neutral in relation to the values of their stakeholders, there are situations where this is not always possible. From time to time decisions need to be taken about what is and is not acceptable – in terms of freedom of speech, standards of behaviour, school uniform, etc. The question naturally arises: in such situations, whose values is it legitimate to promote?

9. Frank and Huddleston (2009), pp. 34-5.

In European countries, the answer is the values of democracy and human rights. This is because democracy and human rights are not regarded as the possession of any one individual or group, but as universal to humankind. They are also endorsed by the Council of Europe Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education¹⁰ to which all Council of Europe countries have agreed, and promoted in the Paris Declaration,¹¹ signed by European Ministers of Education. Applying these values is not always easy because in practice they sometimes conflict, but it does give school decision making a legitimacy that it might not otherwise have.

Values related to democracy and human rights include:

- ▶ equality
- ▶ justice and fairness
- ▶ dignity
- ▶ respect
- ▶ non-discrimination
- ▶ non-violence
- ▶ freedom of expression
- ▶ participation.

” To what extent would you say the culture of your school is underpinned by the values of democracy and human rights?

Is explicit reference made to democracy and human rights in school policy documents? If so, in what context?

Why is it important to be clear about and communicate these values?

Clarity about these values gives teachers a benchmark by which to judge what is and is not acceptable in the classroom and empowers them to approach controversial issues with more confidence. It guides students in their own behaviour and in their relations with others. Communicating these values to parents and the wider school community helps them to see the standards on which the school is operating and that there is no “hidden agenda”.

For these reasons, it is important to try to communicate these values and explain where they come from whenever you can; for instance, in the school’s mission statement, statement of core values or school motto.

” How aware are members of your school community – teachers, students, parents and others – of your school’s stated values? How do you think they would describe them if asked?

How does setting ground rules help?

Ground rules for discussion and debate give teachers and students a greater sense of security when approaching controversial issues, be it in the classroom or in other settings such as a school council. It gives them confidence to take more risks – for example, for teachers to tackle more challenging issues and for students to be more open about their views. Generally speaking, ground rules tend to be more effective in this respect when students themselves have had a part in drawing them up.

10. www.coe.int/en/web/edc/charter-on-education-for-democratic-citizenship-and-human-rights-education.

11. http://ec.europa.eu/education/news/2015/documents/citizenship-education-declaration_en.pdf.

” How common is the practice of the setting of ground rules for discussion in your school? Does it apply in all subjects or school years, or only some?

Do you think this should be a matter of school policy or left to the discretion of individual teachers?

Where do you start?

If you are interested in developing a better understanding of the culture of your school and how it is likely to affect the handling of controversial issues, a good way to start is by walking round the school with a representative group of stakeholders – say, a teacher, a student and a parent – to collect their impressions on the things they see and what these tell them about the underlying culture. You can also try this with different groups, such as prospective parents or former pupils. Student perceptions are particularly important. It may be useful to have some simple prompt questions (see above).

Chapter 3

Teaching and learning

Consistency in teaching and learning creates a climate where teachers and students know what to expect and how to behave. It builds a learning environment which is both safe and inviting, giving teachers the confidence to tackle new and more challenging issues and encouraging students to be more open about their opinions and willing to discuss and debate them.

Consistency is also both a form of quality control and of risk management. It raises standards in subject learning and reduces the risk of problems arising in the classroom or of these spilling out into the school or the community beyond.

In this section, you are asked to reflect on the role of consistency in teaching and learning in developing a strategy for handling controversial issues.

What does consistency mean in relation to controversial issues?

To value consistency is not to say that teachers should be alike in every respect. Teachers are individuals and their individuality should be respected. They need to be allowed to develop the professional style that best suits their individual personality. Rather, consistency in this context refers to the development of shared ideas and practices that benefit the whole-school community – teachers as well as students and parents.

In relation to controversial issues, areas where consistency is most valuable include:

- ▶ what controversial issues are
- ▶ what makes an issue controversial
- ▶ reasons for teaching controversial issues
- ▶ values promoted
- ▶ ground rules for discussion
- ▶ classroom behaviour
- ▶ sharing of learning methods and strategies
- ▶ management of discussion and debate
- ▶ management of students' emotional responses
- ▶ judgments about the sensitivity of issues.

” To what extent would you say teaching staff in your school work to a common agenda in their teaching of controversial issues?

Are there any aspects of the teaching and learning of controversial issues where you would like to see more consistency? If so, which and why?

How is consistency developed?

The most effective way to develop consistency in teaching and learning is by creating opportunities for staff to work together, planning lessons and developing strategy collaboratively. Teachers can support each other and share practice across classes, departments and school years. There are a number of different techniques for encouraging this.

Building consistency in teaching and learning: some possible techniques

- ▶ Joint planning – where a controversial issue crosses subject boundaries, teachers from the different subjects jointly plan the teaching of the issue
- ▶ Team teaching – where colleagues with different personal opinions on an issue share the teaching of the issue
- ▶ Peer observation – where experienced and less-experienced teachers observe each other teaching a lesson on the same issue
- ▶ Stage partners – where a teacher in a primary school supports a newly qualified teacher or a more experienced colleague who has been transferred to a stage or grade they have not taught for some time
- ▶ Critical friends – where a teacher pairs with a small number of critical friends to review their own practice, observe each other teaching and provide each other with constructive feedback

” At the present time, are any initiatives, formal or informal, being undertaken in your school in relation to the strengthening of practice in the teaching of controversial issues? If so, what are these?

How is the development process best managed?

Although responsibility for teaching and learning lies ultimately with the school leader, day-to-day responsibility is probably best delegated to someone who is able to take a more practical “hands-on” approach. Two possibilities are:

- ▶ a co-ordinator, or mentor – someone with a good grasp of the area, able to lead by example and with sufficient authority to manage a school-wide initiative;
- ▶ a think tank, or working party – a small group of staff members with an interest in controversial issues, drawn from a range of subjects or school years, with a remit to co-opt students when necessary.

Case study: Lijepa Naša primary school, Tuhelj, Croatia

During the course of a summer academy in Montenegro, three members of the Lijepa Naša primary school – the head teacher, a homeroom teacher and a teacher of English – set up a project aimed at raising students’ awareness of the importance of communication in conflict situations, and of strategies they might use to resolve such conflict.

On their return to school, the team arranged a series of workshops for colleagues on teaching and learning methods promoting tolerance, non-violent conflict resolution and empathy in the classroom. Working with groups of homeroom teachers, they helped colleagues to incorporate active learning methods into their everyday subject teaching – such as debates, role play and presentations – on a consistent basis, with the aim of supporting students in expressing and sharing their opinions, taking part in discussions and negotiating group decisions.¹²

” In your view, how important is it to have a formal system for co-ordinating and promoting the teaching of controversial issues? Why?

Where do you start?

If you are interested in developing a more consistent approach to the teaching of controversial issues, a good way to start is by creating a simple consistency audit. This involves drawing up a short list of statements relating to the teaching of controversial issues and asking teaching staff to rate these in terms of perceived consistency across the school on a “strongly agree”/“strongly disagree” scale. Items might include: understanding of the reasons for teaching controversial issues, use of ground rules, nature of values promoted, and teaching and learning strategies.

12. Huddleston (2014), p. 12.

Chapter 4

The curriculum

The teaching of controversial issues does not take place in a vacuum but is part of the whole school curriculum. While the formal curriculum itself often cannot be changed, how it is implemented can make a significant difference to the way controversial issues are addressed. The manner in which the curriculum as a whole may be used to support the handling of controversial issues is therefore an important element in the strengthening of practice in this area.

In this section, you are asked to reflect on the role of the curriculum as a whole in developing a strategy for handling controversial issues.

How can the whole curriculum be used to support the handling of controversial issues?

The whole curriculum can be used to support the handling of controversial issues in two main ways. Firstly, by creating a supportive learning climate: a climate in which controversy is not seen as something to be feared but as a natural part of life in a democracy; a variety of viewpoints are explored; matters relating to diversity and identity are approached with sensitivity; and discussion, not intimidation and violence, is seen as the way to resolve conflict.

Secondly, by providing opportunities for students to develop and practise the interpersonal and critical skills needed to engage constructively with controversy. For example, listening, expressing an opinion, arguing a point, recognising bias, evaluating evidence and argument, and looking for alternative interpretations and viewpoints.

What does this mean in practice?

In practice this means encouraging staff to see that controversial issues are not just the concern of a few subjects but that all subjects can have a part to play. The process begins by finding ways of helping staff to make connections between different controversial issues and the subjects they teach.

Identifying curriculum opportunities: a group-planning exercise

Teaching staff arrange groups to brainstorm examples of issues that are currently controversial – in the school, locally, regionally, nationally and internationally. They first identify the issues that are already covered in the school curriculum and put these on one side. Then they reflect on the issues that are left (likely to be much greater in number) and rate them in terms of how relevant they think they are to young people's lives today.

They choose what they think are the most relevant of these and try to make connections between them and different subjects in the curriculum. Having done this, the groups feed the connections back to subject departments or subject lead teachers who consider how these issues can be incorporated into their subject teaching. This exercise is best carried out with mixed groups of teachers from a range of subjects and is useful for initial awareness raising of the area.

” To what extent is responsibility for dealing with diversity and difference seen by staff in your school as a whole-curriculum issue?

How important to you is it to see it as whole-curriculum issue? Why?

How can all subjects contribute?

All subjects can contribute in a number of practical ways to the process of developing a learning environment that promotes and supports the handling of controversial issues.

How all subjects can contribute: some possible actions

- ▶ Identifying diversity naturally arising within the subject – including where conflicting opinions, multiple perspectives, clashes of value and cultural or other differences come into play.
- ▶ Using real-life issues and problem solving to support learning – including the resolution of school-related problems such as discrimination and bullying.
- ▶ Providing opportunities for student self-expression and debate – including both small-group and whole-class work.
- ▶ Developing interpersonal and critical thinking skills – including discussion and debating skills.
- ▶ Encouraging students to suggest their own ideas for discussion topics – including following up on unsolicited suggestions where appropriate.

” At the present time, how well do you think the curriculum in your school supports the management of controversial issues?

Are there any areas you would like to develop further? If so, which areas and why?

In your opinion, what are main difficulties of leading change in this area?

What do different subjects have to offer?

While there are a number of practices that all subjects can incorporate into their teaching, each subject also has something unique to offer. Therefore, encouraging teachers to reflect on the sorts of controversy and insights into controversy with which their subject is uniquely equipped to deal is also an important part of the development process in this area. Although this differs from country to country, some general examples might include the following.

- ▶ Literature – insights into personal issues, such as sexuality; social issues, such as racism and equality; changes in attitudes to issues over time.
- ▶ Language – insights into other countries and cultures; cultural links; different attitudes to issues.
- ▶ History – multiple perspectives on the past; origins of nationalism, fascism, anti-Semitism and Islamophobia; development of views on gender, sexuality and disability.
- ▶ Science – evolution; climate change; animal experimentation; stem cell research; genetically modified foods.
- ▶ Religious education – religious diversity; use of religious symbols such as the crucifix and the hijab.
- ▶ Health and sex education – sexual orientation; lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender rights; abortion; drug use.
- ▶ Maths – different number systems; use and abuse of statistics, such as crime and immigration rates.
- ▶ Civic and social education – different political systems, political parties, policies and ideologies.
- ▶ Physical education – cultural attitudes towards sport; gender patterns in sports; controversies, such as doping.
- ▶ Art – cultural attitudes towards art; art as propaganda and protest; use of art in awareness raising.

- ▶ Information and communication technology – radicalisation of young people via social media; pornography; internet privacy; e-democracy and online campaigning.
- ▶ Geography – local issues, such as minaret building, pollution control, planning and segregation; global issues, such as fair trade, migration, climate change and ethical tourism.
- ▶ Music – cultural attitudes to music; music as propaganda and protest; racist and sexist lyrics in music.

Case study: Veljko Drobnjaković primary school, Risan, Montenegro

While there was already a separate subject called “civic education” in the national curriculum, the school head felt this was not enough and that discussion of issues relating to democracy and human rights should be made a “guiding point” for the teachers of all subjects. Restricting this to one subject in the curriculum did not really empower students to think and feel like active citizens.

With the help of a representative of a local non-governmental organisation, and a fellow teacher, he worked with the Teachers’ Council to introduce relevant issues into a number of different curriculum subjects, including English, Italian, geography, history, biology, social science and science.¹³

” Are there any examples of controversial issues currently omitted from the school curriculum that you think ought to be included? If so, which issues and why? Ideally, in which subject(s) would you locate them?

Where do you start?

If you are interested in encouraging staff to incorporate more examples of controversial issues into their teaching, a good way to start is by holding a session of “cross-curricular speed dating”. Arrange a room with three chairs either side of each desk. Divide staff into groups of six, with no group containing two members from the same subject department. Arrange each group in three pairs around three desks. Each pair has to identify at least one controversial issue that overlaps both their subjects. Rotate one place within the group every few minutes and repeat the process. Pairs write down their ideas and discuss them afterwards with the rest of the staff.

13. Huddleston (2014) p. 13.

Chapter 5

Student voice

The quality of student voice sets the tone for discussion and debate generally in a school. Students who are regularly given a say in matters that affect them, and have their views taken seriously, are more likely to value opportunities for discussion and want to contribute. They are more likely to feel that they can speak openly and that they can cope with conflicting opinions and points of view. Above all, they are more likely to develop the skills of discussion and debate, and be capable of using them with confidence. Student voice is clearly, therefore, an important factor in the handling of controversial issues.

In this section, you are asked to reflect on the role of student voice in developing a strategy for handling controversial issues.

How does student voice contribute to the handling of controversial issues?

Student voice contributes to the handling of controversial issues in three main ways: (a) by helping to create a positive school ethos and culture; (b) by enriching learning; and (c) by influencing school policy and decision-making.

Student voice helps to create a school environment, both in and beyond classrooms, in which all contributions are valued and everyone feels included. It gives students a sense of community and respect for diversity and difference.

Student voice enables students to play an active part in the classroom and in their own learning. Students can suggest and select controversial issues for discussion, have a say in the kind of teaching methods used, help to check teaching materials for bias and draw up protocols for visiting speakers, such as politicians and public officials.

Student voice enables students to influence the way controversial issues are addressed in their school: for example, by giving feedback on the way controversial issues are handled, evaluating the effectiveness of different teaching methods, identifying the diverse learning needs within the student community, drawing attention to new and emerging controversies, and participating in decisions on safeguarding measures – such as in relation to the use of external speakers or, where appropriate, the blocking of access to harmful websites.

” What is the general attitude of staff in your school towards the role of student voice, both in the classroom and in the school as a whole?

Is there an agreed view of what it is for and how it can be used? If so, what is this view?

How can you encourage student voice?

The most important thing that you can do to encourage student voice is to ensure that students' views and opinions are taken seriously by adults in your school community – in particular, by senior staff and those with a role in school governance, whether school governors or members of the school board. Student voice used simply as a form of “window-dressing” only serves to de-motivate students and undermine staff – student relations.

This entails ensuring that student participation is genuine participation – that students have the opportunity to influence decisions that will make a real difference to their lives and those of their peers. It also means ensuring opportunities to participate are available to all, regardless of age, ability or background. It is important to convey the message that all groups in society are entitled to a voice and that everyone's voice counts.

Case study: Lark Rise Academy, Dunstable, England, United Kingdom

Lark Rise Academy is a primary school with pupils aged 3 to 9. Through a system of focus groups, the school discovered that pupils were dissatisfied with the way the school council worked. They felt that it was not genuinely representing all pupils. Responsibility fell to only a few pupils, whereas more wanted to be involved. Also, there was a criticism that only well-behaved pupils could serve.

The pupils were keen to find a new structure that would allow all pupils to be involved in decision making about what was going on in the school. They decided to hold weekly class meetings, which they called “pow wows”.

These 30-minute meetings are facilitated by the class teacher with minutes taken by the teaching assistant. Every class in the school will discuss the same questions, which are generally set by the head teacher. The questions cover a number of thought-provoking themes, such as homework, how to make literacy lessons more exciting, issues in the playground or children’s rights. Every pupil is involved in these sessions, including the three-year-olds in the nursery. The pupils are asked to think about and justify their answers. All answers are listened to and written down. Pupils are given feedback about all the decisions that are made as a result of these sessions.¹⁴

” So far as you can tell, what do your students feel about the opportunities for student voice in your school? Do they feel their contribution is valued?

In what school issues do you think students can most usefully have a say? Are there any school issues they should not be involved in? If so, which issues and why?

How do student-voice activities differ?

Student-voice activities exist on a spectrum. At its simplest, activity is limited to students speaking their minds; at its most sophisticated, students may be leading collective actions of both peers and adults. At the basic level, students are seen as sources of data about the school; at the higher level, as leaders of change. With increasing age and maturity students are capable of taking on more complex and responsible roles. However, at all ages most students can carry out simple tasks at any point in the spectrum and should be encouraged to do so. The more involved they are, the more motivated they become. A number of different typologies for student voice are available.

Student-voice activities: a typology

Student-voice activities can be understood as existing on a simple spectrum from self-expression to leadership.

- ▶ Expression – volunteer opinions
- ▶ Consultation – asked for their opinions
- ▶ Participation – attend meetings
- ▶ Partnership – have a formalised role in decision making
- ▶ Activism – identify problems and generate solutions
- ▶ Leadership – plan and make decisions¹⁵

” Where on the spectrum of student-voice activities would you locate current practice in your school?

14. www.smartschoolcouncils.org.uk/school-council-case-studies/lark-rise-academy/.

15. www.studentsatthecenter.org/sites/scl.dl-dev.com/files/Motivation%20Engagement%20Student%20Voice_0.pdf.

What kind of support is needed?

Many students lack the confidence to express themselves publicly, or the skills of advocacy required in certain student-voice activities. An element of peer coaching and support is likely to be needed, which in turn will need management support – for example, in the form of a student voice co-ordinator.

Quality of student voice in the classroom lies in the first instance in the hands of the classroom teacher. It partially depends on how staff view the role of student voice in teaching and learning, and how well they are able to facilitate it. The facilitation of student voice overlaps with the facilitation of discussion and debate, and demands similar skills. So much so that discussions on controversial issues might be seen as an aspect of student voice, and vice versa.

” Is there currently anyone on your school staff with formal responsibility for student voice?

What if student voice appears to conflict with other educational agendas?

The importance of students being able to speak openly and frankly is integral to the idea of student voice and also to the handling of controversial issues. There are occasions, however, when this may appear to conflict with other educational agendas, such as the promotion of national values, or the prevention of radicalisation – for example, in the context of the British Government’s “Prevent” strategy. School leaders may feel that allowing students to express themselves freely may conflict with the school’s duty to promote certain values.

In situations like this, it is important to bear in mind that it is only to be expected that students will sometimes express unconventional views. This is part of the natural experimentation of youth and should not necessarily be seen as a threat to the school’s “official” values.

It is also important to remember that in European countries, freedom of expression is a basic human right and can only be legitimately restricted to protect another human right.

” In your school, are there other educational agendas or imperatives which appear to conflict with student voice? If so, which and how?

What other factors tend to prevent students from speaking freely in school? How, in your opinion, are these best dealt with?

Where do you start?

If you are interested in developing the role of student voice in your school, a good way to start is with a lesson audit. This involves drawing up a short student questionnaire focusing on a single lesson. Questions should relate to opportunities in that lesson for students to express opinions, discuss issues, make suggestions, etc. Warn staff about the questionnaire but do not tell them the day when it will be used. On the day of your choice, arrange for the questionnaires to be given out at the end of one of the lessons. Students complete them at the beginning of the next lesson, on the basis of the lesson they have just had. Senior staff analyse the results and produce a report. All staff are given a copy of the report and its conclusions are used in the school’s improvement plan. The questionnaires may be given either to every student in the school or only to those in one school level.

Chapter 6

Guidance and support

Confronting controversial issues can be personally challenging for both staff and students. It raises fundamental questions of loyalty and identity. It also arouses strong emotions and can be intimidating and divisive. The need for personal guidance and support, for teachers as well as students, is therefore a critical factor in the handling of controversial issues.

In this section, you are asked to reflect on the role of personal guidance and support in developing a strategy for handling controversial issues.

In which areas are teaching staff likely to need support?

Teaching staff are likely to need support for two main reasons. The first is to help them overcome their initial anxieties about teaching particular issues, so they feel safe and do not shy away from teaching them. This includes anxieties arising out of their own moral or religious views on an issue, about lack of subject knowledge or teaching skills, and about what could go wrong, such as breakdown of discipline, students being upset, or parents complaining.

Secondly, teachers need help to cope personally with problems that arise during or as a result of the teaching process, for example, difficulties with discipline, threats to student well-being, group conflict or antagonisms, parental action, harassment or threatening behaviour – either in or outside school. This includes coming to terms with or dealing with any personal prejudices they may have that are affecting their handling of an issue.

” In your opinion, what are the most likely anxieties staff in your school would have about teaching something controversial?

What can school management do?

The most important thing school management can do to support staff in stressful situations like these is to try to create an atmosphere in which members of staff feel comfortable asking for help when they need it. It means being sensitive to and recognising situations that might precipitate the need for guidance or support, and acting in a timely and proportionate manner when concerns do arise. It also means providing extra support from the senior leadership team at times of particular stress or difficulty.

Supporting staff in stressful situations: some possible action points

- ▶ Policy development – a clear framework setting out the responsibilities of senior management and staff on key issues such as behaviour and discipline, communicating with parents and external organisations
- ▶ Formal guidance – on teaching controversial issues, including tips on how to reconcile one’s own values on issues with the values of the curriculum
- ▶ Teacher voice – opportunities for teaching staff to express their concerns, for example, staff meetings, working groups
- ▶ Coaching – opportunities for personal and emotional support from experienced colleagues, including advice on how to tackle new and challenging issues
- ▶ Professional development and training – on handling controversial issues in school
- ▶ School linking – learning how staff in other schools approach difficult situations
- ▶ Support materials – practical reference material that can be used in lessons, such as prompts on how to respond to inappropriate remarks or language
- ▶ A controversial issues mentor – an experienced colleague who can support teachers individually
- ▶ Staff induction – helping new staff prepare for problems they may encounter when tackling controversial issues for the first time

” How comfortable would you say staff in your school are about asking for help in stressful situations?

Do you have any particular ways of helping staff who might be experiencing stress as a result of having to teach something they regard as controversial? If so, what are they?

What kinds of support are students likely to need?

Tackling controversial issues is as intimidating for students as it is for teachers, but in some ways the emotional challenge can be greater for students. Students may feel threatened and confused when confronted with views that conflict with those of their family. They may be embarrassed to express their opinions for fear of being ridiculed or giving the “wrong” answer. They may be bullied or subject to racist or other forms of abuse on account of their beliefs – either in person or through social media, in school and beyond.

” Do you have any experience in your school of students needing personal support in relation to some aspect of the curriculum? If so, what was it about and how did you respond?

What can you do to help meet these needs?

The most important thing you can do to help meet these needs is to try to establish an environment where students feel safe and secure, are encouraged to talk and are listened to. This means staff knowing students as individuals and being aware of their different needs. It also means students knowing that there are adults in the school whom they can approach if they are worried.

Supporting students in stressful situations: some possible action points

- ▶ Policy development – a clear framework on who does what in relation to areas such as anti-bullying, e-safety and child protection
- ▶ Professional training and development on how to handle emotive issues safely in the classroom
- ▶ Formal guidelines on recognising when a student’s welfare might be at risk and how to respond to this, including in relation to indoctrination into extremist ideologies
- ▶ Peer support – one-to-one support or mentoring for students by students trained for the purpose
- ▶ Peer mediation – disputes between students resolved by trained student mediators

- ▶ Designated safeguarding person – a person that students can turn to for emotional support and who is the first point of contact for students, parents, teaching and non-teaching staff and external agencies in all matters of child protection
- ▶ Personal and social education – lessons on how to deal with different forms of peer pressure
- ▶ Parental and community engagement – working closely with parents on issues relating to individual student well-being and also with community representatives, such as civic and religious leaders

Case study: Home Counties, England, United Kingdom

In a selective school in the Home Counties, the only Jewish boy at the school complained to his teachers of being bullied by a fellow pupil of British-Pakistani heritage, aided and supported by various others. The boy was called a “Christ killer” and a “murderer of Palestinians”. He was told he would face retribution for crimes committed by Jews, and that the Holocaust had never happened. The bullying took place daily, not only in school but also on his train journey home. He became withdrawn and started refusing to go to school.

The school approached the local authority’s support service for minority ethnic achievement for guidance and support. The link consultant then set up meetings with the school leader and senior managers about how best to handle the case. The parents of the boys were requested to come to school and discussions were held with them.

It was decided that the best way to proceed was to invite the local imam and the Jewish family’s rabbi to take part in the discussions. Both spoke about the incidents to the boys responsible and to their parents. They also gave support to the boy concerned and to his family.

The imam spoke at Friday prayers to the local Muslim community about the need for peace and reconciliation. The link consultant followed up this work by conducting a school assembly that discussed the impact of racist bullying, and in personal, social and health education (PSHE) classes the students had opportunities with their teachers to explore the issues more closely, and come to conclusions about the negative impact racism and bullying had on the school community. No further incidents of racist bullying occurred.¹⁶

” How well prepared is your school to deal with student problems arising out of the teaching of controversial issues? Can you think of any areas you would particularly like to strengthen? If so, which areas and why?

Where do you start?

If you are interested in creating a more supportive atmosphere for teaching staff, a good way to start is by spending some time in the classroom with a teacher who wants help teaching a controversial issue. Give the teacher some specific strategies and explain or role-play how they should be used in the classroom, for example, how to facilitate discussion, different forms of questioning, etc. When you visit the teacher, make it clear that you are there to observe the strategies in action and not for any other purpose. Since you are in the room, it gives the teacher the chance to try out the strategies with little risk that the students will not comply. The more time you are able to be in the classroom, even if you are on your computer at the back, the more students will see that both you and the teacher take their learning seriously. If time is scarce, try alternating with other colleagues from the senior leadership team.

16. www.sgsts.org.uk/SupportForVulnerablePupils/EMTAS/Shared%20Documents/Recording%20and%20reporting%20racist%20incidents.pdf.

Chapter 7

Parental engagement

It is not unusual for parents to have reservations about what their children are being taught at school. Often it is the result of a simple misunderstanding. On other occasions it might be a matter of principle – for example, a parent who is opposed to their child being taught certain issues on the grounds of religious faith or political ideology. Building relationships with parents can help to quickly clear up misunderstandings and address concerns before they become serious. It is therefore an important aspect of the handling of controversial issues.

In this section, you are asked to reflect on the role of building relationships with parents in developing a strategy for handling controversial issues.

How do you build relationships?

The sorts of relationships that best support the handling of controversial issues are those which are based on trust. Parents need to feel that the school is working with them and in the best interests of their children and does not have any “hidden agenda”. They need to feel that whenever a controversial issue arises it will be taught sensitively and in a balanced way, respecting a variety of viewpoints – including their own. There are a number of ways of building this kind of trust.

Building relationships with parents: key actions

- ▶ Get to know parents and listen to their views
- ▶ Make them feel included
- ▶ Involve them in the life of the school
- ▶ Inform them about your approach to handling controversial issues

” To what extent would you say parents at your school are supportive of the work of the school?

How important do you think it is to create an atmosphere of trust between a school and its parents? How, in your view, is this best achieved?

How do you make parents feel included?

To make parents feel included you need to treat them as individuals. You also need to acknowledge their own role as educators of their children. Above all, you need to make them feel welcome in the school; for instance, by making it easy for them to contact or make an appointment with a member of staff. You should try to convey these key messages in your communications and in your points of contact with parents: such as through logos and school mottos, mission statements, school websites, newsletters, school entrances and visitors’ reception areas, parents’ evenings and school events.

” Do you take special steps to help parents feel welcome in your school? If so, what steps are these?

Why involve parents in school life?

As regards controversial issues, the more directly involved parents are in school life the more understanding and supportive they are likely to be. Involvement in school life helps parents to see at first hand what the school is trying to do. It helps to clear up any misunderstandings and allay any fears they might have.

There are a number of different ways to involve parents in school life. These include:

- ▶ Taking part in consultations on school policy; for instance, a survey on school ethos. How far parents can be involved in actual decision making differs from country to country. Powers of this kind should always be carefully regulated, with contributions to decision making being restricted to formally constituted bodies such as a parents' organisation or a school governing body, and parents not being allowed to veto decisions made within the school.
- ▶ Acting as a resource for student learning; for instance, as part of a homework assignment on a controversial issue, students interview family members on their attitudes and experiences; or holding a "facilitated dialogue evening", in which students raise issues concerning a particular controversial issue and adults take the role of listeners, expressing their hopes and concerns for their children.
- ▶ Contributing to the teaching process; for instance, parents who have professional expertise in a specific curriculum area act as visiting speakers on a controversial issue (such as members of the medical profession or lawyers).

” To what extent do you try to involve parents in the life of your school? What methods do you use?

**How important is it to you to try to involve parents in school life? Why?
What purpose do you see it as having?**

What should you tell parents about your approach to discussing controversial issues?

As many controversial issues tend to arise unexpectedly, it is helpful to make parents aware of your approach to discussing these issues in readiness for when this happens. This might consist of a short statement outlining the basic principles of your approach and representative examples of the main controversial issues being taught. If necessary, it could be augmented by a few short notes on the place of controversial issues in the curriculum, the benefits of teaching controversial issues to their children's learning and how it will help them in life beyond the school.

It is also helpful to make parents aware of related school policies and how they connect to the teaching of controversial issues – such as policies on behaviour, anti-bullying, discrimination and gender equality.

Teaching controversial issues: parental guidelines

Here is an example of parental guidelines that seek to reassure parents that teachers will ensure balanced teaching of controversial issues.

Teachers in our school will:

- ▶ facilitate discussion and debate, rather than being the leading authority on a topic.

Teachers in our school will not:

- ▶ present their own views as factual evidence to the pupils;
- ▶ present their own views about the views of others;
- ▶ present information as opinions and not as indisputable facts.¹⁷

17. http://ccea.org.uk/sites/default/files/docs/curriculum/area_of_learning/CCEA_Controversial_Issues.pdf.

” Do you refer to controversial issues in any of your school’s current communications with parents? How important do you think it is to do this?

Case study: school in an urban area, Ireland

This is a large, ethnically diverse school located in an urban setting. In its mission statement, the school commits itself to celebrating different kinds of diversity. As part of a celebration of sexual orientation the school arranged an LGBT week, organised by the student council. A number of activities were held during the week, including guest speakers, LGBT-friendly “selfies” and a “stand up against bullying” event. The LGBT flag was raised at the start of the week by the Minister for Health and the event received coverage in the national press.

A group of eastern European parents, all affiliated to a particular church, voiced their concerns to their pastor, who, along with a number of other church leaders in the community, wrote a letter of complaint to the Board of Management and to the patron of the school. The parents collectively withdrew their children from the school for the remainder of the week. The school responded in writing to the letter from the church leaders explaining the rationale behind the week and the letter was sent to the families in question, respecting their decision but explaining the purpose of the week. Though still unhappy to have their children involved, having had an opportunity to see the situation from the school’s perspective, the parents took no further action. The week was a resounding success and is now a regular feature of the academic calendar.¹⁸

Where do you start?

If you are interested in involving a wider range of parents in school life, a good way to start is by arranging some free training sessions for the parents of immigrant or minority children or parents whose children are new to the school. Choose a time during the week that will suit the greatest number. Topics for the training sessions could include language proficiency, the educational system, gender equality, the rights and duties of parents, and school policies and practices.

¹⁸. Personal communication from Mary Gannon.

Chapter 8

Risk management

Within any school subject, some degree of risk taking is necessary – otherwise nothing will ever be achieved. Risk management is about identifying and assessing potential risks and then responding to them. Risks fall into different categories. In relation to controversial issues, they include: impact on students and student behaviour; reactions of parents; attitudes of the local community, including of civic and religious organisations; and media response. The possibility of complaints from parents, negative publicity in the press or the intervention of local community or religious leaders is an ever-present one. Effective risk management is therefore an important aspect of the handling of controversial issues.

In this section, you are asked to reflect on the role of risk management in developing a strategy for handling controversial issues.

What does risk management involve?

There are two elements in risk management. The first is risk reduction, namely, taking measures to reduce the likelihood of the risk occurring and reducing the impact of the risk should it occur. The second is crisis management, which involves the preparation of contingency measures for when the risk occurs. We shall consider each one in turn.

How can you reduce the risks associated with teaching controversial issues?

Many of the risks associated with teaching controversial issues arise from confusion or lack of understanding about curriculum goals in this area. The risk of offending sensitivities through misunderstanding is much reduced when there is a clear rationale for controversial issues understood by all. There are a number of different ways to develop this. These include the followings:

- ▶ Ensuring consistency in the teaching and learning of controversial issues, for example through collaborative teaching, or staff guidelines
- ▶ Informing parents about the school's rationale for teaching controversial issues, for example through parental guidelines
- ▶ Communicating the school's core values, for example in the school mission statement, or statement of values
- ▶ Establishing a culture of openness, for example providing opportunities for students to give feedback on teaching and learning, for teachers to discuss their concerns, and for parents to voice their concerns
- ▶ Ensuring clarity in communications, for example in instructions for homework assignments
- ▶ Developing protocols for activities related to controversial issues, for example for visiting speakers such as politicians, or religious or community leaders

” Of the different preventative measures a school can take to reduce the risks associated with teaching controversial issues, which would you say were the most important? Why?

What sort of contingency measures is it useful to have in place?

Having an accessible student-support system and clear policies on issues such as bullying, discrimination and child protection are useful contingency measures for resolving problems relating to student welfare and behaviour.

For dealing with parental anxieties and complaints about controversial issues, it is important to have an appropriate complaints procedure. This means ensuring that, wherever possible, complaints are resolved quickly and informally, and are not allowed to escalate. There should be clear procedures for making and receiving enquiries and complaints, and an effective mechanism for directing them to the appropriate member of staff for resolution.

There is always a risk, however, that a controversy will spread beyond the confines of the school. Negative media coverage can cause serious damage to a school's reputation. Should there be a danger of this happening, an immediate response is required. For this reason, it can be helpful to refer to controversial issues in school policy on responding to critical incidents. Having an agreed rationale for teaching controversial issues and supporting documentation such as staff guidelines and protocols can be useful should there be a need to give interviews or briefings, or write press releases.

However, there is also a second area of risk to consider in situations where the school or elements within the school are likely to receive adverse publicity. This is the potential impact of events and controversies from outside the school; for instance, when political campaigns target a particular minority group, or sections of the local community are demonised in some way. In situations like this, action may need to be taken to prevent the publicity impacting negatively on relationships within and beyond the school. This might also be referenced in general school policy on dealing with critical incidents.

Case study: Bristol, England, United Kingdom

In the city of Bristol there is a mixed secondary school with a culturally rich intake of students aged 11 to 16, representing over 40 nationalities, including a significant number of children of Somali origin. Thirteen men from the Somali community were convicted of child exploitation offences with white girls, following a police investigation in Bristol. The head teacher was informed of developments just before the news broke in the local and national media. Keen to demonstrate the school's aims of being a culturally rich and caring place where "everyone is valued for who they are and what they can become", the head teacher took action to limit the negative impact of the impending media storm on the school, its students and the communities it serves. She was particularly concerned about a potential backlash against the Somali community and the Somali students in the school.

This action included:

- ▶ writing a press release reassuring the local community that the school took the safeguarding of its students very seriously and was working with all the relevant agencies to ensure that students knew how to protect themselves and report any concerns;
- ▶ engaging with the local media – TV, radio and newspaper interviews – to stress the positive ways in which students from diverse backgrounds get on with each other in the school community;
- ▶ inviting parents or members of the community who had any concerns to contact the school without hesitation;
- ▶ arranging a special school assembly to warn students about a likely backlash against Somali students in the area and to emphasise the need for all students to support each other in and beyond the school;
- ▶ meeting and speaking with Somali community leaders about joint actions, and emphasising school policies on equality and diversity;
- ▶ reviewing how issues of cultural identity and diversity were addressed through the curriculum.

This action succeeded in dampening any potential crisis and after a few days the publicity subsided. The school continued to function normally throughout this time, with all students, including those from the Somali community, feeling safe and secure in the school.¹⁹

” How would you rate the effectiveness of your school’s current procedure for dealing with complaints? Are there any aspects you think could benefit from further development? If so, which aspects?

How do you deal with comments on social media?

Given the nature of social media, it is to be expected that a school will attract critical comments now and again. Only when criticism becomes persistent and continuous is it likely that you will need to respond. Professional judgment is called for in deciding when and how to do this. There is always the possibility of making the situation worse by disseminating the content to a wider audience. Where the comments are critical but not personally abusive, you could invite the person responsible to discuss their concerns with you in school, or suggest they use the school’s formal complaints procedure. However, should the postings become defamatory, threatening or racist, it may be more appropriate to seek legal advice, or contact the appropriate public authority or the police.

” In your opinion, how significant is the potential of social media to have an adverse effect on a school? Is it something you are concerned about in your school? If so, why?

Where do you start?

If you are interested in reducing some of the risks associated with teaching controversial issues in your school, a good way to start is by completing a simple risk assessment of the general area. First identify what you think are the main risks. Then weigh each one up in both terms of potential impact and probability as “high”, “medium” or “low”.

Alternatively, give each component a score between 0 and 5. When totalled you will have a good overview of the levels of risk, which you can use as a guide to strengthening practice in the future. You can do this activity on your own, but is likely to have more impact if carried out by the senior leadership team as a whole.

19. Personal communication.

Chapter 9

Staff development and training

Controversy is an unavoidable and growing part of school life in Europe. Yet few school leaders, senior managers or teachers in European countries receive any formal training in the handling of controversial issues. Pre-service and in-service teacher-education programmes rarely, if ever, prepare teachers for this. Development programmes for future senior managers and school leaders likewise rarely address it. The provision of opportunities for continual professional development is therefore vital to the effective handling of controversial issues.

In this section, you are asked to reflect on the role of staff development and training in developing a strategy for handling controversial issues.

What kind of professional development?

Professional development activities in relation to controversial issues fall into a number of broad categories in terms of the focus of the activity and of whom it benefits most. These include activities that focus on:

- ▶ developing a sound grasp of the rationale for teaching controversial issues – all staff;
- ▶ gaining a better understanding of a specific issue, such as the Holocaust – appropriate subject teachers;
- ▶ acquiring teaching skills and competences related to the teaching of controversial issues – all teaching staff;
- ▶ acquiring the management skills required in policy development and implementation in relation to the handling of controversial issues – school leaders and senior managers.

” As far as you are aware, have any of the staff in your school had any formal training in the handling of controversial issues? If so, what form did this take and what was the result?

What sort of training methods can you use?

While external courses may be best for training individuals on specific topics, such as sex education, methods that encourage dialogue and sharing of experience are more effective for motivating staff and for developing expertise in handling controversial issues across the school as a whole.

Central to this is the need to establish a system of peer support for teaching and managing controversial issues. That said, many of the usual methods used in professional development apply equally to the handling of controversial issues.

Staff development: some suggested training methods

- ▶ Work shadowing – observing a colleague teaching a particular issue or controversial issues in general
- ▶ Coaching – meeting regularly with an experienced colleague to discuss personal progress in relation to teaching particular issues, to learn new ideas, etc.
- ▶ Paired lesson planning – working together on the same controversial issue
- ▶ Research groups – meeting once a week to discuss teaching methods individuals have used
- ▶ Team teaching – working alongside a colleague to share the teaching of a particular issue in the classroom
- ▶ External conferences and courses – relating to specific issues, or to teaching controversial issues in general
- ▶ Professional dialogue – discussing practice in teaching controversial issues with a line manager as part of the performance management process
- ▶ Involvement in external networks, development groups or projects – providing opportunities for professional development in handling controversial issues
- ▶ Advanced practitioner staff – staff trained in handling controversial issues and charged with training colleagues in their department, faculty or school year

” Which of the training methods being used for professional development in your school do you think would work equally well for staff development in handling controversial issues?

How do you choose the most appropriate training for staff?

In choosing the most appropriate training for staff, several factors need to be taken into account. These include the skills staff already possess, including those of the school leader and senior managers; the area of practice you wish to strengthen; individuals’ personal interests and career plans; and any relevant government imperatives or guidelines. You may also be guided by any priorities that may have emerged in the process of carrying out a risk assessment exercise in this area.

Methods for obtaining evidence on the training needs of individual staff include:

- ▶ checklists for self-review;
- ▶ questionnaires;
- ▶ personal requests;
- ▶ discussion with line managers;
- ▶ formal appraisal or performance management interviews.

Whichever method is preferred, the focus for teachers will be on the key skills and competences required when teaching controversial issues, and for the senior leadership team on the skills and competences needed for managing them.

Assessing teachers’ training needs: some suggested skills and competences

- ▶ Understanding the reasons for handling controversial issues
- ▶ Understanding what makes an issue controversial
- ▶ Promoting core values
- ▶ Establishing ground rules for discussion
- ▶ Creating a positive and safe climate in and beyond the classroom
- ▶ Selecting appropriate teaching and learning strategies
- ▶ Avoiding bias
- ▶ Awareness of one’s own bias and assumptions and being able to stand back from them
- ▶ Facilitating open-ended discussion and debate
- ▶ Promoting student voice

- ▶ Managing students' emotional responses
- ▶ Responding to insensitive remarks
- ▶ Communicating and engaging with parents and community representatives

Case study: Goethe Gymnasium, Sebnitz, Germany

The Goethe Gymnasium is a secondary school in a small town in south-eastern Germany. Interest in debating as a teaching method was increased after one of the teachers attended a training course in debating organised by the Hertie Foundation.

Debating is a formal method of democratic deliberation carried out between two groups according to strict rules. It helps students grow in self-confidence, develop their critical thinking skills and take controversial social and political issues more seriously.

On the basis of this initial interest, the school offered a course of in-service training in debating to the whole staff, including to teachers of German, science and history. The method was formally introduced to students in year 9 (ages 13-14), though some teachers began earlier with less complex exercises in years 7 and 8 (ages 11-13). By year 11 (ages 15-16), debating is often used in all classroom subjects, especially in the natural and social sciences.²⁰

” In relation to the handling of controversial issues in school, where would you say the strengths and weaknesses of your teaching staff lie?

In your view, how do the training needs of school leaders and senior managers in relation to the handling of controversial issues differ from those of teaching staff? How do you think these needs can best be addressed through training?

Where do you start?

If you are interested in providing opportunities for professional development in the handling of controversial issues, a good way to start is with some of the training activities in the Council of Europe teacher-training pack *Living with controversy*.²¹

The pack has been successfully piloted by teachers in several European countries and contains a detailed programme of training activities for teachers, designed for use across all European countries and in all phases and types of school. It deals with issues such as: how teachers' personal beliefs have impact on their teaching of controversial issues; how to approach conflicting opinions and truth claims; how to protect student sensitivities; how to defuse inflammatory situations; and how to handle issues in a balanced way without the need for extensive background information.

20. Frank and Huddleston (2009), pp. 58-59.

21. <https://rm.coe.int/CoERMPublicCommonSearchServices/DisplayDCTMContent?documentId=09000016806948b6>.

Appendix I

A checklist of possible actions

The following checklist outlines a range of actions school leaders and leadership teams might wish to take in developing a strategy for handling controversy and for teaching controversial issues in school. The actions flow from the nine sections of the tool above and the issues and questions raised therein. Which of these actions are taken up, and by whom, will depend on the particular school context. No school is expected to carry out them all. They are offered simply to guide reflection and to aid the planning process.

In the checklist, each action is accompanied by a number of questions. The questions are included to stimulate thought and discussion about the different actions, whether they are important and how they might be implemented.

1. Reviewing guidance and policies

Possible actions

- ▶ **Review relevant legislation, statutory guidance and duties – for example, on student voice, community cohesion, sex and relationships education, or political indoctrination**
 - How do these relate to teaching controversial issues?
 - Do they support or conflict with it?
 - Does the teaching of controversial issues help with their implementation?
- ▶ **Audit existing school policies – for example, on equality, child protection, anti-bullying, or behaviour and discipline**
 - How do these relate to teaching controversial issues?
 - Do they support or conflict with it?
 - Does the teaching of controversial issues help with their implementation?

2. Reviewing current policy and practice

Possible actions

- ▶ **Identify issues that are currently regarded as controversial in school**
 - What issues do teachers currently identify as controversial?
 - In which subjects do they occur?
 - What makes these issues controversial?
- ▶ **Consult teachers about their experience of teaching controversial issues**
 - How confident do teachers feel about teaching controversial issues?
 - What concerns do they have?
 - What kinds of training or support do they think they would need?
- ▶ **Audit current practice in teaching controversial issues across subjects**
 - How are controversial issues being taught?
 - What teaching methods and strategies are used?
 - How much consistency is there between subjects?

- ▶ **Consult students about their experiences of controversial issues in school**
 - What issues do students identify as controversial?
 - How comfortable do they feel discussing them?
 - How effective do they think the teachers' methods are?
 - What do students think they learn from discussing controversial issues?
- ▶ **Consult the wider school community about controversial issues at school**
 - What issues do parents and other stakeholders identify as controversial?
 - What concerns do they have about these being taught in school?
 - How fairly do they think the school handles them?
 - What do they expect or want from the school in relation to the handling of controversial issues?
- ▶ **Clarify the school's core values**
 - What are the school's core values?
 - Do they support teaching about controversial issues or conflict with it?
 - How well understood are they within the school community?
 - How are they justified?
 - Do they refer explicitly to democracy and human rights?
- ▶ **Consult teachers, students and the wider school community about the quality of the school learning environment**
 - What is the atmosphere like in the school?
 - How well do different groups relate to one another?
 - Do they mix?
 - Do people feel they can speak openly about their differences?
 - Is diversity valued or seen as a threat?
- ▶ **Consult students about opportunities for student voice in school**
 - Do students feel they have a say in running the school?
 - Do they feel their voice is respected?
 - In what sorts of decisions do they participate?
 - Do they have their own decision-making body?
 - Do they feel they can make a difference to the school?

3. Policy development

Possible actions

- ▶ **Work with staff to develop an agreed rationale for teaching controversial issues**
 - What makes an issue controversial?
 - Why teach controversial issues?
 - What is the role of the teacher?
- ▶ **Work with subject leaders to compile a list of examples of controversial issues in each subject**
 - Where are conflicts of opinion or values to be found?
 - Where do you find evidence of diversity – religious, cultural, political or other?
 - On which issues is it possible to take a range of perspectives?
- ▶ **Work with heads of department or year heads, teachers and students to develop effective and engaging teaching and learning approaches**
 - What are the different roles teachers can take?
 - What skills are needed to stimulate and manage effective discussions?
 - How can teachers encourage students to empathise with others' viewpoints?
 - How can they introduce topics in a balanced way?
 - How can they cope with complex issues or when they have insufficient background knowledge of an issue?

- ▶ **Identify a means of overseeing the teaching of controversial issues across subjects**
 - What are the advantages of appointing an individual as “co-ordinator” or “mentor”?
 - What skills would such a person require?
 - What responsibilities would they have?
 - Would it be more effective to have a team?
 - If so, how should the team be chosen?
 - How would they share responsibilities?
- ▶ **Review risk management procedures**
 - Where is the school likely to be most vulnerable?
 - Can parents be contacted quickly if necessary?
 - What procedures are in place for dealing with the media, including social media?
 - Do you have a media-friendly rationale for teaching controversial issues?
 - Does everyone know what to do to protect and support students in the event of an external event or problem having an impact on the school community?

4. Action planning

Possible actions

- ▶ **Identify existing strengths in teaching controversial issues**
 - What good practice already exists?
 - How can it be built upon?
 - What kinds of expertise exist among staff?
 - How can this be made use of?
- ▶ **Identify areas for development**
 - How supportive is the school learning environment?
 - How is the curriculum implemented?
 - How well is the rationale for teaching controversial issues understood?
 - How effective are the pedagogical methods used by staff?
 - How consistent is teaching across subjects?
 - How effective is student voice?
 - Are the risk management procedures sufficient?
 - How far do parents understand and support the school’s approach to controversial issues?
 - Is personal guidance and/or support easily accessible if teachers or students need it?
- ▶ **Identify staff training needs**
 - How well do teachers understand the rationale for teaching controversial issues?
 - How comfortable are they with their classroom role(s)?
 - How skilled are they at facilitating discussion, using effective questioning, managing student emotions, etc.?
 - How good are they at identifying controversial issues within their own subject?
 - How confident are they at dealing with controversy outside the classroom, for example in corridors, play areas?
- ▶ **Identify resource requirements**
 - What kinds of training materials are needed?
 - Is there a role for external facilitation or support, such as local authority or government agencies, NGOs, universities or other schools?
- ▶ **Develop an action plan**
 - What kind of outcomes do you want?
 - What methods will you use?
 - What is the timescale for completion?
 - Who are the key people to involve and what will their different roles be?

5. Monitoring and evaluation

Possible actions

- ▶ **Identify success criteria**
 - How will you know if your plans for handling controversial issues are on track?
 - What kind of outcomes would you like to see? For example, more consistency in teaching and learning, growth in teacher confidence, improved relationships between different groups, better achievement?
- ▶ **Establish monitoring, evaluation and review procedures**
 - How will you check progress?
 - What methods will you use? For example, student and/or teacher questionnaire, focus groups, lesson observations?
- ▶ **Identify what evidence will be gathered, when it will be gathered and by whom**
 - What kind of evidence will tell you if your approach is succeeding? For example, levels of student and/or teacher satisfaction, a more inclusive atmosphere, better test or examination results?
- ▶ **Ensure staff have regular feedback on progress**
 - What kind of feedback will be given to staff and in what form? For example, oral reports from leadership at staff meetings, reports from subject leaders?

Appendix II

Managing controversy: implications for school leaders and managers – A scoping paper

Introduction

Purpose

In a Europe of rapid population movement and increasing diversity, the way in which schools handle controversy and controversial issues has never been more important.

What is seen as controversial in school varies from country to country and changes over time. Typical examples of controversial issues in Europe today include: migration; refugees; gender and sexuality – especially lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender rights; religious dress and symbols in public life; extremism and anti-terrorist strategies; child abuse; austerity measures and the nature of European governance.

Although it is tempting for schools to shy away from such difficult issues, this would be a mistake. The educational benefits of teaching controversial issues are overwhelming. It helps children and young people deepen their subject knowledge, develop their analytical and critical thinking, and generally become more civic-minded. Increasingly, it is also coming to be seen as a means of defusing conflict and healing divisions, both in school and in wider society, and as a way of developing shared values and building resilience to extremism and risky behaviour.

For schools, trying to pretend that controversial issues do not exist is simply no longer an option for the following reasons.

Firstly, school curricula are never value-free: they are always open to objections from groups with conflicting values.

Secondly, students will always ask unprompted questions.

Thirdly, children and young people see and read about controversial issues in the media, including the social media (via mobile phones, tablets, computers, etc.). Many of them have direct experience of the impact of these issues on their daily lives.

Taking controversy and controversial issues seriously raises important questions for schools – not only about teaching methods and classroom approaches but also about leadership and management: for example, in relation to policy development, curriculum planning, training, teacher support, quality control and parental anxieties.

This scoping paper focuses on some of these questions from the point of view of school leaders and senior managers and provides a brief theoretical background to the self-reflection tool.

Foundation

The scoping paper has been developed through the Pilot Projects Scheme “Human Rights and Democracy in Action”, jointly organised by the Council of Europe and the European Commission. With the self-reflection tool and teacher-training pack *Living with controversy*, it forms a comprehensive professional development resource supporting all aspects of a school’s work in this field.

The resource should be seen as promoting the Council of Europe’s core values – democracy, human rights and the rule of law – and the concept of education as a bulwark against social evils such as extremism and the radicalisation of youth, xenophobia and anti-Semitism, violence and hate speech, declining trust in politics and politicians and the negative effects of austerity measures.

It has been designed and piloted by representatives of countries from all reaches of Europe that were involved in this pilot project.

The context

Public concern arising in the aftermath of a number of high-profile incidents of violence and social disorder in different European countries has combined with new thinking in education for democracy and human rights to make the handling of controversial issues in schools a matter of educational urgency.

Firstly, incidents such as the riots in London and hate killings in Norway in 2011, the *Charlie Hebdo* attack and mass shootings in Paris in 2015, the suicide bombings in Belgium and the attack in Nice in 2016, and the effects across Europe of the unfolding refugee crisis in North Africa and the Middle East, have prompted a whole-scale review of the part played by schools in the moral and civic development of young people, an imperative that has been echoed across Europe.

Secondly, European policy on education for democracy and human rights has shifted from reliance on textbook exercises and theoretical knowledge to an emphasis on active and participatory learning and engagement with “real-life” issues. There is a growing consensus that democratic citizenship, respect for human rights and intercultural understanding is learned more effectively through “doing” than by accumulating facts. Accordingly, curricula for democratic citizenship and human rights education across Europe have been opened up to new, unpredictable and controversial types of teaching content.

Opening up the curriculum to contentious and difficult issues raises a number of questions for schools. In the first instance, it raises questions about teaching methods and classroom approaches. Questions of this nature and how they might best be answered are dealt with in the teacher-training pack *Living with controversy* (Kerr and Huddleston, 2015).

In the present context, however, it also raises questions for school leadership and management – for example, how to:

- ▶ encourage staff to take on and feel comfortable teaching controversial issues in subjects across the curriculum;
- ▶ support staff in the classroom and in their interactions with parents;
- ▶ ensure staff have access to the training they need to be able to handle difficult issues safely and sensitively;
- ▶ create opportunities for the discussion of controversial issues outside as well as inside the classroom; for example, in assemblies, student councils, pupil parliaments, discussion groups;
- ▶ develop and maintain quality of teaching and consistency of approach across the school;
- ▶ create a supportive school ethos and culture;
- ▶ address the anxieties of parents and other stakeholders, including in the media.

Literature review

Over the last three or four decades, there has been a slow but steady growth in literature advocating the teaching of controversial issues as a central element in democratic citizenship and human rights education, while at the same time highlighting the considerable challenges teachers face when handling such issues in the classroom.

This literature includes authored and edited volumes for example, Berg et al., 2003; Claire and Holden, 2007; Cowan and Maitles, 2012; Hess, 2009; Stradling et al., 1984), journal articles for example, Ashton and Watson,

1998; Clarke, 1992; Dearden, 1981; Kelly, 1986; Soley, 1996; Wilkins 2003) and a range of practical guidelines and online resources for teachers (for example, Huddleston and Kerr, 2006; CitizED, 2004; Citizenship Foundation, 2004; Clarke, 2001; Crombie and Rowe, 2009; City of Dublin Vocational Education Committee, 2012; Fiehn, 2005; Oxfam, 2006; Richardson, 2011).

Definition of “controversial issues”

The term “controversial issue” is used in different ways in different places. However, the differences tend not to be significant. They seem to represent different variations on the same general set of themes rather than radically different underlying conceptions.

They may be defined as issues which “arouse strong feelings and divide communities and society”.

Typically, controversial issues are described as disputes or problems that are topical, arouse strong emotions, generate conflicting explanations and solutions based on alternative beliefs or values or competing interests, and which, as a result, have a tendency to divide society. Such issues are often highly complex and incapable of being settled simply by appeal to evidence.

However, it is the potential of controversial issues to arouse strong emotions, both inside and outside the classroom, which is often regarded as constituting the greatest challenge in schools. For many commentators, the defining characteristic of a controversial issue is its political sensitivity. By this is meant its tendency to arouse public suspicion, anger or concern – among students, parents, school officials, religious and community leaders, public authorities, and among teachers and school staff themselves.²²

It can be useful to distinguish two types of controversial issues: long-standing issues such as the sectarian divisions and tensions between differing groups in a number of European countries; and recent issues such as the growing concern about religious extremism, violence and the indoctrination and radicalisation of young Europeans, or the rise of cyberbullying and online identity theft.

Both types offer similar challenges to teachers, but with differing emphases. With long-standing issues the challenge for schools is how to come afresh to the issue and find something new to say without further alienating particular groups or individuals. With very recent issues the challenge is how to respond to spontaneous discussion by students, how to find reliable information on the topic and determine the position teachers should take on it.

Since attitudes change and circumstances vary, what is regarded as controversial at one time may seem relatively innocuous at another, and what is controversial in one place may not be so elsewhere. The idea of state-funded healthcare is particularly controversial in the United States of America, for example, but hardly at all in Europe.²³ Issues of sexual orientation and religious difference can be addressed quite easily in some European countries, but in others they are more difficult. Similarly, what is considered controversial in one school, or even one class, may attract little attention in another.²⁴

Stradling (1984) also draws a useful distinction between issues that are superficially controversial and those that are inherently controversial. The former, in principle at least, are capable of solution by appeal to evidence. The latter derive from disagreements based on matters of fundamental belief or value judgment and are much more intractable.²⁵

The educational benefits of teaching controversial issues

Stradling (1984) divides educational justifications for the teaching of controversial issues into two types: “product-based” and “process-based”.

22. Stradling (1984) p. 2.

23. Hess (2009).

24. Stradling (1984).

25. Stradling (1984), p. 2.

a. Product-based justifications

Here, issues are seen as important in themselves, either because they relate to the “major social, political, economic or moral problems of our time”, or they are “directly relevant to students’ lives”.²⁶ This was one of the major reasons for teaching controversial issues given in the Crick report (1998) in the United Kingdom:

Controversial issues are important in themselves and to omit informing about and discussing them is to leave a wide and significant gap in the educational experience of young people, and is to fail to prepare them for adult life.²⁷

A slightly different argument is that it is important not only to teach controversial issues because the learning will be valuable in its own right but also to compensate for the one-sided and confusing ways in which some issues are presented in social and other forms of media accessed by children and young people today. Thus Scarratt and Davison (2012) observe:

The evolution of mass media has increasingly exposed children to sensitive issues, which require demystification and discussion.²⁸

One recent version of this argument is that teaching about controversial issues provides schools with an opportunity to present “counter-narratives” to extremist ideologies (National Union of Teachers, 2015). This is said to be most effective when students are encouraged to construct their own “counter-narratives” (Jamieson, 2015).

b. Process-based justifications

In process-based reasoning, the substance of controversial issues is seen as less important than the learning competences or civic attitudes and behaviour that can be engendered by engaging with them. These include the following.

- ▶ Subject-related – for example, understanding that controversy is not to be feared but is part of life in a democracy, the ability to discuss contentious issues in civil and productive ways, strategies for engaging in such discussions, realising that one’s views matter, as do all in a democracy.²⁹
- ▶ Cross-curricular – for example, language and communication skills, confidence and interpersonal skills,³⁰ higher-order dialogic and thinking skills,³¹ information processing, reasoning, enquiry, creative thinking and evaluation skills.³²
- ▶ Civic behaviour – for example, greater political interest,³³ pro-democratic values, increased political engagement,³⁴ more civic knowledge, greater interest in discussing public affairs out of school, young people more likely to say they will vote and volunteer as adults.³⁵

Shared values and resilience to extremism

In recent years there has been a growing interest in how discussion of contemporary issues can help children and young people construct shared values and build resilience to extremism. Several different but related aspects of this can be identified in the literature.

a. Democratic dialogue

Discussing current issues is said to be a good way of helping young people learn how to engage in democratic dialogue. Engaging in dialogue with people whose values and ways of life conflict with one’s own is an essential part of the democratic process and fundamental to the building of shared values in society. The development of student discussion skills, in particular in relation to “sensitive, controversial issues” is identified

26. Stradling (1984), p. 3.

27. Crick report (1998), 10.4.

28. Scarratt and Davison (2012), p. 38.

29. Hess (2009), p.162.

30. Claire and Holden (2007).

31. Wegerif (2003).

32. Lambert and Balderstone (2010), p. 142.

33. Soley (1996).

34. Hess (2009), p. 31.

35. Civic Mission of Schools report, quoted in Hess (2009) p28.

as an important teacher competence in the Council of Europe tool on teacher competences for education for democratic citizenship and human rights education.

b. Social cohesion

There is an emphasis on the use of controversial issues teaching as a tool to further social cohesion and counteract forces of division in society (Brown et al. 2012; Gross and Davies, 2015). Education is seen as a “powerful weapon against an extremism which attempts to accentuate divisions and differences between individuals and communities, and exploits fears based on ignorance or prejudice”.³⁶ Official guidance for schools in England, for example, highlights the role of controversial issues teaching in “challenging extremist narratives”, “promoting human rights” and “building strong, safe and cohesive communities”.³⁷ Schools are encouraged to provide opportunities for their students to “understand, meet and engage with people from different faiths, cultures and social backgrounds in ways that promote common values while recognizing diversity within communities”.³⁸ Factors identified as promoting social cohesion include classroom pedagogies and a democratic school environment (Shuayb, 2012).

c. “Safe spaces”

Research on the effectiveness of different approaches to the building of resilience to extremism suggests that the creation of “safe spaces” for the discussion of controversial issues is a:

vital characteristic of any teaching method or intervention aiming to build resilience to extremism.³⁹

A “safe space” is more than just a physical space in which students are free from harm. It is:

an environment in which practitioners and participants can have rich and meaningful discussions about controversial issues, and in which young people feel safe discussing those issues.⁴⁰

A “safe space” in this sense means ensuring that young people feel able to express their views regardless of what these views are or how people may react; that they can ask questions without worrying about being “silly” or “wrong”; and that they can say when they find a view or a question from others offensive or unacceptable.

d. The classroom as a “civic forum”

A related idea is the notion of the classroom as a “civic forum”. In the context of classroom discussion, it is argued, school students should be treated as citizens in their own right, not just as citizens in waiting. The classroom should be seen:

not only as a *model* civic forum but also as an *actual* one, and citizenship discussions as not ‘just talk’ but also as a form of active citizenship in its own right.⁴¹

e. A supportive school ethos and culture

It has long been recognised that students learn not only from what they are taught explicitly in the classroom but also implicitly from what they experience in the daily life of the school. Education for citizenship will be most effective, therefore, when it takes place in schools which demonstrate model democratic and human rights values and embed them in daily life. In the same way, student discussion of contemporary issues will be most effective in schools which model the values of democratic dialogue and collective problem solving in their approach to everyday decision making. It suggests a school ethos which “upholds high standards of fairness and respect for human rights, and in which everyone involved is valued equally and encouraged to take an active part in the life of the school.”⁴²

36. Greater Manchester Police (2010), p.5.

37. Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency (2010), p.9.

38. Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency (2010), p.10.

39. Bonnell et al. (nd) p. 49.

40. Bonnell et al. (nd), p. 48.

41. Huddleston and Rowe (2015), p. 96.

42. Huddleston and Kerr (2006), p.82.

Lack of support for school leaders and managers

While it is clear that the consequences of addressing controversial issues in school are many and far-reaching and have important implications for school leadership and management – with very few exceptions (for example Pierpoint (2014), Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (nd)), these wider questions have been completely overlooked by commentators and researchers. The bulk of the literature deals only with classroom pedagogy and almost entirely ignores the role of school leaders and senior managers.

There is a lack of up-to-date practical training and support available for school leaders and senior managers on managing controversy and controversial issues in school. The little that does exist is rapidly becoming outdated.

The need to fill this gap has been further reinforced by the outcomes of the pilot project for teachers *Living with controversy*. The pilot project highlighted the crucial role of school leaders and senior managers in setting the tone for how well controversial issues are addressed in schools and the need for up-to-date training and support (Kerr and Huddleston, 2015).

It is to this role and, in particular, the need for a whole-school approach that we now turn.

A whole-school approach

A whole-school approach to controversial issues implies more than a one-off event or a set of training initiatives – although it may involve both of these. It means working with students, parents, staff and the whole community to provide a solid foundation on which to embed developments and improvements in this field in a systematic way.

Why is such an approach needed?

▶ Vision

If they are to take it seriously, teaching staff need to be convinced of the educational benefits of teaching controversial issues.

▶ Training

To address controversial issues safely and sensitively, teachers need high-order facilitation skills of a kind not normally provided in initial teacher training or continuous professional development.

▶ Support

Given the potentially incendiary nature of certain issues, teachers need to know they have the authority and backing of the school for what are they doing and that they can rely on the school for help in dealing with disciplinary problems or expressions of parental concern that they cannot manage by themselves.

▶ Personal and professional concerns

To feel at ease with the idea of teaching controversial issues, teachers need time to be able to discuss with other practitioners in the school their personal and professional concerns – about particular issues and how they might be approached.

▶ Developing a common approach to policy and practice

To develop a common approach to policy and practice in relation to controversial issues, staff need opportunities to be able to work together and to discuss teaching methods and approaches collectively.

▶ Monitoring and evaluation

In order for staff to improve their standing and make progress in teaching controversial issues, there needs to be some agreed way of measuring success and evaluating the effectiveness of practice.

▶ Child protection, safeguarding and student welfare

Being the most likely to have difficulties with or be adversely affected by discussions of controversial issues, vulnerable children and students from minority groups need special care and supervision.

▶ School ethos and culture

Given the importance of school ethos and culture in the development of student attitudes and values, the school needs to ensure that respect for student voice and the value of dialogue are reflected in its ethos and culture.

▶ Consulting stakeholders

If it is to consult widely about policy on controversial issues, the school needs to be able to manage and co-ordinate the involvement of its various stakeholders.

▶ External and public relations

To prevent unfounded fears or concerns about the school's handling of controversial issues from arising among parents and other stakeholders, the school needs to be able to respond quickly to misinformation or unfounded rumours spread in the local community or in social or other media.

Strategic role of leadership and management

A whole-school approach requires a strategic approach to leadership and management. This approach should be as follows.

- ▶ **Active** – concerned with developing a shared vision of how controversy and controversial issues can be handled across the school; transforming this vision into policy; communicating policy to staff and stakeholders; providing training; supervising the implementation of policy; monitoring the quality of implementation; overseeing the review of policy and setting goals for the future.
- ▶ **Responsive** – responding quickly and empathetically to teachers' personal and professional concerns; teachers' and students' need for support; and concerns or complaints from parents and others, or from the media.
- ▶ **Proactive** – looking for ways of creating new curriculum opportunities; a more supportive school ethos and culture; improved risk assessment strategies; increased support for vulnerable and minority groups; and better relationships with the media.

Relation to other school policies

Handling controversy and controversial issues, although a distinct area of leadership and management in its own right, should not be seen as completely separate from other areas of school concern but rather as inter-linked with them. There is a considerable overlap between policy on controversial issues and other school policies; for instance, policies on gender equality, anti-bullying, student welfare and safeguarding, community cohesion and anti-radicalisation.

Policy on controversial issues should therefore be integrated into the school's overall programme and treated as a part of the school's self-evaluation process and development planning cycle.

Conclusions

- ▶ It is clear from the literature that the educational benefits of teaching controversial issues are significant and wide-ranging and that the inclusion of controversial subject matter is important for effective education for democratic citizenship and human rights today in Europe and beyond.
- ▶ Of particular significance is the contribution of the teaching of controversial issues to the construction of shared values and resilience to extremism, and the need for schools to create "safe spaces" where students from different backgrounds and ways of life can discuss their concerns openly without fear.
- ▶ It is also clear that introducing contemporary issues into the classroom raises questions not only of pedagogy but also about the role of school leadership and management – for example, about how to build staff confidence in teaching controversial issues, how to support staff both in the classroom and in their interactions with parents, how to provide access to training, how to maintain a consistency of approach across the school and how to address the anxieties of parents and stakeholders.
- ▶ The role of the school leader is crucial – not only in overseeing policy development and implementation but also in setting the general tone for the way controversial issues are addressed. School leaders should act as champions for democratic dialogue and respect for difference and be prepared to model these in their own approach to school management.
- ▶ The public nature of controversial issues and their resonance across the school community suggests the need for a collaborative approach to policy development in which staff, pupils, students, parents and other stakeholders all have a part to play. It also suggests a need for a collaborative approach to practice development in which teaching staff come together to discuss issues and ideas, and agree on approaches and methods.
- ▶ Organising and co-ordinating school decision making on controversial issues on a collaborative basis implies a whole-school approach to management – one that brings together students, staff, parents and the whole community, and touches, in principle at least, every aspect of the school's work.

- ▶ A whole-school approach requires a form of management that in equal measure is active (promotes good practice across the school), responsive (responds to new developments and unplanned events) and proactive (promotes the factors that support good practice and minimise potential risk).
- ▶ Developing staff confidence in handling controversial issues safely and sensitively is an essential responsibility of management. The provision of good quality professional training and in-school opportunities for self-development is central to school improvement in this area.
- ▶ Another essential responsibility of management is to provide support for teaching staff – including practical help with problems that arise in and around the classroom, or interactions with parents.
- ▶ Classroom learning should not be considered in isolation. What takes place in the classroom has an effect, good or bad, on the school as a whole. Similarly, the ethos and culture of the school has an effect on what takes place in the classroom. The development of a supportive school ethos and culture should therefore be seen as an important aspect of school policy and practice.
- ▶ Controversial issues vary from place to place and over time. It is important, therefore, that policy and practice on controversial issues should incorporate flexibility and give due consideration to the need to adapt teaching methods and approaches to local conditions. In particular, it should give due consideration to the welfare of children with special educational needs and children from vulnerable and minority groups.
- ▶ A whole-school, collaborative approach to controversial issues has important implications for school planning and resource allocation – including in connection with policy development and implementation, staff development and support, teaching materials and external relations.
- ▶ Policy and practice in controversial issues should not be seen as separate from, but as integral to and contributing to other areas of school concern, such as gender equality, diversity and violence reduction. Policy development and review should be integrated into the school’s annual cycle of self-evaluation and improvement planning.
- ▶ With few exceptions, the role of school leadership and management has been almost entirely ignored by commentators and researchers. There is insufficient up-to-date practical training and support available for school leaders and senior managers in relation to planning and managing the teaching of controversial issues. The little that does exist is rapidly becoming dated and in need of review. New training and/or support material in this area is urgently needed.

Recommendations

On the basis of the above conclusions, the following is recommended.

- ▶ The management of controversial issues as a whole-school issue should be considered a priority area for development in the professional training of school leaders and managers.
- ▶ New management tools and materials should be created to help school leaders and managers develop a strategic approach to the teaching of controversial issues appropriate to their schools.
- ▶ These tools and materials should have as one of their primary purposes the development of shared values and resilience to extremism within schools and the wider school community.
- ▶ They should take as their starting point the notion of “safe spaces” – the creation of regular opportunities in school for students to be able to discuss their views on current public controversies freely and without fear.
- ▶ They should encourage styles of leadership and management that promote a collaborative approach to school policy making – involving staff, students, parents and the wider school community.
- ▶ They should be capable of being integrated into a school’s existing cycle of self-evaluation and improvement planning.
- ▶ These tools should link to and be used alongside the training materials for teachers published in the professional development pack *Living with controversy*.
- ▶ They should be applicable to and accessible across all European member states, and all phases of education and types of school.

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