Controversy & polarisation in the classroom

Suggestions for pedagogical practice

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1. Tensions in society, controversy in the classroom

What if discussions about political and societal issues become so turbulent that a class erupts into turmoil and chaos? What if, on the other hand, topics are so sensitive or controversial that students, parents or school authorities are reluctant to even discuss them in an educational context? How should we react when a student suddenly launches into an unexpected provocative or hatefilled diatribe in class? What if students voice extreme views or standpoints or condone terrorist violence? How should we react when a school finds itself suddenly in the grip of harmful forms of polarisation and groups of students from different backgrounds start to turn on one another?

Although the classroom and school are pedagogical spaces geared to constructive learning, they are, of course, not closed off from society. On the contrary: instances like the above indicate that societal conflicts and tensions can enter the classroom at any moment, sometimes quite violently.[1] The pedagogical challenge across a wide variety of contexts is how to deal constructively with these difficult situations. What should we do? How should we react? How should we create a classroom and school climate in which controversial issues and societal conflicts can be engaged with openly and constructively, and heightened tensions and harmful forms of polarisation can be defused or even prevented?

Over the years an impressive array of models and methods have been developed to assist teachers and educational professionals to deal with situations of this kind, such as dialogue techniques, polarisation management methods, artistic pedagogies and non-violent communication techniques. It is of course good that such a wide range of pedagogical models and approaches are available to teachers. Nonetheless, if we want these strategies and techniques to be implemented in a relevant and effective way, a number of questions need to be addressed before they are introduced in classrooms and schools.

Firstly, given the sheer number of didactic models and approaches that are available to educational professionals, there is a risk that teachers could become lost in the many perspectives and strategies on offer and do not know how to choose the best response for the specific situations they face in the classroom. A crucial question, therefore, is: which methods and resources are appropriate in what settings and for which kind of conflict? On the other hand, there is also a risk of teachers using a 'one-size-fits-all' approach; i.e. they might apply strategies that may be relevant and effective in one context in situations where another approach might be more effective.

Secondly, we need to be aware of differences in cultural and national contexts. Models and strategies that are meaningful in one context might be inappropriate in another. What do we do, for example, in countries where hostile forms of political polarisation put a strain on open dialogue? In some contexts, the idea of discussing controversial societal issues in schools might in itself be controversial. Therefore, when thinking about strategies for pedagogical practice we need to pay close attention to the question of how pedagogical models and approaches work across a wide range of possible contexts.

And thirdly, in light of the idea that theory without practice is empty, but practice without theory is blind, it seems perilous to recommend strategies for practice without critically reflecting on a number of theoretical and normative issues, such as: what does it mean to bring 'politics' into the context of a classroom? What are the critical prerequisites for democratic citizenship education that aims to empower students to find their voices? At the same time, we need to take care that theories and pedagogical insights do not remain abstract, but are meaningful and valuable to educational practitioners.

In this attempt at an inspirational guide we first highlight some of the theoretical and pedagogical premises on which our approach to dealing with controversy and polarisation in the classroom is based. In the second and most elaborated part we formulate a number of suggestions for pedagogical practice based on these premises. These suggestions are based on what we call a 'scenario-based approach'. In our search for answers to the question 'What works best in which situation?' (and thus avoid the pitfall of a 'one-size-fits-all' approach), we distinguish among three scenarios in which conflicts and tensions may arise in a classroom. In light of these distinctions we then discuss a number of useful techniques and methods to deal with each of these situations.[2]

2. Practising the democratic conflict

When societal conflicts or tensions raise their head in the classroom in the form of discussions about controversial issues, provocative student statements, or a concerning level of polarisation among students, teachers are faced with a difficult and challenging situation. How do they react?

A number of studies indicate that some teachers opt for a strategy of avoidance. They ignore controversial issues, limit their teaching to 'safe' and stable knowledge, or try to suppress societal conflicts in their classroom, either because they are afraid of losing control of the class, or that conflicts might harm students, or that parents might react negatively, or because they feel they lack the necessary skills or the proper training to deal with these kinds of situations. In some contexts there might even be pressure from colleagues, school principals, school boards, parents or the authorities to remain silent about particular topics and avoid issues reflecting societal conflicts and tensions.[3] Our approach, however, starts from the belief that avoiding controversial topics and societal conflicts is not a good idea in educational contexts. Conflicts and tensions are seen as part and parcel of a democratic society, and they are not resolved (let alone transformed) by ignoring or suppressing them. Drawing on insights from transformative conflict resolution and from a critical perspective on citizenship education, we assume that it is better not ignore or try to 'control' these conflicts but, much more positively, to see them as opportunities for students to learn how democracy works in practice. The idea, moreover, is that this approach can also have a preventative effect. It is assumed that severe tensions and harmful forms of polarisation are less likely to manifest themselves in classrooms and schools that open up space for students to constructively explore and work on controversial issues that are topical in society at large.

Theoretically, this approach to democratic citizenship education is underpinned by two key concepts:

↗ The first is that of the *open classroom climate*, which refers to a classroom where students feel free to express their opinions and are actively encouraged to do so, even if these opinions diverge from those of their co-students or teachers. Another constitutive element of an open classroom climate is that, when they explain and discuss topics, teachers draw students' attention to a plurality of perspectives on the issue under discussion;[4] in other words, that they actively and deliberately incorporate multiple perspectives into their lessons.

↗ The second key concept underpinning our theoretical framework is that of the *political classroom*. The idea here is not to 'politicise' teacher-student relations in a biased party-political sense, nor to open the door to ideological indoctrination. In the view of Hess and McAvoy, the concept of the political classroom builds on the idea that schools are – and ought to be – *political sites*.[5] The term 'political' refers here to the role of citizens within a democracy. The political classroom, therefore, is one that helps students to develop their ability to deliberate on political questions and discuss controversial societal issues. Underlying this approach is the belief of the US philosopher and educational reformer John Dewey that for citizenship to work, teachers should try to see the classroom as a mini-democracy or, in other words, as a community for democratic practice.[6] This conception of the political classroom entails a number of observations regarding the position of the teacher. In a nutshell, it suggests that teachers should preferably adopt a position of neutrality and not engage in partisan politics. However, they should not be neutral on the issue of the value of democracy. On the contrary, teachers have a crucial role to play in creating open and democratic classrooms where young people learn what democracy means and how it works in practice.[7]

The rationale for creating an open classroom climate

The idea of an open classroom climate – a classroom where students can voice a plurality of views and opinions – is a constitutive element of any perspective that sees a school class as a community for democratic practice. This idea is theoretically well developed in the literature on democratic citizenship education. An empirical case can also be made for favouring an open classroom climate. Current research indicates that this kind of climate promotes the development of positive attitudes to citizenship among students. More specifically, an open classroom climate has positive effects on students' political knowledge, political self-efficacy, and political and generalised trust, while also promoting the understanding that conflict is an integral part of democracy.[8]

At the same time, some research seems to suggest that when the open classroom climate is at risk of closing down, e.g. when tensions within the class are mounting, this may have a negative effect. Once students perceive intergroup relations as antagonistic, attitudes such as tolerance are seen to deteriorate. On the other hand, if the atmosphere is positive between groups, this is associated with significantly lower levels of prejudice.[9]

In short: the way in which teachers deal with societal conflicts as they are played out in school environments makes a difference. If teachers succeed in transforming difficult discussions and societal tensions into constructive learning opportunities and stimulate an open classroom climate, they can make a valuable contribution to democratic citizenship education. On the other hand, when the classroom climate becomes negative and tensions get the upper hand, the effects on students' political attitudes will likely be negative.

Transforming heated discussions and conflicts into constructive learning opportunities and defusing tensions is not easy. This is why it is vital that teachers have the right strate-

gies and techniques at hand to constructively manage these difficult situations, stimulate open classroom discussions, and defuse harmful forms of polarisation.

The classroom as a space for democratic discussion

If the aim is to create open and democratic classrooms, a number of theoretical and normative issues need to be fleshed out before we can introduce concrete didactic strategies and models. We argue that three basic questions need to be addressed:

↗ Which frames of reference should teachers and students *share* if they want to engage in fruitful democratic discourse and discussion?

↗ How can teachers create spaces that are as *open* as possible for dialogue and political discussion?

↗ Are there *limits* to what can be said in the classroom?

On an abstract level, the first question refers to the basic principles of liberal democracy, such as freedom, equality and reciprocity. But what does this mean for classroom practice? One approach is to agree on a number of ground rules for positive and fruitful interaction before starting with discussions or efforts to resolve conflicts. Ideally, these rules should be decided on in close consultation with the students themselves. What rules groups eventually decide on will be quite similar in most cases, such as mutual respect, listening to each other, a ban on insults, etc.[10] This shared 'covenant for good interaction' creates a connective framework that allows students to express different opinions in a constructive way and in a safe space.

The second question deals with how dialogues and discussions are allowed to play out in the classroom. This is not only a practical issue: conceptions of 'good' classroom dialogue are also linked to more fundamental philosophical choices. On the one hand, many authors writing on democratic citizenship education plead for a *deliberative* dialogue model. Students should be asked to express themselves in a reasonable voice and use rational and 'valid' arguments (i.e. arguments based on expert knowledge). Preferably they should keep strong emotions in check. In times of fake news and increasing polarisation, a lot speaks in favour of this deliberative model. It certainly seems worthwhile for teachers to try and teach this kind of dialogue to as many of their students as possible.

At the same time, the question can be raised as to whether this deliberative model is attainable in all classroom situations and contexts, and whether it is desirable in all cases. Most teachers know that discussions about controversial topics can be quite heated and do not always live up to the deliberative ideal of rational discourse. Is this necessarily a problem? Emotionally charged controversies and societal conflicts are typical of democratic politics. In this light, the crucial question is not how to 'rationalise' all classroom discussions, but rather how students can learn how to deal with politically charged conflicts in a constructive and transformative way. Moreover, some research suggests that if teachers attempt to impose the requirements of a deliberative dialogue too strictly, they may leave some students behind.[11] Not all students have the same levels of verbal skills or are as knowledgeable about complex societal issues as others in their class. Factors such as socio-economic background seem to play a role in explaining why some students are less inclined to engage in deliberative classroom discussions. And then there are also students who may want to express themselves in more emotionally charged language registers, e.g. when they want to communicate 'political' emotions such as anger, indignation or unease. Ideally, we should also allow space for students to be critical about or challenge what they perceive as unfair power relations in society. According to Ruitenberg, all of this is a legitimate part of critical and democratic citizenship education.[12] Harking back to agonistic pedagogies and theories of democracy,[13] the central idea here is that democratic citizenship education should aim to empower the greatest possible number of students to find *their own* voices in the classroom.

All of this implies keeping the space for democratic discussion in the classroom as open as possible. At this point, however, an important third question arises. Are there limits to this open classroom; in other words, can anything and everything be said in class? The question of the boundaries and regulation of freedom of speech – which are important issues in any democratic society – is also relevant in the context of any classroom where political issues are discussed.[14] Without going into great depth on this issue, we argue that the space for democratic discussion in the classroom is indeed a bounded one. This is linked to the issue of classroom safety. Allowing students to express racist or other discriminatory without any constraints, for example, might severely threaten the emotional or even physical safety of others in the class. Other students might feel targeted, threatened or insecure. Any 'freedom of speech' must therefore take into account students' right to basic safety in the classroom. In some countries, moreover, discrimination in schools is forbidden, and teachers are required to ensure discrimination-free classrooms. In a more general sense, not allowing discriminatory remarks to go unchecked is an important aspect of democratic and pluralist citizenship education. Of course, in the context of the classroom, 'guarding' the boundaries of free speech is not only a question of coercive disciplinary action. On the contrary, teachers have a range of pedagogical techniques at their disposal to deal with these kinds of challenging situations. It is to these strategies that we now turn.

3. Pedagogical practice in three scenarios

In the introduction to this guide we touched on possible pitfalls associated with the wide array of didactic strategies and models developed for and introduced in educational systems in order to deal with conflict and polarisation in classrooms and schools. On a practical level, the danger is that teachers may feel overwhelmed by the many perspectives and strategies on offer, and as a result may fail to identify techniques and strategies that suit their particular needs. On the other hand, there is the danger that teachers will adopt a 'one-size-fits-all' approach, and will apply a particular model to a wide range of very diverse situations. In order to avoid these pitfalls and assist educational professionals to find the 'right' models and strategies that they can use to effectively deal with real situations in the classroom, we need to bring some order to the numerous approaches that are currently on offer.

This, we argue, can be done by distinguishing carefully among the range of different scenarios in which controversial issues, societal conflicts and other kinds of tensions can arise in the classroom. The underlying idea of this approach is pedagogical common sense: before choosing a specific technique or approach, it is vital for teachers to first assess the specific situation they are confronted with. For most teachers this indeed is common sense: it is something they do on a daily basis. The logic of training sessions and workshops, however, often seems to be that particular models and strategies are presented without elaborating extensively on the specific situations in which they work best and how they relate to other possible situations and strategies.

In this paper, we distinguish among three scenarios in which conflicts and tensions can occur in the classroom:

↗ *The class in turmoil:* Teachers are confronted with confrontational remarks made by students, or with fiercely contested discussions or instances of polarisation.

↗ *Controversial topics in the curriculum:* Teachers have to teach subject matter that is sensitive or that can cause controversy among students.

↗ *Controversy as a form of pedagogy:* Teachers want to work proactively and constructively with students on controversial or sensitive issues and use discussions of these issues as a way to teach the principles and practice of democratic citizenship education.

For each scenario we suggest a number of useful pedagogical strategies and didactic techniques.

Scenario 1: The classroom in turmoil

Tensions can suddenly and rapidly mount in the classroom. In this scenario students make confrontational, discriminatory or otherwise insulting remarks, or engage in fierce discussions or intergroup quarrels. As a result, the classroom explodes.

Teachers are then faced with a difficult and challenging situation. They must come up with an adequate reaction within seconds – and with a second or third one if the first reaction does not work. To do this they have to almost immediately find answers to a number of difficult questions:

↗ How do teachers assess the **dynamics of the classroom** and the specific **situation** they are facing? Are they dealing with a fierce discussion that they can transform into a constructive classroom conversation in which students exchange views and are encouraged to listen to others? Or is it an instance of harmful polarisation that needs to be defused in order not to harm intergroup relations? And what should they do in either of these situations?

↗ Which **position** is the best one to take to deal with a particular situation? Is it best to engage in a fierce discussion to make a point or try to start a multi-voiced conversation without taking sides?

↗ What about **safety** in the classroom? Are there students who withdraw and keep silent – and who might experience the classroom as an unsafe or threatening space?

↗ How should teachers react when students' **discourse** is deemed **unacceptable**?

It is not easy to distinguish between 'good' and 'bad' responses to such a scenario. Much depends on the specificity of the situation. Nonetheless, a number of pedagogical strategies and techniques are available that can inspire and guide teachers in their reactions. We distinguish between two situations: cases of confrontational remarks, controversy and fierce discussion, on the one hand, and cases of harmful polarisation, on the other.

Uproar in the classroom

It can be utterly overwhelming when students suddenly make inflammatory remarks or erupt in quarrels. Instantly a great distance seems to separate teacher from students, or students from one another. How should teachers react?

Firstly, they have to assess whether they find a remark unacceptable.

Responding to unacceptable remarks

Situations may arise when teachers will feel that certain remarks or opinions are unacceptable or transgressive, either because they are so hatefilled or discriminatory that they might jeopardise the safety or peace of mind of others in the classroom, or because they violate basic values inscribed in educational laws or pedagogical school projects. In such cases, teachers first have to make clear to the student making these remarks that a boundary has been crossed and that some remarks will not be tolerated in class.

At the same time, it is important that teachers make clear that their intervention is not targeted at the person who made the remark, but at the transgressive remark itself. It is possible that students are struggling with or become emotional about specific topics, and that this expresses itself in unacceptable language or behaviour. Through open-ended questions teachers should try to find out if this is indeed the case and explore what might lie behind remarks of this kind. This also makes it possible to keep the dialogue open and encourages students to reflect on their discourse, attitudes

and behaviour. An intervention to demarcate what is acceptable in the classroom and what is not should therefore ideally be accompanied by an invitation to students to engage in a further conversation. In other words, teachers should tell students that certain remarks are transgressive and unacceptable, but simultaneously make clear that they are interested in discussing with the class the topic that has been raised – but in a different way and using other language.[15]

Reactions to confrontational remarks: different options…

Generally speaking, four options are available to deal with confrontational remarks or heated discussions. Teachers can:[16]

- ⬈ **ignore** the inflammatory remark, abruptly **break off** the discussion, or **exclude** a student from class;

- ⬈ engage in a discussion by offering **counter-arguments** and trying to convince students of a different position or viewpoint;

- ⬈ allow students to **vent** their emotions without asking for further arguments;

- ⬈ **listen** carefully and **ask open-ended questions** in an effort to try and invite students to think about what they have said and to probe them for their underlying arguments, motives and needs.

None of these options is in itself 'good' or 'bad', and a lot depends on the specific situation that arises. In some cases it will be necessary to take coercive disciplinary action, such as reprimanding or excluding a student, or to close down a fiery quarrel in order to maintain a safe classroom climate. In other instances it will be appropriate to give students the space to express their views and vent their emotions. If possible – and in an ideal situation – teachers can try and open a dialogue in which students not only express their opinions, but also substantiate them with supporting arguments while listening to the arguments of others.

Although much depends on the situation that prevails, the pedagogical approach advocated here starts from the premise that consistently ignoring discriminatory remarks or avoiding difficult situations is not a good idea. It will do little to address the root causes of conflicts and tensions. In the long term, moreover, the openness and democratic character of the classroom climate will suffer. It therefore seems to be imperative to search for a more constructive and *transformative* approach.

When is it best to avoid a discussion? And when is it possible to open up a constructive conversation? This is not an easy judgement to make. Timing and a careful, realistic assessment of the situation pertaining in the classroom are key. This is a question of experience and trial and error. Nonetheless, teachers can take a number of clues into account to make such a judgement:

↗ Identifying the **emotional dynamic** and **level of escalation** is a vital factor in assessing the classroom situation and deciding on a course of action. Clearly, the more tense and charged the situation is, the more difficult it will be to soothe tempers and facilitate an open, democratic discussion.

↗ **Time pressure** is clearly an issue: if a situation becomes explosive at the end of the lesson, teachers obviously have less time to steer the class into calmer waters.

↗ If students are **manifestly unwilling** to engage in a more fruitful discussion or dialogue (or are simply interested in creating an uproar in class), it can make sense to either close the discussion or just let them vent their views and emotions for a brief period without probing them for their underlying arguments or motives. Teachers should take care, however, to raise the subject again – ideally, as soon as possible – and try to have a more constructive conversation in a calmer atmosphere.

↗ Some issues can be very **sensitive** for certain students. The sensitivity of the subject at hand is an important element in deciding on the course of action to take.

The importance of good dialogue and questioning techniques

As good mediators and dialogue trainers know from experience, open-ended and probing questions are capable of defusing explosive or tense situations. By asking an appropriate question, a teacher shows that he/she is sincerely interested in his/her students, is willing to listen carefully to what they say, and wishes to find out more about their views and underlying motives and needs. This type of question could focus on a number of areas. Why are students so preoccupied with a specific theme? Why does it make them emotional? Why do they think it is controversial and arouses strong and contradictory responses among their fellow students? Through careful listening and probing on the part of the teacher, students will feel that they are taken seriously, that their voice counts, and that the classroom climate is open to their views. And when students feel they are being taken seriously, in all probability they will also become more inclined to listen to other viewpoints. In many cases this pedagogical approach of questioning, listening and probing will substantially reduce tensions in the classroom. This approach, moreover, is crucial to creating an open classroom and to encouraging students to learn how they can constructively engage with the conflicts that inevitably arise in a democratic society.[17]

Addressing confrontational remarks and heated classroom discussions by using transformative techniques is very challenging. But what do teachers do if this approach does not work and tensions continue to mount, resulting in harmful forms of polarisation?

Dealing with cases of polarisation

Nowadays polarisation seems to have become a bit of a buzz-word that as a result is in danger of becoming a catchall term. What exactly do we mean by 'polarisation'? The literature provides a number of clues to help us reflect on the term's meaning. For example, social psychologists and political scientists distinguish among various forms of polarisation, such as real and perceived polarisation, affective polarisation, group polarisation, political polarisation and ethnic-cultural polarisation.[18] In the context of the classroom, a distinction among three forms of polarisation might prove useful.

Polarisation in like-minded groups

Firstly, we can see polarisation as a social-psychological process in which a group of like-minded students, by talking to one another, tend to become more extreme in their views than they were before. As Sunstein has shown, discussions between like-minded people do not have to be very tense or fiery, nor do they have to take the form of bitter us-versus-them thinking to have real polarising effects. In this case, polarisation results from social-psychological mechanisms such as group dynamics, confirmation biases and motivated reasoning; in other words, the like-minded individuals involved tend to support and reinforce the ideas of the others in the group, with the result that the members of the group tend to believe in these ideas more and more strongly.[19] It is clear that this type of polarisation is relevant in a classroom context. If a teacher asks a group of like-minded students to discuss a controversial topic, it is likely that the individuals making up the group will move collectively to a more extreme position than the one they held before. What can teachers do to counteract this dynamic when they think it might have negative consequences? Research suggests that if group discussions are properly facilitated and structured, and participants are challenged to explore other perspectives, polarisation can be avoided or lessened.[20]

Increasing tensions between groups

A second form of polarisation is characterised by the development of increasing tensions between political, ethnic or cultural groups. 'Pushers' take the lead in pitting (the identity of) one group against (that of) another, the groups of 'joiners' grow, while the 'silent' middle or centre becomes increasingly smaller.[21] This form of polarisation, which extends beyond an 'ordinary' heated discussion, can become dangerous and harmful when any inclination to listen to other voices or viewpoints is absent, when the 'other' is rejected or excluded, or when groups of students begin to define others

as a 'threat' or an 'enemy'. How should we defuse this kind of polarisation? Here the work of Dutch philosopher-trainer Bart Brandsma is inspiring. He suggests four *gamechangers*:[22]

Change the **target audience**
↗ Change the focus from the views of the extreme poles and instead focus on students in the 'middle' who still want to engage in a nuanced conversation.

Change the **topic**
↗ Move away from the identity issues the pushers want to talk about and start a conversation on the concerns of those occupying the middle ground.

Change **position**
↗ Move towards the middle ground, where students do not want to choose between the two opposing camps.

Change the **tone**
↗ Use *mediating speech* and try to engage and connect with the diverse and more reasonable middle ground.

Radicalisation and extremism

Thirdly, a polarised mindset might lead students to express radical or extreme viewpoints in the classroom. In light of what has been said above, the first challenge for teachers when this happens is find out how deeply rooted these convictions are. To do this teachers can use the dialogical and questioning techniques highlighted above. Teachers should bear in mind that their young students' minds are very much in a state of development, and that this sometimes involves experimenting with radical ideas. Van San, Sieckelinck and De Winter therefore suggest that in the first instance teachers should try to understand the radical ideas that students express from a *pedagogical perspective*.[23] A *security risk perspective* only comes into play when ideas and behaviour are in danger of becoming extremist or violent.
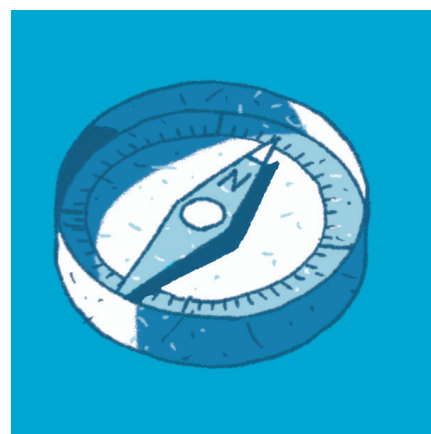
Scenario 2: Controversial topics in the curriculum

Usually teachers have a fair degree of freedom to decide how they teach certain topics. In some cases, however, the curriculum prescribes a particular content that they have to convey to their students. Nonetheless classes dealing with this content can cause heated discussions and meet with fierce resistance from students. A classic example of this kind of content is evolution theory. Although the curriculum rests on ample, widely accepted evidence and is supported by a broad scientific consensus, classes about evolution can meet with resistance, especially from religious students who view scientific thinking on evolution as contradictory to their faith-based beliefs.[24]

'Open' and 'settled' issues

Before going into pedagogical strategies to deal with these situations, it is useful to first reflect on different types of controversial issues. Hess and McAvoy distinguish between 'open' and 'settled' controversial issues:[25]

↗ '**Open' issues** are subjects about which a lively debate is ongoing in science or society as a whole, either because no conclusive answers have been found to date, or because diverging opinions are perfectly possible and legitimate.

↗ By contrast, Hess and McAvoy consider issues as '**settled**' when either a widely shared consensus about a particular issue has formed in society or when overwhelming evidence suggests that contrary views should not be deemed either correct or legitimate.

The definition of whether an issue is open or settled is not fixed. As Hess and McAvoy argue, issues can 'tip' from open to settled or vice versa (e.g. because of generational or demographic changes in society). Examples of 'settled' issues include the inadmissibility of racism and gender discrimination or, in science, evolution theory.

From a pedagogical point of view it is important to ascertain whether a controversial issue is open or settled. When they are teaching open issues, teachers can present multiple viewpoints as being equally legitimate, and can adopt the role of impartial facilitators of discussions on these topics. When teaching settled issues, however, they have to convey specific content. This does not necessarily mean that teachers cannot create space for students to share their thoughts and concerns, but it does imply that they cannot remain neutral.[26] They should teach on the basis that there is a societal con-

sensus on an issue (e.g. that racism is unacceptable)[27] or there is overwhelming evidence that certain views should not be deemed as scientifically legitimate (e.g. creationism in a science class on evolution).

Case study: teaching evolution theory

In the sense discussed above evolution theory is a 'settled' issue. Scientists have reached broad consensus on its validity. Nonetheless, teaching evolution theory can prove to be highly controversial in classes containing students with strict religious beliefs. The conflict that propels contestation and resistance is not necessarily one between science and religion – at least not in a general sense. The contestation of evolution theory mostly arises when students believe in literal interpretations of religious texts about the origins of life on earth. From a pedagogical perspective, the important question then is how teachers can engage with these students who, based on their religious convictions, contest or resist scientific insights into and explanations of evolution theory when these insights/explanations are taught in a science class.

There are various ways of tackling this challenge. One option for teachers is to 'simply' convey the content of the subject matter, based on the premise that students just have to accept what is being taught. This in itself is a legitimate strategy, but the question becomes how this approach will work in practice. Will this strategy be able to overcome resistance and lead students to understand evolution?

The following guidelines might be useful:

➚ The literature suggests that when students feel that their teachers are 'pushing an agenda' they are less inclined to keep an open mind to hearing about evolution.[28] It can therefore be valuable for teachers to create space for students to share their thoughts or concerns about the issue being discussed. Teachers should avoid 'compromise' or allowing relativism to creep into their teaching of the science of evolution. The aim is rather to allow students to share their views and concerns, which will open both the classroom and students' minds and thus make for a constructive learning experience. This approach might have a higher chance of defusing resistance and opening students' minds about evolution than authoritatively and unquestioningly pushing the subject matter.

➚ There is no reason why controversial scientific issues should only be dealt with in science classes. In close cooperation with colleagues teaching social studies, civics, history, philosophy, ethics, religion or aesthetics, it might be a good idea to set up cross-curricular projects in which students are encouraged to explore the meaning of controversy in science and, more broadly, the nature of scientific knowledge. Thus, students can learn to understand the differences among various ways of thinking, e.g. scientific, religious, philosophical and artistic.

➚ Studies indicate that some science teachers still teach science as a set of certainties and absolute truths rather than as a field of knowledge that thrives on uncertainty and discussion and that works through a continuous process of empirically testing theories and hypotheses.[29] To open students' minds for a learning experience it might be useful to explain how scientific knowledge is generated. A historical perspective can be useful here, e.g. a discussion of the history of evolution theory.

Scenario 3: Controversy as pedagogy

Controversies are a basic and inevitable feature of democratic societies. A plurality of opinions and perspectives will always be present in such societies, and from time to time this will lead to heated discussions or even clashes. Because schools are not sealed off from the outside world, at any moment societal conflicts and tensions can appear in the classroom. Above we reflected on how teachers can react when this happens. There is, however, no reason why teachers should only engage with controversial issues at these moments of tension. From the perspective of democratic citizenship education, proactively working on ways to deal with various kinds of controversial issues offers promising avenues to enhance students' dialogical skills and democratic competencies.

Schools are thus powerful sites where students can practise dealing with differences of opinion and societal conflicts in a constructive and transformative way. A multi-perspective approach to controversy is a key concept here. Because controversial issues inevitably entail a wide range of points of view and perspectives, they offer pedagogical opportunities to teach students how to discuss their views while keeping an open mind about other perspectives, how to listen to and familiarise themselves with other points of view, and how to democratically negotiate conflicts about political issues. In this way students can develop and enhance their critical thinking skills and democratic competencies. At the same time, teaching students how to engage with controversies in a peaceful and non-violent way will make it more likely that they will react less vehemently when sensitive issues suddenly pop up in classroom discussions. Thus, using controversy as a form of pedagogy might help to prevent harmful forms of polarisation.

Teaching controversial issues in a polarised political climate

Despite its pedagogical value to democratic citizenship education, teaching controversial issues can be sensitive and tricky.[30] In countries with a highly polarised and hostile political climate, for example, teaching controversial societal issues in schools is sometimes seen as controversial in itself. In these contexts, teachers and educators wanting to work on these topics can often run into opposition, which makes it difficult to promote a multi-perspective approach. Thus, polarisation can pose a number of obstacles to the teaching of controversial issues:

↗ Teachers might be afraid or reluctant to talk about controversial issues in the classroom.

↗ Teachers bringing up sensitive issues such as current societal conflicts might even be threatened with sanctions or even persecution by the authorities.

↗ Educators who want to discuss controversial issues in their classes are confronted with myths such as that 'only partisan teachers talk about controversial topics' or that 'teaching students about controversial issues boils down to "doing politics" in the classroom'.

↗ In a polarised political climate many questions are framed in simplistic terms of 'good versus bad'.

How can teachers overcome these obstacles and move forward in their teaching? It is initially worth noting that even in highly polarised contexts, educators find that many students actually want to talk about controversial societal issues. There are a number of possible ways to do this:

↗ It might be useful to think in terms of a spectrum from 'cold' to 'hot' topics and start out with issues that lie more at the 'cold' end of the spectrum. To find out which issues are sensitive, it is helpful for teachers to first deliberate among themselves as to what they consider to be cold or hot topics in their classrooms.

↗ In some contexts it might be useful to think about the language used to describe the process of teaching controversial issues. In a highly polarised political climate, for example, a multi-perspective approach and an open classroom might be perceived as more neutral than a 'political classroom'. Equally, some might perceive the term 'controversy' as referring to a 'black-or-white' issue on which two sides vehemently disagree. Thus, the concept itself might have a polarising effect. In these cases alternative concepts might be used to refer to what is being taught/discussed, such as 'socially acute questions'.[31]

↗ Although a whole-school approach is valuable across all contexts, it is useful to emphasise its value specifically in a polarised political climate. A first aspect of this approach is the importance of teacher-to-teacher communication. When students see teachers with different convictions talking to their colleagues in a calm and unaggressive way, they might follow their example. Secondly, it is best if teachers inform their colleagues and principals when they plan to work on controversial issues. And thirdly and more broadly, a whole-school approach might entail that teachers, as a team, structurally try to embed talking about controversial issues as essential to the school's broader pedagogical project. This approach might also be promising to address the fears many teachers feel about dealing with controversial subjects in the classroom. The whole-school approach creates a safe climate for teachers to take responsibility themselves and allows them to work using a bottom-up approach. Ideally, principals should be involved in these efforts. A whole-school approach also involves engaging parents, in this case by clearly explaining to them why the school thinks it is important to work on controversial issues and how teachers will do this. The basic point that needs to be made to parents here is that the school wants students to deal constructively with differences of opinion of whatever kind. It might be useful to point out that this controversy-as-pedagogy approach is not about partisanship or indoctrination, but about learning how differences of opinion and perspective are inevitable in a democracy, and how students can deal with them constructively. It might help to clarify this perspective by introducing an explicit and well-thought-out pedagogical project that involves all the school's stakeholders (teachers, the principal, students, parents, etc.).[32]

Teaching controversial issues: some suggestions and guidelines

Needless to say, in terms of the prerequisites for and objectives of the controversy-as-pedagogy approach, good preparation and a whole-school approach are not only valuable in highly polarised contexts, but also make sense across national and cultural contexts. Research on the effects of peace education suggests[33] that the effectiveness of a particular programme is enhanced when:

- a team of teachers is actively involved in and committed to supporting the programme;
- the school principal actively supports and participates in the programme;
- the programme's objectives are consistent with the school's educational project and the overall targets that the national educational system sets for schools;
- both the classroom and broader school climates are open and provide space for dialogue;
- students actively participate in the programme;
- various forms of active learning are combined in the programme; and
- the programme takes into account students' diverse backgrounds (in terms of their socio-economic and cultural backgrounds and gender). These factors, which lie outside the educational setting itself, not only have an influence on the outcomes of a classroom intervention, but also on the strength of its effects on specific groups of young people.

Educators may also want to take the following suggestions and possible guidelines into account:

↗ Teachers should ensure that the classroom remains **open and safe** for all students. Discussions about controversial topics can cause uncertainty and even fear among students.[34] This is why it is important that they are reassured that differences of opinion and controversies are 'okay' and part of what it means to live together in a democratic society.

↗ Work on controversial issues can serve a number of **objectives**, e.g. teaching students to listen carefully and actively to one another, enhancing their critical thinking skills, encouraging them to explore a variety of different ways of looking at an issue, teaching them to base their arguments on sound evidence, and so forth. It is important for teachers to decide in advance which specific objectives they are aiming to achieve with a particular project or programme, because this will help to determine which method or didactic approach will be most meaningful and effective.[35]

↗ At the same time, it is important to **diversify** and triangulate methods, because not all students have the same learning style or preference, e.g. some students are more comfortable with oral discussion exercises, while others may prefer artistic means of expression.[36]

↗ Teachers should think carefully about the specific **topic** they want students to work on.[37] Elements to take into account are, for example, the profile and composition of a particular group of students, as well as their prior experience of discussing sensitive topics. Teachers should take into account the fact that what causes strong emotions or is a sensitive issue might differ from person to person, and will vary across cultural backgrounds. Similarly, concepts are understood differently and mean different things to students from different backgrounds or who speak different languages. Therefore, it is important to be as context-sensitive as possible. As we mentioned above, it might be useful to distinguish between 'colder' and 'hotter' controversial topics, and to start a programme with topics that are 'open' but lie on the colder end of the spectrum.

↗ Good **preparation** and active **facilitation** on the part of the teacher are important prerequisites for success. To prevent the exercise from going off at a tangent or in irrelevant directions, lacking in substance, or hopelessly losing focus, students should be encouraged to carry out extensive preparation, while teachers should play an active role in guiding and facilitating the work.[38]

When setting up and developing specific projects, teachers can utilise a wide diversity of methods and techniques. Without discussing all of these in great detail, one can think of the following types:

Dialogue, discussion or debate: Different types of classroom conversation can be distinguished, but the general idea of all of them is that teachers and students should discuss a particular topic in a structured and organised way.[39] In all types of classroom conversations it is important that teachers actively facilitate the conversation. Not only can discussions all too easily lose focus and drift off in irrelevant directions, it is important that the conversation should also entail more than a mere exchange of opinions.[40] Through active questioning and probing, students should be encouraged to give reasons for their opinions and to critically examine their own views, while they should also be urged to actively listen to others' points of view. The overarching idea is that a group of students should establish a *community of research* in order to collectively explore and critically investigate a controversial issue from a variety of different perspectives.

Although many courses still start from a given master narrative or from a Eurocentric perspective, the **curriculum** often offers numerous (explicit or implicit) clues as to how teachers should teach a particular type of subject matter by using a multi-perspective approach and focusing on some kind of controversy. In principle, almost any topic can be presented in a multi-voiced way or taught in terms of its 'controversial' aspects. In history, for example, teachers can actively search for different perspectives on a specific historic event, using different sources. In science, teachers can show how scientists often spend long periods of time discussing theories, methodologies and research results before any kind of consensus is reached.

Also, controversial issues are often suitable subjects for **longer-term projects** in which a group of students focus on a current 'hot' news item or explore a specific issue for a longer period of time. The aim here is that students should gather and delve into various types and sources of information, and then explore the subject further in classroom discussions or essays. These collaborative projects can take many forms. In history education one might think of a project where students compare textbooks dealing with a controversial topic involving two or more different countries and identify how national bias can mean that the topic is viewed in quite different and often opposing ways. In science education, collaborative and interactional projects that involve groups of students studying controversial socio-scientific issues seem to be a very promising approach. Research indicates that when students from various backgrounds work together to explore complex socio-scientific issues (climate change, meat consumption, etc.), and do so by taking into account a plurality of interests and legitimate perspectives (personal, social and cultural, objective-scientific), they not only enhance their socio-scientific reasoning skills, but also their democratic competencies. They learn that knowledge is complex, plural, uncertain and conditional on context; that multiple positions can be justified depending on the values and beliefs of those holding them; and that competing interests need to be managed through a democratically negotiated process.[41]

Last but not least, **artistic pedagogies** are a promising way to work with students on controversial issues. Arts in education can open up fresh perspectives and offer possibilities for students to express themselves in a variety of ways (including non-verbal ways). By encouraging students to explore topics related to identity and conflict through artistic expression, teachers can invite them to share stories about themselves and the world in an open way.

4. Conclusion

Controversies and societal conflicts are inevitable in a democratic society. Nonetheless, in educational contexts they can pose a number of pedagogical challenges, e.g. when they unexpectedly and at times brutally raise their head in the classroom or lead to increasing tensions in schools. Over the last decades a wide array of models, interventions and strategies have been developed to enhance teachers' capacities to deal with controversy and polarisation in educational contexts. In this guide we attempted to bring some order into what is currently on offer to teachers. We distinguished among three scenarios – three types of situations – in which conflicts, controversies and tensions can arise in the classroom. This distinction, we argued, is useful if we want to enable teachers to make informed choices on what pedagogies and models they can apply in their classrooms and to tailor their didactic approaches to what is needed in specific pedagogical situations.

At the same time, it has become apparent that the methods and strategies presented above also have a great deal in common. What is striking, for example, is the overall emphasis on dialogical and questioning techniques, a shared transformative approach towards conflict, and the importance of an open classroom climate. Ultimately, all the approaches discussed have one key element in common: they perceive the classroom as a laboratory for democracy – a place where students are given the opportunity to exercise and develop their democratic voices.

The question of constructively engaging with controversial issues and polarisation in our classrooms and schools is topical in many European countries. In that light, educational professionals and scholars from across Europe will find value in working together on this issue and learning from one another. Thus, they can share insights that are both meaningful across countries and sensitive to the particularities of spe cific national contexts. With this publication we hope to have made a contribution to this exchange of insights, theoretical frameworks, experiences and good examples of practice. We also hope that our work will stimulate further comparative research on the topic. Based on our prior research, we would like to conclude by identifying two interesting and promising avenues for further study: firstly, the possibilities inherent in a whole-school approach to constructively dealing with controversial issues and, secondly, the added value of engaging teachers and educational professionals in peer-to-peer learning communities.

Endnotes

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1   In this inspirational guide the focus is on *societal* and *political* conflicts, and not on *interpersonal* conflicts (although the latter can of course be inspired by the former). When we use the term 'conflict' in this guide we are therefore referring to societal and political conflicts.

2   This inspirational guide is based on a book published by the Flemish Peace Institute in 2018 (in Dutch): M. Van Alstein (2018), *Omgaan met controverse en polarisatie in de klas*, Kalmthout: Pelckmans Pro.

3   Studies that have explored the reasons why teachers avoid discussions about controversial themes include, among others, C. Oulton, V. Day, J. Dillon & M. Grace (2004), 'Controversial Issues: Teachers' Attitudes and Practices in the Context of Citizenship Education', *Oxford Review of Education*, 30(4), pp. 489, 499; A. McCully (2006), 'Practitioner Perceptions of Their Role in Facilitating the Handling of Controversial Issues in Contested Societies: A Northern Irish Experience', *Educational Review*, 58(1), pp. 52-55; J. Byford, S. Lennon & W.B. Russell (2009), 'Teaching Controversial Issues in the Social Studies: A Research Study of High School Teachers', *The Clearing House: A Journal of Educational Strategies, Issues and Ideas*, 82(4), pp. 166-169; S. Philpott, J. Clabough, L. McConkey & T.N. Turner (2011), 'Controversial Issues: To Teach or Not to Teach? That is the Question!', *Georgia Social Studies Journal*, 1(1), p. 41; and R. Woolley (2011), 'Controversial Issues: Identifying the Concerns and Priorities of Student Teachers', *Policy Futures in Education*, 9(2), pp. 282, 288, 289.

4   M. Hooghe (ed.) (2012), *Jongeren, politiek en burgerschap: Politieke socialisatie bij Belgische jongeren*, Leuven: Acco.

5   D.E. Hess & P. McAvoy (2015), *The Political Classroom: Evidence and Ethics in Democratic Education*, New York: Routledge.

6   D.E. Hess (2009), *Controversy in the Classroom: The Democratic Power of Discussion*, London: Routledge, p. 162.

7   On the question of the teacher's position, see T. Kelly (1986), 'Discussing Controversial Issues: Four Perspectives on the Teachers's Role', *Theory and Research in Social Education*, 14(2), pp. 113-138.

8   See C. Hahn (1999), 'Citizenship Education: An Empirical Study of Policy, Practices and Outcomes', *Oxford Review of Education*, 25(1-2), p. 233; A. Perliger, D. Canetti-Nisim & A. Pedahzur (2006), 'Democratic Attitudes among High-school Pupils: The Role Played by Perceptions of Class Climate', *School Effectiveness and School Improvement*, 17(1), p. 121; D.E. Campbell (2008), 'Voice in the Classroom: How an Open Classroom Climate Fosters Political Engagement among Adolescents', *Political Behavior*, 30(4), pp. 437-454; D.E. Hess (2009), *Controversy in the Classroom: The Democratic Power of Discussion*, London: Routledge, p. 30; R. Dassonneville, E. Quintelier, M. Hooghe & E. Claes (2012), 'The Relation between Civic Education and Political Attitudes and Behavior: A Two-year Panel Study among Belgian Late Adolescents', *Applied Developmental Science*, 16(3), pp. 140-150; E. Claes, M. Hooghe & S. Marien (2012), 'A Two-year Panel Study among Belgian Late Adolescents on the Impact of School Environment Characteristics on Political Trust', *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, 24(2), pp. 208-224; A.M. Martens & J. Gainous (2013), 'Civic Education and Democratic Capacity: How Do Teachers Teach and What Works?: Civic Education and Democratic Capacity', *Social Science Quarterly*, 94(4), pp. 956-976; E.B. Godfrey & J.K. Grayman (2014), 'Teaching Citizens: The Role of Open Classroom Climate in Fostering Critical Consciousness among Youth', *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 43(11), p. 1803; M. Persson (2015), 'Classroom Climate and Political Learning: Findings from a Swedish Panel Study and Comparative Data', *Political Psychology*, 36(5), pp. 587, 594, 596; and E. Claes & M. Hooghe (2016), 'The Effect of Political Science Education on Political Trust and Interest: Results from a 5-year Panel Study', *Journal of Political Science Education*, May, p. 9.

9   Y. Dejaeghere, M. Hooghe & E. Claes (2012), 'Do Ethnically Diverse Schools Reduce Ethnocentrism? A Two-year Panel Study among Majority Group Late Adolescents in Belgian Schools', *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 36(1), pp. 108-117.

10   See D.E. Hess (2002), 'Discussing Controversial Public Issues in Secondary Social Studies Classrooms: Learning from Skilled Teachers', *Theory & Research in Social Education*, 30(1), p. 23; A.B. Lusk & A.S. Weinberg (1994), 'Discussing Controversial Topics in the Classroom: Creating a Context for Learning', *Teaching Sociology*, 22(4), pp. 301, 305; and R.W. Evans, P.G. Avery & P. Velde Pederson (2000), 'Taboo Topics: Cultural Restraint on Teaching Social Issues', *The Clearing House: A Journal of Educational Strategies, Issues and Ideas*, 73(5), p. 300.

11   See A. Hemmings (2000), 'High School Democratic Dialogues: Possibilities for Praxis', *American Educational Research Journal*, 37(1), pp. 67-91; D.E. Hess & P. McAvoy (2015), *The Political Classroom: Evidence and Ethics in Democratic Education*, New York: Routledge, pp. 5-7; and E. Claes, L. Maurissen & N. Havermans (2017), 'Let's Talk Politics: Which Individual and Classroom Compositional Characteristics Matter in Classroom Discussions?', *Young*, 25(4).

12   C.W. Ruitenberg (2009) 'Educating Political Adversaries: Chantal Mouffe and Radical Democratic Citizenship Education', *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, 28(3), pp. 269-281.

13   E.g. see C. Mouffe (1999), 'Deliberative Democracy or Agonistic Pluralism?', *Social Research*, 66(3), pp. 745-758; and C. Mouffe (2013), *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically*, London: Verso.

14   M. Maussen & R. Grillo (2014), 'Regulation of Speech in Multicultural Societies', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 40(2), pp. 174-193.

15   This strategy of delimiting and inviting is based on and inspired by the work of Dutch dialogue coach Leon Meijs; see www.factorveiligheid.nl/onderwijs.

16   J. Patist & B. Wansink (2017), 'Lesgeven over gevoelige onderwerpen: Het aangaan van het moeilijke gesprek in de klas', *Kleio*, 4, pp. 45-47.

17   K. Goris & M. Van Alstein (2019), 'Practising in the Democratic Conflict: A Look at the New Citizenship Final Attainment Targets', *Yearly Report Flemish Peace Institute 2018*, pp. 16-25. In Flanders and Brussels the Democratische Dialoog, a project of Erasmushogeschool Brussel, is a pioneer of this approach; see http://democratischedialoog.be/.

18   E.g. see M.J. Hetherington (2009), 'Putting Polarisation in Perspective', *British Journal of Political Science*, 39(2), pp. 413-448; and P. Valdesolo & J. Graham (2016), *Social Psychology of Political Polarisation*, New York: Routledge.

19   C.R. Sunstein (2009), *Going to Extremes: How Like Minds Unite and Divide*, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.

20   See ibid., p. 56; and K. Strandberg, S. Himmelroos & K. Grönlund (2017), 'Do Discussions in Like-minded Groups Necessarily Lead to More Extreme Opinions? Deliberative Democracy and Group Polarisation', *International Political Science Review*, June, pp. 1-17.

21 B. Brandsma (2016), *Polarisation: Understanding the Dynamics of Us Versus Them*, BB in Media.

22 See https://insidepolarisation.nl/en/; Bart Brandsma (2017), Polarisation: *Understanding the Dynamics of Us Versus Them*, BB in Media; and RAN Education Working Group (2017), *RAN Polarisation Management Manual.*

23 See M. van San, S. Sieckelinck & M. de Winter (2013), 'Ideals Adrift: An Educational Approach to Radicalization', *Ethics and Education*, 8(3), pp. 276-289.

24 See B. Pobiner (2016), 'Accepting, Understanding, Teaching, and Learning (Human) Evolution: Obstacles and Opportunities', *American Journal of Physical Anthropology*, 159 (suppl. 61), pp. 234-274. Also see H. Swanson (2010), 'Teaching Darwin: Contemporary Social Studies through Controversial Issues', *Journal of Social Studies Research*, 34(2), pp. 153, 156-157, 166; and W. Journell (2013), 'Learning from Each Other: What Social Studies Can Learn from the Controversy Surrounding the Teaching of Evolution in Science', *Curriculum Journal*, 24(4), pp. 499-506.

25 D.E. Hess & P. McAvoy (2015), *The Political Classroom: Evidence and Ethics in Democratic Education*, New York: Routledge, pp. 159-181.

26 For more on the teacher's position, see T. Kelly (1986), 'Discussing Controversial Issues: Four Perspectives on the Teacher's Role', *Theory and Research in Social Education*, 14(2), pp. 113-138.

27 E.g. see M. Hand (2008), 'What Should We Teach as Controversial? A Defense of the Epistemic Criterion', *Educational Theory*, 58(2), pp. 213-228; and M. Hand (2007), 'Should We Teach Homosexuality as a Controversial Issue?', *Theory and Research in Education*, 5(1), pp. 69-86.

28 See W. Journell (2013), 'Learning from Each Other: What Social Studies Can Learn from the Controversy Surrounding the Teaching of Evolution in Science', *Curriculum Journal*, 24(4), pp. 499-506 and B. Pobiner (2016), 'Accepting, Understanding, Teaching, and Learning (Human) Evolution: Obstacles and Opportunities', *American Journal of Physical Anthropology*, 159 (suppl. 61), pp. 234-274; and.

29 C. Oulton, J. Dillon & M.M. Grace (2004), 'Reconceptualizing the Teaching of Controversial Issues', *International Journal of Science Education*, 26(4), pp. 414, 416; R. Levinson (2006), 'Teachers' Perceptions of the Role of Evidence in Teaching Controversial Socio-scientific Issues', *Curriculum Journal*, 17(3), pp. 253-254, 257; P. Reis & C. Galvao (2009), 'Teaching Controversial Socio-scientific Issues in Biology and Geology Classes: A Case Study', *Electronic Journal of Science Education*, 13(1), pp. 6, 15-16.

30 The insights in this paragraph are based on the discussions during a workshop on dealing with controversy and polarisation in education organised by the Flemish Peace Institute and the Evens Foundation, 23-24 May 2019. Many thanks to Cecile Barbeito Thonon, Ilse Hakvoort, Lexi Oudman, Olivier Morin, Tea Maksimovic, Malina Baranowska-Janusz and Marjolein Delvou.

31 This term is used by Morin, Simonnneaux and Tytler; see O. Morin, L. Simonneaux & R. Tytler (2017), 'Engaging with Socially Acute Questions: Development and Validation of an Interactional Reasoning Framework', *Journal of Research in Science Teaching*, 54(7), pp. 825-851.

32 An interesting and promising project on the value of the whole-school approach is the *Learning Communities for Peace* project funded by the Erasmus+ Programme of the European Union and the Evens Foundation. The project aims to address the rise of incidents of conflict in school settings as a consequence of changing European realities. An important focus of the project was on the uniqueness of each school context, as well as the idea that the process of creating school communities for peace should be co-designed with the school and its community in order to share ownership; see www.lcpeace.eu.

33 B. Spruyt, M. Elchardus, L. Roggemans & F. Van Droogenbroeck (2014), *Can Peace Be Taught? Researching the Effectiveness of Peace Education*, Brussels: Flemish Peace Institute, pp. 83-84.

34 E.g. see A.B. Lusk & A.S. Weinberg (1994), 'Discussing Controversial Topics in the Classroom: Creating a Context for Learning', *Teaching Sociology*, 22(4), pp. 301, 305; and R.W. Evans, P.G. Avery & P. Velde Pederson (2000), 'Taboo Topics: Cultural Restraint on Teaching Social Issues', *The Clearing House: A Journal of Educational Strategies, Issues and Ideas*, 73(5), p. 300.

35 D.E. Hess (2009), *Controversy in the Classroom: The Democratic Power of Discussion*, London: Routledge, pp. 56-70; D.E. Hess (2002), 'Discussing Controversial Public Issues in Secondary Social Studies Classrooms: Learning from Skilled Teachers', *Theory & Research in Social Education*, 30(1), pp. 3, 6, 38.

36 J. Byford, S. Lennon & W.B. Russell (2009), 'Teaching Controversial Issues in the Social Studies: A Research Study of High School Teachers', *The Clearing House: A Journal of Educational Strategies, Issues and Ideas*, 82(4), p. 165.

37 M. Hand & R. Levinson (2012), 'Discussing Controversial Issues in the Classroom', *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 44(6), pp. 614-629.

38 Ibid.

39 E.g. see W.C. Parker & D.E. Diana (2001), 'Teaching with and for Discussion', *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 17, pp. 275, 279, 285; R.L. Healey (2012), 'The Power of Debate: Reflections on the Potential of Debates for Engaging Students in Critical Thinking about Controversial Geographical Topics', *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, 36(2), pp. 239-257; and P.G. Avery, S.A. Levy & A.M.M. Simmons (2013), 'Deliberating Controversial Public Issues as Part of Civic Education', *The Social Studies*, 104(3), p. 106.

40 A. Harwood & C. Hahn (1990), 'Controversial Issues in the Classroom', ERIC Clearinghouse for Social Studies, ref. ED327453; A. Lefstein (2006), 'Dialogue in Schools: Towards a Pragmatic Approach', Working Papers in Urban Language & Literacies, no. 33; M. Hand & R. Levinson (2012), 'Discussing Controversial Issues in the Classroom', *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 44(6), pp. 614-629.

41 O. Morin, L. Simonneaux & R. Tytler (2017), 'Engaging with Socially Acute Questions: Development and Validation of an Interactional Reasoning Framework', *Journal of Research in Science Teaching*, 54(7), pp. 825-851.

Flemish Peace Institute

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