

EDC/HRE FOR PRINCIPALS



Awareness

Controversy is a fact of life – embrace it!

Preparation

Controversy is at the heart of learning!

Action

All free to speak openly!

CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES



Controversial issues

As a principal you will know better than most that controversy is an unavoidable fact of life in schools today. The use of social media and instant forms of communication brings school students into daily contact with issues like migration, climate change, terrorism and LGBT rights. Handling issues like these can be challenging, but how are young people to make sense of them if they are not allowed to discuss them at school? How will they learn to think critically or debate democratically if they do not have a teacher to guide them? Discussing controversial issues has many benefits, but it is not a task to take lightly. Among other things, you need a well-trained staff, a relevant curriculum, and a supportive school ethos.

The material in this section is largely based on two Council of Europe manuals:

The training pack Teaching Controversial Issues is available to download at: <https://pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/charter-edc-hre-pilot-projects/teaching-controversial-issues-developing-effective-training-for-teachers-and-school-leaders>

The school self-evaluation tool Managing Controversy is available to download at: <https://pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/charter-edc-hre-pilot-projects/project-1-managing-controversy-a-whole-school-training-tool>

Controversial issues - Topic 1: Controversial issues at school
Controversial issues – What and where?

A controversy is more than an everyday disagreement or difference of opinion. It is one which arouses strong emotions and causes ill-feeling and divisions between people.

Controversies are a natural part of life in a democracy, and in any community that values freedom of expression, including schools.

Controversies vary with time and place. They also vary in scale, from local to global.



Sometimes a controversy can arise in the school itself. For example, people may disagree with:

- what is being taught in your school, e.g. evolution,
- your school rules, e.g., about what students wear,
- your dealings with the local community, e.g., treatment of migrant students

As a principal, you will quite rightly be concerned about the way controversial issues are handled in your school – whether it is in a discussion in class, a debate in the student parliament, or a meeting of parents. You need to be aware of the consequences if things get out of hand and of the damage it can cause to your school's reputation.

This is why it is important for you to:

- understand the risks of handling controversial issues
- monitor issues you think are likely to be controversial
- teach your staff how to manage controversial issues wisely

Controversial issues - Topic 1: Controversial issues at school

Controversial issues – Why it is good to talk

It is tempting to try to shy away from controversial issues at school. You may think that bringing issues out into the open will only create more ill feeling, that students will not be able to cope, or there will be complaints.

This is not the democratic way. The **democratic way of resolving disputes and conflicts of opinion is to talk about them**. It is important to discuss issues, openly and respectfully. Learning how to do this is one of the most important lessons a school can teach.

Here are **some other reasons why it can be good to talk about controversial issues at school**. Which do you think are the most important? Try to rank them on a scale from 1-10. This is an exercise you can also do with your students, staff or parents.

1. It develops the competence of critical and analytical thinking	
2. It prepares students to deal with future controversies they will likely encounter	
3. It gives students an opportunity to express themselves	
4. It helps students make sense of what they see and hear in social media	
5. It exposes students to a wider understanding of the world	
6. It makes school lessons more realistic and up to date	
7. It makes students feel valued by the school and by society	
8. It helps students respect people with different views and backgrounds	
9. It highlights misinformation and fake news in social media	
10. It gives students confidence and a sense of self-efficacy	

Of course, this does not mean that all issues, however controversial, should be discussed in school. What this exercise shows is that there is much to be gained from talking through controversial issues in school if you can handle them safely.



Controversial issues - Topic 1: Controversial issues at school
Controversial issues – What do people at your school want to talk about?

One way of addressing the need to discuss difficult issues seriously is by finding out what people at your school would really like to talk about. Here is a survey you can use with teachers, students and parents. It divides controversial issues into three types – those associated with lessons, with everyday school life and with parent-school relations. When you have the results, you can take steps to initiate conversations about on the issues that seem to be most urgent.

	Teachers	Students	Parents
Lessons			
Everyday school life			
Parent-school relations			



Controversial issues - Topic 2: Handling controversial issues safely

Managing controversial issues in the classroom – What skills do teachers need?

To be able to handle controversial issues safely in the classroom, teachers need a range of skills. These include:

- how to select issues for discussion
- how to deal with their own personal beliefs and biases
- how to respond to racist, sexist and other derogatory remarks
- how to facilitate a discussion without taking sides
- how to encourage students to see other points of view
- how to teach students to discuss issues respectfully
- how to prevent emotions from boiling over in the classroom
- how to cope when lacking expertise on an issue.



Ask your teaching staff to assess their weakest skills in terms of their ability to deal with controversial issues. Use this information as a basis on which to select appropriate forms of **professional development** when the opportunity arises.

Controversial issues - Topic 2: Handling controversial issues safely

Managing controversial issues in the classroom – Practice ideas

Managing the discussion of a controversial issue safely in the classroom demands a range of skills from the teacher. Here are 4 ideas for **training activities** that will help to develop some of these skills in your teaching staff.

1. How to deal with one's own personal beliefs and biases

Give teachers a selection of pictures of people's faces (cut out from magazines). Ask, "Which one is the terrorist?" and have them explain their thought processes in reaching an answer. Then explain that there is no correct answer. The beliefs and biases expressed are all in the teachers' heads. Continue by asking teachers to try to identify the (unconscious') beliefs and biases they may have in relation to specific controversial issues they might have to encounter at school.

2. How to respond to racist and other derogatory remarks

Provide some scenarios in which students make racist or other derogatory remarks. Ask teachers in groups to think of and discuss different ways of responding to these, considering their respective advantages and disadvantages. Experiment with different responses, such as "Where did you get that idea from?", or "Do you realize how hurtful this might sound to some people?" Reflect on when and how it may be appropriate to introduce students to the concept of 'hate speech'.

3. How to encourage students to consider other points of view

Teachers give their own views on a number of controversial issues. Ask them to choose the one they feel strongest about and to try to argue in favor of the opposite point of view. Give colleagues an opportunity to question themselves in adopting this role. Debrief by asking them what they have learned from the experience about such views and the people who espouse them. Reflect on when and how this exercise could be used with students in school.

4. How to prevent emotions boiling over in the classroom

Ask teachers in groups to experiment with 'de-personalizing' the questions they might use when facilitating a classroom discussion, i.e., by making them societal rather than personal questions. For example, changing "What do you think about migrant workers?" to "What do people think about migrant workers?" Practice with a range of examples. Discuss the effect this change of language might have on discussions in school and situations in which this might be valuable.



Controversial issues - Topic 2: Handling controversial issues safely

Managing controversial issues in the classroom – Teacher roles

Like everyone else, teachers are entitled to their own views. But this does not necessarily mean they should share them with their students, or that they should favor views in accord with their own. So, whose side should a teacher take in a classroom discussion?

It is not a question of taking one side or another. The aim is to help students learn. To help them do this, there is **a range of roles that a teacher can play** in the classroom. Here are six different roles and the situations in which you might use them.

‘IMPARTIAL CHAIRPERSON’

Ensure that all students are able to express a view, but make no comments

Adopt this role when students are well-informed and the discussion is evenly balanced

‘DEVIL’S ADVOCATE’

Take an opposite view to the one expressed by students

Adopt this role when most of the students express the same opinion

‘ALLY’

Take the side of one individual or a specific group of students

Use this strategy to support weaker students or a marginalized group

‘PUBLIC AUTHORITY’

Inform students about the official view

Adopt this stance to deal with a question of human rights, formal school policy or a government decree

‘EXPLAINER’

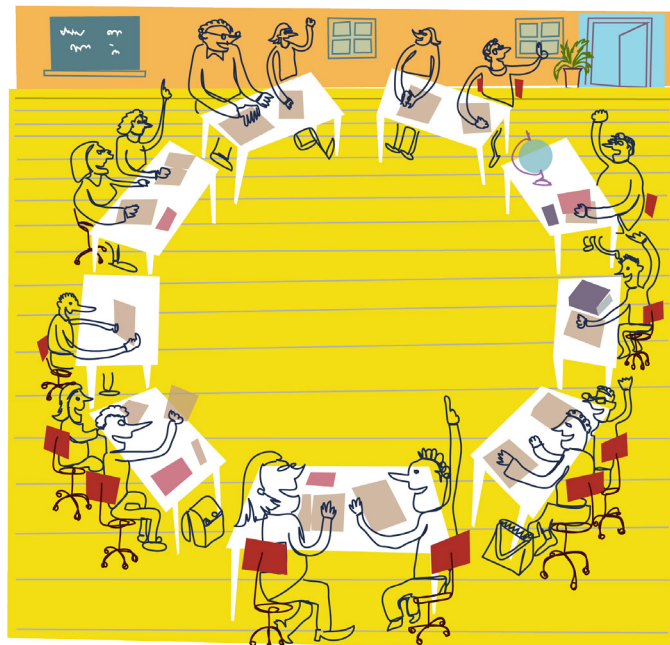
Set out a range of different options and arguments

Useful when students are unaware of different positions or of supporting arguments

‘CITIZEN’

Adopt this role to make your own views known

Use this strategy when your impartiality is questioned by students



Controversial issues - Topic 3: Controversial issues in the curriculum

Controversial issues in the curriculum – Where and what?

The curriculum can often be a source of controversy in a school. Some school subjects are more associated with controversy than others. Here are some examples to look out for.

- **History** – conflicting versions of your country’s history
- **Religious education** – conflicting views on morality and religious truth
- **Health education** – conflicting attitudes towards sexuality and moral behavior
- **Civic and social education** – conflicting political programs and ideologies
- **Literature** – conflicting views on moral and social attitudes expressed in fiction
- **Science** – conflicting views on the application of science, and the clash with religion.

As principal it is important to be aware that people in your school community might disagree strongly with the way your school is handling some of these issues, e.g., with the version of history taught in History lessons, or the use of a particular book in Literature.

In many cases the curriculum is mandatory and you have no power to alter it. Thus, where there is a concern about a disagreement getting out of hand, you may need to address the situation by making a **public statement** to allay fears about the way your school is handling the issue in question.

In the longer term, however, the best strategy is to ensure that your teaching staff are aware of the potential for controversy in the subjects they teach, and that they have the **skills** required to deescalate controversial issues safely.



Controversial issues - Topic 3: Controversial issues in the curriculum

Controversial issues in the curriculum – Creating opportunities to talk

While some school subjects are more associated with controversy than others, there are opportunities to talk about controversial issues in every subject in the curriculum if you know where to look. Discussing these issues in class will contribute not only to students' democratic education, but also to a deeper understanding of the subject itself.

Subject-teachers may not always recognize that these opportunities exist, however. Therefore, make use of these **two activities** to help your staff identify some of the possibilities.

1. 'SUBJECT-MATCHING'

Form mixed groups of teachers from a range of school subjects. Ask the groups to brainstorm examples of issues which are currently controversial in your school, community or society. Identify the ones already covered in the mandatory curriculum and put these on one side. Ask the groups to focus on the issues which are left and rate them according to their perceived relevance to the lives and education of your students. The groups then choose the most relevant issues and try to make connections between these and the current subjects in your school curriculum. Collate the results from the different groups and ask subject heads or subject lead-teachers to consider how they might incorporate these issues into the teaching of their subjects.

2. 'CROSS-CURRICULAR SPEED DATING'

Arrange a room with a row of three chairs facing each other on either side of each table. Divide your staff into groups of six, with no group containing two teachers who teach the same subject. Arrange each group in three pairs around a table, with the members of each pair facing each other. Ask each pair to identify a controversial issue which overlaps with their two subjects. Rotate one place within the group every few minutes and repeat the process. Pairs should take notes of their suggestions to discuss later in a large group debrief.



Controversial issues - Topic 3: Controversial issues in the curriculum

Controversial issues in the curriculum – Facilitating discussion

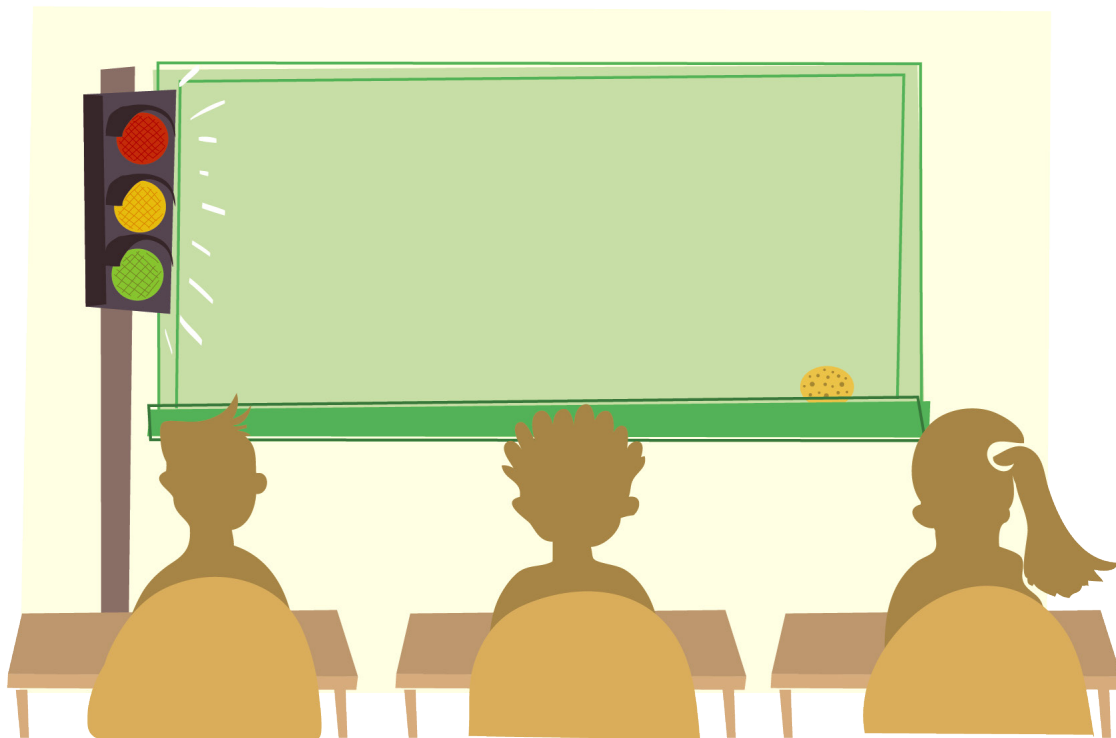
How do you present controversial issues for discussion in the classroom? Asking students simply to take sides and argue for or against a proposition is rarely enough. It doesn't do justice to the difficulty of issues or to the lack of information some people have about them.

'AGREE, DISAGREE, DON'T KNOW'

Label three walls of the classroom 'AGREE', 'DISAGREE' and 'DON'T KNOW'. Read out a statement on a controversial issue, e.g., "It is wrong to eat meat". Ask students on their own to reflect on the statement and go to the wall which best reflects their opinion, i.e., whether they agree or disagree with it, or don't know what to think. Re-arrange the chairs and tables so that the students are sitting in rows along the walls they have chosen, facing inwards. The 'AGREE's and 'DISAGREE's should be facing each other with the 'DON'T KNOW's in between. Give the students a chance to express and discuss their opinions, taking turns, one person speaking at a time- as follows:

- 'AGREE's put their arguments to the 'DISAGREE's
- 'DISAGREE's put their counter-arguments to the 'AGREE's
- 'AGREE's and 'DISAGREE's interact with each others' arguments
- 'DON'T KNOW's express their own thoughts on the issue – however confused – and have a chance to question 'AGREE's and 'DISAGREE's
- 'AGREE's, 'DISAGREE's and 'DON'T KNOW's interact with each others' arguments and questions.

This kind of activity requires at least one hour and a half, maybe more. To debrief, you may wish to ask students to reflect on the state of their opinions after the exercise, identify the most salient points in the debate, or consider how they might explore the issue in more depth.



Controversial issues - Topic 4: Controversial issues and school culture
Controversial issues and school culture – Safe to talk?

As school principal, you will be aware that the quality of everyday life and culture of a school can make a difference to how well students learn and achieve. It is exactly the same with controversial issues. Talking about difficult issues can be uncomfortable and worrying for teachers, students and parents alike. It is important, therefore, to create a school culture in which people feel free to **talk openly about sensitive issues without fear of criticism**.

A supportive school culture

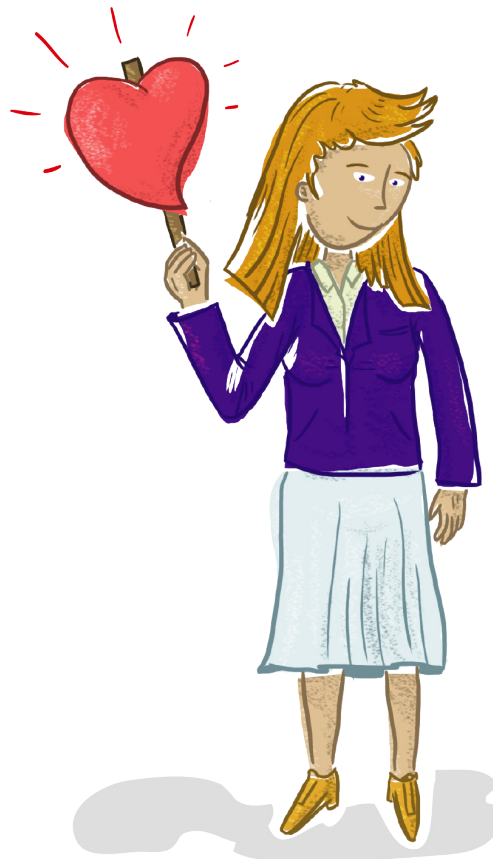
What are the elements of such a culture? A culture which is likely to support the discussion of difficult issues is one which is:

- **safe** – everyone is free from bullying, name-calling and intimidation
- **welcoming** – everyone is known as an individual and feels part of the common school community
- **open** – everyone is free to form, experiment with and express their own ideas
- **inclusive** – everyone is able participate in any school activity on an equal basis
- **rights-respecting** – everyone’s human rights are respected, especially freedom of expression, belief and religion, privacy and freedom from degrading treatment
- **democratic** – everyone has a say in school decision-making.

School rules and behavior policies

Having the right school rules or behavior policies and enforcing these appropriately goes a long way towards establishing the kind of culture you need. This applies as much to the rules that guide everyday behavior in and around the school as well as the rules which teachers use to guide classroom discussions.

Are there any areas of controversy which the prevailing culture in your school prevents the teachers from discussing with their students? If so, what are these and why?



Controversial issues - Topic 4: Controversial issues and school culture

Controversial issues and school culture – Rate your school

To what extent does the prevailing ethos and culture in your school encourage people to talk about difficult issues? One way to find out how open your school is to these kinds of discussions is to carry out a simple attitude survey. In order to get a rounded picture, it will be important to involve the parents, as well as the students and teachers.

Here are some basic questions you could ask any school stakeholder:

SCHOOL CULTURE ATTITUDE SURVEY

At this school:

1. How are you treated by others?
2. How safe do you feel?
3. When there is a problem do you know to whom to turn to?
4. How well do you feel you are listened to?
5. What kinds of opportunities do you have to express your opinions?
6. How often do you have the chance to discuss your opinions with others from the school?
7. What say do you have in school rules and decision-making?
8. How well do you think students from different backgrounds mix?
9. How welcoming is the school culture for people with disabilities, of different genders or sexual orientation, or from different ethnic or religious groups?



Controversial issues - Topic 4: Controversial issues and school culture

Controversial issues and school culture – Encouraging the student voice in class

It is difficult for students to join in discussions of controversial issues if they are not already used to speaking publicly in school. Giving students frequent opportunities to talk in class gets them used to expressing themselves in front of others. It helps them gain confidence at speaking in public and become more adept at the process.

The important thing is that students feel listened to when they speak, and that their opinions are respected.

One way to help your staff include ample opportunities for the student's voice in their classrooms, is to create a **checklist** for lesson planning. After using the checklist for a while, the teachers will find that they are following it automatically. You can also use such a checklist for lesson monitoring and evaluation.

Here is an example:

STUDENT VOICE CHECKLIST

In this lesson, are there opportunities built in for students to:

Ask a question?
Express an opinion?
Interact with others?
Make a practical suggestion?
Take a vote?

