

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.

