

# 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

*The opinions expressed in this work are the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy of the Council of Europe.*

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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

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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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# Introduction

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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”.<sup>1</sup> 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.

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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”.<sup>2</sup> 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.

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2. [www.coe.int/t/dg4/education/Source/competences/CDC\\_en.pdf](http://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.<sup>3</sup> It draws for its inspiration and aims on the Council of Europe Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education<sup>4</sup> and the Declaration on promoting citizenship and the common values of freedom, tolerance and non-discrimination through education (Paris Declaration).<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup>

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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](http://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](http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/education/Source/competences/CDC_en.pdf).

## Chapter 1

# School leadership

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**T**he 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?