

Tackling today's challenges together: Teaching controversial issues

77 FACTS

Controversial issues vary from country to country and change over time. They include: migration and refugees, sex education, crucifixes in schools, Islamic headscarves, child abuse and austerity measures.

WHAT ARE CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES?

Controversial issues arouse strong feelings and divide opinion in communities and society. They often involve major conflicts of value and interest coupled with disputed claims about underlying facts.

Some of these issues are long-standing – such as the sectarian divisions between communities in a number of European countries – while others are more recent, such as the radicalisation that leads to terrorism.

Young people are bombarded with partial and misleading information on controversial issues via social media. They need help to be able to make their own judgments based on reason and evidence.

Young people do not often have a chance to discuss controversial issues in school, because they are seen as too challenging to teach. If children have no opportunities to talk constructively with people with different views and backgrounds, prejudice will go unchallenged, which could lead to intolerance, violence and radicalisation.

HOW CAN SCHOOLS HELP?

Learning how to communicate with people whose ideas and values are different from one's own is central to the democratic process and essential for inclusive and peaceful societies.

It is crucial to help teachers recognise the value of engaging young people in discussions on controversial issues and to develop teachers' confidence and ability to make this part of their everyday practice, in particular by:

- creating "safe spaces" in the classroom where students can explore issues that concern them freely and without fear;
- using teaching strategies which promote open and respectful dialogue;
- using techniques that help to protect the sensitivities of students from different backgrounds and cultures, prevent friction in the classroom and allow contentious material to be presented without bias.

The potential benefits of teaching controversial issues are significant and wide-ranging. Education for democratic citizenship and human rights (EDC/HRE) can only be effective if it covers controversial issues.





COUNCIL OF EUROPE TEACHING MATERIALS

Professional Development Pack on Teaching Controversial Issues through Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights

Manuals

Democracy and human rights start with us: Charter for All – brochure for children on human rights and citizenship

Democracy and human rights start with us – Guidelines for Educators

Other key resources

- The e-book Shared histories for a Europe without dividing lines (2014) contains examples of teaching material on historic events and movements within Europe, based on a multiperspective approach.
- Teaching about the Holocaust in the 21st century explores the problems related to teaching difficult issues and to making judgments about the effectiveness of different approaches when teaching topics such as the Holocaust.
- Bookmarks A manual for combating hate speech online through human rights education is useful for educators both inside and outside the formal education system.
- Mirrors Manual on combating antigypsyism through human rights education addresses the problem of racism towards the Roma, and aims to provide essential information and methodological tools to address antigypsyism with young people of all ages and in any socio-cultural setting.
- Guidelines for Educators on Countering Intolerance and Discrimination against Muslims: Addressing Islamophobia through Education (published by UNESCO, OSCE/ODIHR and the Council of Europe) aims to assist educators in identifying signs of intolerance and discrimination against Muslims in schools and provides suggestions on how to prevent and respond to this phenomenon.

TEACHER TRAINING

The Pestalozzi Programme trains 1 000 teachers a year across Europe, with many activities designed to create a positive, nonviolent atmosphere, which allows for an open and constructive dialogue at school.

Summer academies on "Human Rights and Democracy at School" for teachers and members of parents' associations provide face-to-face training with online follow-up on a broad range of topics, including controversial issues. Schools in 22 countries are currently involved. The academies are organised in co-operation with the Polish and Montenegrin authorities and the European Wergeland Centre.

COUNCIL OF EUROPE STANDARDS

The Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education provides a common framework for promoting mutual understanding, social cohesion and intercultural dialogue. All 47 Council of Europe member states have adopted the Charter.

Committee of Ministers Recommendation CM/Rec(2012)13 on ensuring quality education requires member states to provide "a secure and non-violent learning environment in which the rights of all are respected".

USEFUL COUNCIL OF EUROPE WEBSITES

Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education

www.coe.int/edc www.edchre-pilot-projects-eu.coe.int

History teaching http://shared-histories.coe.int

Pestalozzi Training Programme for Education Professionals **www.coe.int/pestalozzi**

No Hate Speech Movement www.nohatespeechmovement.org

Teaching about the Holocaust www.coe.int/holocaust



