



Tackling today's challenges together: Teaching controversial issues

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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.



