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DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5617/adno.8380>

Controversial societal issues in education: Explorations of moral, critical and didactical implications

Many societal issues come across as controversial and are under debate in today's democratic societies. Examples of such issues are migration policies, climate change and terrorism; however, the agenda can rapidly change (Misco, 2012). This kind of issue can evoke strong reactions, as individuals have competing interests and favour different solutions. The increased polarisation in the political and ideological landscape seemingly reinforces the controversies in many of these questions. This has, in turn, consequences of didactical nature for the practices of education as well as educational theory and research. Education – maybe social studies subjects in particular – has an important function to support students in the formation of their own positions in relation to topical, complex and controversial societal issues that lack simple answers or solutions. Education also has a function in sustaining and developing democracy, a function in which controversial issues can be ascribed a specific role (Council of Europe, 2015).

The ambition with this special issue of *Acta Didactica Norden* has been to bring together research about the didactical potentials and challenges in relation to controversial societal issues. An open call for papers was published on the website of *Acta Didactica* in the end of 2018, and was spread in relevant networks. From this, we received 18 abstracts for potential manuscripts. After several steps in the process of evaluating relevance and quality in accordance with the criteria of *Acta Didactica*, we can hereby present the resulting special issue containing eight articles. We wish to thank the reviewers of the manuscripts for this special issue, at least two anonymous reviewers for each article, for their constructive and valuable critique.

Our aim as editors has not been to settle scholarly discussion, but to promote and encourage it. We wish to see this issue as a part of the ongoing expansion of research about controversial issues in education. This area of research saw its initial expansion in the 1980s, while it has received a growing interest in the latest decade. Today, it is perceived as a dynamic international field of research (Zimmerman & Robertson, 2017), which is expanding also in the Scandinavian research context (Ljunggren, Unemar Öst, & Englund, 2015; Larsson, 2019; Kittelmann Flensner, 2019).

There is no generally accepted definition of *controversial issues* in the research literature. Most definitions, however, contain what we describe as emotional, cognitive and evaluative elements. Hence, controversial issues are matters about which individuals or groups tend to get upset and disagree, about which individuals or groups tend to hold conflicting explanations, and about which individuals or groups create solutions based on different values (e.g., Cooling, 2012; Hand, 2008; Ljunggren et al., 2015; Stradling, 1984). Researchers seem to disagree on whether or not an issue needs to satisfy all of these requirements in order to be determined as controversial, and if they can be identified theoretically (Hand, 2008) or practically through close examination of classroom activities (Stradling, 1984). Which aspects of controversial issues researchers emphasise seem to rely on a variety of factors, but we argue that it often depends on how they perceive the principle aim of a specific school subject or education in general.

If the principle aim of education, for example, builds upon the idea that students learn and develop best without being exposed to unsettling or threatening content, it is important that the teacher creates a safe learning environment. Social, cultural and historical studies often involve emotionally challenging issues of exclusion, oppression and violence. In such cases, teachers may consider avoiding certain discussions (Stradling, 1984), supplying trigger warnings to prepare students for potentially offensive content (Hickey, 2016), and providing emotional support for marginalised individuals or groups (Cush, 2007). This is characteristic of an emotional perspective of controversial issues which, for instance, does not take account of competing theoretical perspectives.

If, on the other hand, the principle aim of education is to contribute to the students' ability to think and act rationally, it is important that they are provided with opportunities to review arguments from different points of view and learn how to make well-grounded assessments. It is not necessary that there are any disagreements in the classroom or values at stake in order to regard issues as controversial. Which issues are labelled as controversial, rather, depends on whether there are competing theories which can explain a phenomenon in society, culture or history without any of them being contrary to reason. This is characteristic of a cognitive perspective which, at the same time, excludes many of the questions, such as racism and discrimination, which are frequently used in the literature to exemplify controversial issues in education, since there are no rational ways of justifying these practices (Hand, 2008, pp. 217, 218, 224).

If the principle aim of education is to contribute to the students' ability to feel empathy (Stradling, 1984, p. 123), or look beyond people's differences and work for a fair community (Cooling, 2012, p. 177), it may be important that they are exposed to specific personal stories that can facilitate their understanding of others. Conflicting theories or disputes between researchers do not pose serious problems for teachers who easily can account for various perspectives in their teaching. Rather, issues that tend to divide the population in society, where

individuals or groups stand against each other while appealing to different ideals, norms or values are considered to be challenging in the classroom (e.g., Stradling, 1984, p. 121). This is characteristic of an evaluative perspective on controversial issues which, at the same time, tends to exclude many theoretical or scientific debates, since they are difficult to relate to on a personal level.

This issue does not offer a shared understanding of what ‘controversial issues’ in education means, or how it should be handled by teachers or researchers. Rather, we seek to demonstrate how it can be understood and employed in different school settings and by different researchers. The contributors of this special issue emphasise various aspects of controversial issues and approach them from theoretical or practical perspectives, based on different perceptions of the principle aim of specific school subjects or education in general. A majority of the articles relate to specific school subjects (history, religious education and social studies), but there are also contributions of a more general character. The discussions of the articles relate to different national contexts. The authors are based in different countries (Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Finland and Germany) and have their scientific training in different disciplines (for example religious studies, history, education, social studies, political science and philosophy). By this breadth, this special issue offers a substantial contribution to the international research within the field, both through the empirical findings of the studies presented, but also in terms of development of the notion ‘controversial issues’ and of several methodological approaches of how to address them in education.

The articles

Two of the contributions in this special issue concern the non-confessional Swedish school subject Religious Education (RE). In the first of them, Malin Löfstedt points out that religion and RE, once regarded as one of the most important school subjects, has become target of increasing criticism and as such, an example of a controversial issue. The author identifies some critical perspectives on religion and how teachers tend to respond to them in a pedagogical environment which is often characterised by secular norms. In the concluding discussion, Löfstedt develops how the concept of religious literacy can provide a constructive perspective for teachers in order to engage the students in activities that help develop a deeper understanding of themselves and others in a multicultural society.

However, it is not only critical perspectives on religion in a society characterised by secular values, which provide challenges for teachers in religious education. Karin Kittelmann Flensner analyses teachers’ different approaches to topics associated with conflicts in the Middle East, as for instance, migration, radicalisation, and terrorism. She uses criteria that focus primarily on students’ and teachers’ emotional responses and behavioural conflicts to determine which

issues are considered as controversial. Which approach teachers choose to avoid or embrace controversies, seems to rely on a variety of factors, but often it depends on how they perceive their role in the classroom or perhaps even the principle aim of education.

These examples indicate that teaching controversial issues rests on an ability to treat facts, values, and facilitate critical thinking as a part of the didactical practice. The educational philosopher Lars Samuelsson provides insight into how it is possible to improve the education in this regard. He distinguishes between issues that are internally and externally controversial. Sustainable development, for instance, is an issue characterised by internal disagreements, among individuals and groups, about different definitions or interpretations of the concept. The author concludes that these kinds of issues are often more difficult to resolve than external issues, e.g., regarding whether or not sustainable development is desirable. Samuelsson proposes a specific methods-based model for ethics education as particularly appropriate for dealing with the moral dimension of education for sustainable development and for controversial issues generally.

Anders Stig Christensen and Tilman Grammes analyse the Beutelsbach consensus, which is a German contribution to the debate of how to treat controversial issues in the classroom. It consists of three general principles, which can be summarised as follows: (a) it is not permissible to overwhelm the students or prevent them from forming their own opinions, (b) controversial issues must be taught as controversial, and (c) it is important to recognise the students' personal interests. Hence, the authors share a methodological interest in how to treat controversial issues in the classroom. They discuss the Beutelsbach consensus in relation to research on controversial issues in education before applying the principles on Danish and German cases. In the concluding discussion, they argue that the Beutelsbach consensus provides a theoretical framework which can shed light on important questions when dealing with controversial issues in education.

Vidar Fagerheim Kalsås and Jenni Helakorpi investigate how the curriculum content regarding the Romani people has been subject of an ongoing negotiation between different stakeholders in a Norwegian context. Their analysis indicates that a debate regarding the content of a curriculum also can have broader effects perhaps even on a societal level. The authors suggest that it is important to investigate why some of the content that is brought into the curriculum is framed as controversial issues in education. They also identify a need to consider how a wider range of factors, in an ever-changing social and political context, contribute to educational policy.

As starting point for his article, Johan Sandahl suggests a connection between increasing polarisation in political debate and an increasing difficulty to taking in the perspectives of others. He discusses how teaching in civics can offer democratic training if the teacher organises deliberative conversations about political and controversial issues. Based on two classroom interventions, Sandahl explores "social perspective-taking" as a tool that can be actively trained and that might

lead to students developing a deeper understanding of different cultural and ideological perspectives on political issues.

In their article, Robert Thorp and Monika Vinterek, based on 36 written narratives, show how many Swedish pre-service history teachers tended to narrate their nation's past as devoid of conflicts, and how they positioned themselves in relation to this history. Seen in contrast to the controversial aspects of history teaching that have been noticed in other nations, the authors see a risk that Swedish school history teaching is promoting a "controversially uncontroversial" national history.

Additionally, Rikke Alberg Peters and Hildegunn Juulsgaard Johannesen mainly relate to the subject of history, but more directly concerning didactical practice. In their article, they regard conspiracy theories as a controversial topic in history teaching. Together with two teachers, they designed an action research study to explore and evaluate teaching strategies dealing with conspiracy theories. Their study shows that the topic was highly motivational for the students (age 13–15), and that it had the potential of opening up complex aspects of the uses of history. The open-ended dialogic and enquiry-based approach that both teachers pursued during the study, made it possible for the students to engage in critical thinking and historical reflection.

This special issue demonstrates that controversial societal issues in education is a complex phenomenon, and that it can be approached by research in different ways. We hope that the included articles will contribute to the ongoing development of the research field of controversial issues in education, and that it can also serve as a basis for reflections over educational practice.

About the editors

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