

Teachers' view on controversial issues in grade 7-9 school subject civics

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This paper explores teachers experiences of controversial issues in civics teaching: what topics teachers consider controversial when teaching civics, how they handle controversial issues in civics, and, how the teachers view the pupils' education in civics in relation to controversial issues. The study is part of an ongoing research project that focuses on didactical knowledge about ways to teach and learn controversial societal issues in social studies subjects (VR 2017-03642). There are no one definition of controversial issues in education. The controversial dimension can be seen as made up of emotional, cognitive and evaluative elements, expressed as emotional disagreement, conflicting explanations, and as propositions of different solutions based on differing values (cf Larsson & Lindström, 2020, Hand 2008, Ljunggren et al 2015). Societal problems and contemporary problems are, and has a history of being, a part of the content of school subject civics (Larsson 2019), and societal questions has a central function as a civic subject didactical tool (Morén 2017).

The empirical data consists of a *web-survey* (open-ended and closed questions) with total 80 grade 7-9 social studies (SO) teachers. 70 teachers described what controversial topics that occurs in civics. The answers from the teachers that identified primarily with civics (21) was focused in the analysis of teacher strategies. In addition, we have *two sets of interview data* from semi-structured individual interviews. Two teachers were interviewed in connection to case observations of teaching controversial issues in civics and five teachers were interviewed individually about their experiences of teaching controversial issues in civics.

71% of teachers said that controversial societal issues are an integrated part of their civics teaching (in line with societal issues as integral part of civics e.g. Morén 2017), which can be compared with 52% for religion, 38% for history and only 19% for geography. The topics deemed controversial in civics was e.g. migration and refugee matters, immigration, feminism, HBTQ... but also democracy and freedom of speech (see also Larsson & Larsson 2021). The teacher strategies in relation to controversial issues identified by Stradling (1984) - neutral, balance different views, play the devil's advocate, ally with marginalized pupils, or support the official line - was used in the construction of the web-survey. The most common strategy among the teachers was to balance different views. This strategy was also prominent in the interview data. However, the interviews gave a more nuanced and complex picture of the teachers situated considerations of the role of controversial issues in relation to the subject, their pupils learning, and also well-being. Tentative results are that the teachers carefully consider to what extent they are to torch and intensify discussion, how much they are to reveal their own position, when to encourage pupils to formulate their opinions and when they are to make demarcations of what is not allowed to be aired in the classroom. The results are finally discussed in relation to four different approaches identified by Persson (2022) - deflecting, enlightening, challenging, and correcting.

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