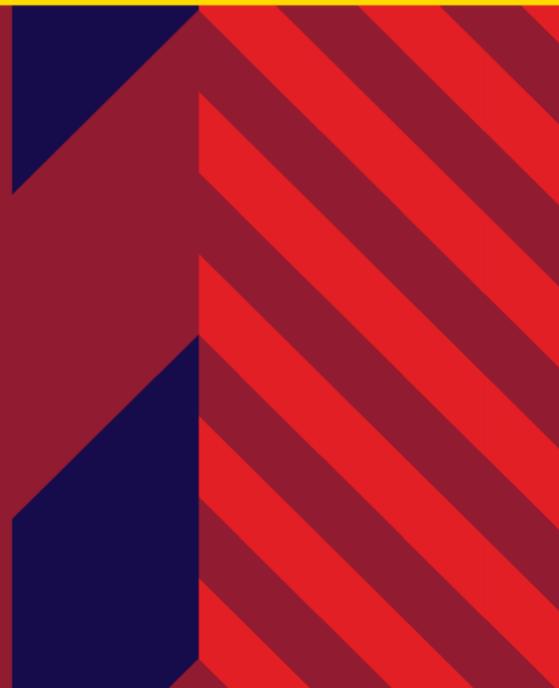


Teaching contested narratives and controversial issues

Contextualised approaches from Cyprus, Denmark, Lebanon, Northern Ireland and Norway

Halldis Breidlid & Lakshmi Sigurdsson (main editors)
with editorial group: Anna Maria Daou, Eleni Christodoulou,
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Preface

This book is the result of the 3-year international ERASMUS+ project, ConCitizen (*Teaching controversial issues and contested narratives in Citizenship Education* <https://www.kp.dk/en/concitizen>).

The project team included teacher educators and NGO officials from Cyprus, Denmark, Lebanon, Northern Ireland, and Norway. We would like to thank all the student teachers, NGO activists, teachers, researchers, and fellow teacher educators that kindly welcomed us to schools in Belfast, inspired us through lectures, guided us on field trips through Nicosia and to Utøya, and participated at the symposium in Nicosia and the conference in Oslo. We extend our thanks also to Per Anders Aas and Anders Granås Kjøstvedt from the reference group and to reviewer Anja Beate Sletteland for qualified response and suggestions that have improved both structure and content of the book. Finally, we would like to thank Anders Fretheim Breidlid and Norman Richardson for thorough proofreading.

Oslo, February 13th, 2026

Halldis Breidlid and Lakshmi Sigurdsson

Abstract

The main question of this book is how we can teach controversial issues and contested narratives in post-conflict and diverse societies. Our aim is to provide teachers and students with ideas and tools for contextual reflection and didactic planning. Confronted with the current increasing political polarisation and threats to democracy, such as disinformation, fake news and online propaganda, teachers are challenged to deal with a great range of contested narratives and controversial issues in the classroom. Such issues can appear in several school subjects, but this book gives priority to examples from history education, religious education, and citizenship education. The primary target group is teachers and student teachers across Europe and beyond, who are looking for ways to combine theoretical perspectives with pedagogical approaches in the teaching of controversial issues and contested narratives.

A specific point of attention in the book is to show how controversial issues and contested narratives are interrelated, since multiple, contested, and sometimes competing, narratives often are involved in controversial issues. In schools, teachers must handle controversial issues and competing narratives daily, related to the past or to current situations – or to both. As the book is based on a 3-year Erasmus+ project, it provides examples from five different national contexts: Cyprus, Denmark, Lebanon, Northern Ireland, and Norway. Based on the experiences from this international cooperation, we highlight how the specific national, geographic, cultural, political, and religious contexts have an impact on which issues are perceived as controversial, and why specific narratives are powerful or contested in classrooms and society.

Sammendrag

Hovedspørsmålet i denne boka er hvordan vi kan undervise om kontroversielle temaer og omstridte narrativer i post-konflikt og flerkulturelle samfunn. Målet er å gi lærere og lærerstudenter ideer og verktøy til kontekstuell refleksjon og didaktisk planlegging. Konfrontert med dagens økte politiske polarisering og trusler mot demokratiet, som desinformasjon, falske nyheter og nettpropaganda, blir lærere utfordret til å håndtere et bredt spekter av omstridte narrativer og kontroversielle temaer i klasserommet. Slike temaer kan dukke opp i flere skolefag, men denne boka prioriterer eksempler fra historieundervisning, religionsundervisning og undervisning om medborgerskap. Den primære målgruppen er lærere og studenter i lærerutdanning i og udover Europa, som ønsker å kombinere teoretiske perspektiver med pedagogiske tilnærminger i undervisningen om kontroversielle temaer og omstridte narrativer.

Et særlig fokus i boka er å vise hvordan kontroversielle temaer og omstridte fortellinger henger sammen, siden mangfoldige, omstridte og konkurrerende fortellinger ofte er involvert i – eller ligger til grunn for – det som i samtiden ses på som kontroversielt. På skolen må lærere håndtere slike temaer og narrativer daglig, enten de gjelder fortiden, samtidige forhold – eller begge deler. Siden boka er basert på et treårig Erasmus+ prosjekt, gir den eksempler fra fem ulike nasjonale kontekster: Kypros, Danmark, Libanon, Nord-Irland og Norge. Basert på erfaringene fra dette internasjonale samarbeidet framhever vi hvordan de spesifikke nasjonale, geografiske, kulturelle, politiske og religiøse kontekstene påvirker hvilke saker som oppfattes som kontroversielle, og hvorfor spesifikke fortellinger er særlig virkningsfulle eller særlig omstridte i klasserom og samfunn.

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Introduction

When Christopher Columbus arrived in the Bahamas in 1492, he landed on an island which he named San Salvador. Although the island was already inhabited by the Taíno people, Columbus declared the territory under the authority of King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain. This act marked the beginning of Spanish colonization in the Americas, as Columbus took control without negotiation or consent from the native population, viewing the land and its people as subjects of the Spanish monarchy.

During the next 100 years, most of the Central and Southern part of America became Portuguese or Spanish colonies.

In 1992, the 500th anniversary was launched to celebrate the assumption that Columbus – and the European explorers – had discovered, conquered, and civilised America. However, for many indigenous groups in America the arrival of the Europeans had led to diseases, deaths, and destruction of culture. For them this was not an event to celebrate, but to regret. Accordingly, they viewed the quincentenary contentiously. Based on 500 years of colonialism and suppression they had constructed their own narratives. Inspired by the US “Indigenous Peoples’ Day” honouring Native Americans and their presence in the Americas before 1492, many Latin Americans have made the Columbus Day, October 12, the date when he first arrived in the Caribbean, into an American Indigenous Peoples’ Day. This illustrates how past and present are linked together through various narratives.

What is the aim of the book?

The arrival of Europeans in Central and South America is a historical fact. We can however talk about this event in different ways, creating different, sometimes competing, stories – or narratives. The narrative we stick to depend on our point of view and the perspective we choose; in this case possible options might be European and colonial, or Marxist, or indigenous American. An event, and a narrative about this event, is obviously not the same. Today, the arrival of Columbus in the Americas is often referred to with a paradigmatic narrative about European conquest of non-European territories, or, more generally, of the Western colonization and domination project. Consequently, the Columbus’ 500th anniversary has become a focal point for competing and contested narratives on European exploration and indigenous rights abuses, based on the violent and oppressive treatment from European colonialists such as Columbus and others towards indigenous peoples across the Americas.

As such, this is one of the crucial events in European history, as well as in World history, and therefore something commonly dealt with in school. But with more critical approaches to colonialism, the celebration of Columbus has become a controversial issue. The question is: what is the best way of teaching about this? How can we teach about historical events in a way that the new generations can “live in it”, meaning that they become equipped with critical literacy and skills to handle today’s challenges? Some teachers prefer a strategy where they choose one narrative above another, aiming to avoid challenging discussions in the classroom. Others try to make the different narratives that exist regarding one specific event visible to the students, as they seek to create awareness about the complexity and multi-perspectivity involved in such, often competing, narratives.

This book will explore how we can teach controversial issues and contested narratives in post-conflict and diverse societies. The primary aim is to provide teachers and students with ideas and tools for contextual reflection. Although contested narratives (in the following: CN) and controversial issues (in the following: CI) manifest in different school subjects, we give priority to three subjects, where such issues are more likely to emerge: history education, religious education, and citizenship education, since these subjects often reflect specific values and the political history of the respective countries (Kello 2015; Flensner 2020). The primary target group is teachers and teacher students across Europe and beyond, who are looking for ways to combine theoretical perspectives with pedagogical approaches in the teaching of CI and CN in history education, religious education, and citizenship education.

Multiple, contested, and competing narratives are involved in many controversial issues. Some contestation is rather invisible, but the various versions of the narratives can still be challenging. In school, teachers must handle controversial issues and competing narratives daily, either related to the past or to current situations – or to both. Especially in societies that are split along ethnic, religious or other cultural lines, teachers need to navigate between different and sometimes conflicting collective memories (Kello 2015). Today, in times of conspiracy theories, disinformation, fake news and “alternative facts”, increased polarization, and global conflicts, teachers are confronted with a great range of contested narratives and controversial issues in the classroom (Cassar, Oosterheert & Meijer 2023; Kello 2015; Bekerman & Zembylas 2012). To a certain extent, teachers in different countries share these challenges across different subjects and types of schools. However, a key point of attention in this book is how the specific national, geographic, cultural, political, and religious contexts influence on which issues are experienced as controversial, and how specific narratives are powerful or contested in classrooms and society.

A basic distinction can be drawn between post-conflict societies with ongoing or a recent history of violent conflicts, and societies without such recent violent conflicts, though with challenging new demographic patterns shaped by immigration and growing cultural complexity. However, for democratic societies something is common, since in these societies, educators work within a framework of values that express the fundamental ideal of human dignity, freedom, and self-determination as we find it in The Universal Declaration of Human Rights and in the Convention of the Rights of the Child. This orientation includes freedom of thought, conscience and religion as well as freedom of opinion and expression, which in the classroom implies respect and openness towards cultural and religious diversity. A central aim is also to encourage everyone to make use of their own understanding, and although we as educators do want to influence our students, we "do not want to fully determine their thoughts, feelings, and actions" (Biesta 2021). The task of education is therefore not to teach students what to think, but rather how to think.

Definitions of CI and CN and their interrelatedness

In recent years, controversial issues have received growing attention in educational research and literature (Lippe 2019; Flensner 2020; Christensen & Grammes 2020; Alvén 2023). In 2020 The Council of Europe (CoE 2020) highlighted the teaching of controversial issues as a priority area for teacher training and recommended an emphasis on active and participatory learning and engagement with 'real-life' issues' (Kerr & Huddleston 2020). However, whereas most other textbooks specifically focus on controversial issues including emotional and sensitive issues (i.e. Eriksen, Goldschmidt-Gjerløv & Jore 2022), this book also highlights contested narratives, since this is a core concept for the understanding of many conflicts in the world today, thus posing an educational challenge.

At the same time, we emphasise that although it is generally possible to distinguish between CN and CI, they are often intertwined in a dynamic way. While some controversial issues may contain multiple layers of contested narratives that fuel the controversy, making it more heated or polarised, an examination of contested narratives can reveal how multiple controversial issues are often involved in the different narratives. Chapter 3 and 6 provide examples from different contexts, illuminating such interconnections.

Controversial issues often reflect concerns that traditionally have caused divisions in society, such as interpretations of history, religion, politics, and collective memories (Richardson & Gallagher 2011; Bekerman & Zembylas 2012). For students and teachers, strong emotions can be attached to flags, anthems, and other national symbols, as these become part of both personal and collective identity. The

emotional response to such material expressions reflects the challenges of dealing with dissonant heritage (Potz & Scheffler 2022) and indicate the need for development of relevant didactic approaches to controversial issues.

In the initial phase of the ConCitizen project, we arrived at the following definitions of controversial issues and contested narratives, which we will use throughout the book.

Controversial issues are:

Issues of public importance that generate conflicting views and evoke strong emotions which result in reactions or avoidance.

Contested narratives are:

Different collective interpretations of events, figures or texts that create conflicting perceptions and feelings about the past, the present and the future.

Controversial issues and contested narratives may be related to a great variety of perspectives: majority versus minority, religious affiliations, ethnicity, gender, age, social class, rural versus urban, ideologies, political affiliations, freedom of expression, economy, religious or non-religious worldviews, different interpretations of historical events, etc. (see examples in chapter 3). Historical traumas transmitted as collective memories down the generations (Erlil & Rigney 2009; Ahonen 2013; Kello 2015) will often manifest as controversial in the classroom, where historical events and narratives can entail both ambivalence and sensitivity for some students. This will also apply for classrooms in European societies shaped by immigration with diverse patterns of narratives and collective memories that are passed on from one generation to the next and continuously reshaped by information disseminated on traditional and social media.

Critical approaches to collective memories can interrupt fixed historical narratives by acknowledging the suffering of others and the need for solidarity across divisions. Including 'dangerous memories' and dissonant heritage in teaching can be the first step in the breaking with 'us and them' dichotomies through the challenge to include the other's memory (Bekerman & Zembylas 2012) and facilitate critical questions to established norms and positions. The inclusion of memories that have been hidden or suppressed is connected to questions about representation in public space. A Danish study from 2010 revealed that out of 640 memorials in Denmark, only 2% celebrated women. In recent years, critical discussions have ignited a new tendency to address persons and objects that have not traditionally been objects of celebration in public space (cf. Rønberg 2015). Thus, the use of aesthetic and site-specific

learning in relation to CN and CI can stimulate students to analyse power and representation in public spaces but also introduce them to new memorials that are more ambiguous, conflicted, and ambivalent (Rønberg 2015; Scheffler & Potts 2022).

Challenges facing teachers and student teachers

Based on our own and current research, we introduce a context-based approach to controversial issues and contested narratives in post-conflict and diverse societies, providing examples, models and strategies that teachers can apply in classrooms when topics are controversial or sensitive to some of or all the pupils and when addressing narratives that oppose each other or are in conflict.

Education systems based on an ideal of democratic formation, promote active participation, coexistence, and a critical stance towards diverse opinions and outlooks. Recently new challenges for democracy have emerged; some highly visible, like extremism – both Right-wing, Left-wing, and religious. Conflicts across the world have led to increased political polarisation and the growth of populism, moving the norms of argumentation and public discourse in ways that pose serious challenges to democracy (Flensner 2020). Yet another challenge is how the digitalisation of society evokes a polarised debate culture on social media characterised by echo chambers, filter bubbles, and conspiracy theories. Conflicts, attacks and wars at the time of writing, such as the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the war between Israel and the paramilitary groups Hamas and Hezbollah, have led to further polarisation in public debate and in schools, challenging teachers to navigate, whether such issues are raised by students or are part of the lesson plan.

Contested narratives and controversial issues are included - or avoided - in schools, depending on the resources and qualifications of the teacher, but also on other factors such as support from school leadership, dialogue with parents and the opportunities inherent in formal curricula and aims. Whereas some curricula specifically mention controversial issues and contested narratives, others may be open for inclusion of such issues, while others again may limit the possibilities through specific definitions of subject content and approach (see chapter 2). The image that teachers have of the social, political, and academic space around schooling will also affect their interpretation of the curriculum and their courage to teach controversial issues and contested narratives. Therefore, we highlight the impact of context both in terms of what is regarded as controversial by teachers, but also in terms of the aims and pedagogical repertoire that they refer to (Kello 2015). As we combine perspectives from existing research on CI and CN with data from the

ConCitizen project, the following section provides a brief introduction to the project and its basic components.

The ConCitizen project

The book is informed by the 3-year international ERASMUS+ project, *ConCitizen (Teaching controversial issues and contested narratives in Citizenship Education* (<https://www.kp.dk/en/concitizen/>), which entailed a cooperation between teacher educators and NGO officials from Cyprus, Denmark, Lebanon, Northern Ireland and Norway. The participants from the five different contexts were united by a mutual interest in the teaching of controversial issues and contested narratives in post-conflict and diverse societies. The cooperation between partners from different national contexts is reflected in the cross-national examples included in the book. As we also included students, practicing teachers and NGO activists in different parts of the project, the importance of context became a key point of attention.

This transnational cooperation turned out to be very fruitful, as we all learned a lot both from formal and informal exchanges. It has been a great pleasure and learning process to meet and experience different approaches to education, controversies and narratives, and to discuss current challenges. We experienced in practice how excursions to controversial sites and monuments in different contexts can enhance learning and reflection. At meetings in Copenhagen, Belfast, Nicosia, and Oslo we walked and talked and met with local researchers, teachers, and activists. We have felt the impact of conflicts and experienced site-specific learning about dissonant heritage, dangerous memories, and different approaches to history, religion, and citizenship education. The more informal meetings for a meal and an occasional glass were also an important aspect of our project, connected to the joy of sharing local traditions and giving space for both inspiring and challenging conversations.

Outline of the book

Chapter 1 presents definitions of, and examples related to texts, symbols and events (historical and current) regarding the two core concepts: contested narratives (CN) and controversial issues (CI) with references to current and recent research. Further, the chapter entails a brief introduction to CI and CN in the three subject areas: history education, religious education, and citizenship education. The chapter also includes a brief presentation of CI and CN especially relevant in the context of the five participating countries of the ConCitizen project.

In chapter 2, we introduce key points and discussions that have been raised in recent educational research on controversial issues and contested narratives, and

we discuss the importance of including controversial issues and contested narratives in educational curricula and engaging young people with these issues in classrooms. Drawing on research literature and building upon insights from the project's surveys and from focus group discussions with teachers as well as from the virtual exchanges with student teachers and youth from Cyprus, Denmark, Lebanon, Northern Ireland and Norway, the chapter highlights (1) why we should focus on teaching CI and CN, (2) challenges of teaching controversial issues and contested narratives, and (3) how to better prepare teachers to teach CI and CN.

Chapter 3 provides examples of contested narratives and controversial issues from the five national contexts (Cyprus, Denmark, Lebanon, Northern Ireland and Norway) in history education, religious education, and citizenship education. These are visualised in a word-cloud and supported by images. The most important examples for discussion at primary or secondary level - according to teachers, NGO experts or educational experts - are highlighted and explained. A key point of attention is the sensitive nature of these issues and their ability to invoke intense emotions when discussed. As each country has its own historical, political, religious and cultural sensitivities, the consideration of context is emphasised. Chapter 3 also provides examples of topics that can be transnational in nature, to illustrate how some controversial issues (which are not so tied with the historical narrative of a specific country) can be found across borders.

Chapter 4 deals with the possibilities and assumptions for creating safe spaces for teaching and handling controversial issues and contested narratives. Based on theory and informed by project results, questions related to teacher 'stance' and especially ideals of neutrality are elaborated and discussed. The chapter also deals with questions related to teachers' response to contested narratives and controversial issues when these are unanticipated and not planned. The distinction between safe spaces and brave spaces is discussed and elaborated further through strategies, such as communities of disagreement and pedagogies of discomfort.

Chapter 5 deals with pedagogical approaches in the teaching of controversial issues and contested narratives, building on theory and project results. The aim is to provide inspiration for planning, teaching and handling of controversial issues and contested narratives in the classroom. After an introduction to subject didactics for history education, religious education and citizenship education, this chapter presents a didactic model for planning and reflection.

In chapter 6 different examples of CN and CI in the respective subjects and from the five contexts are elaborated through the model. This final chapter also includes examples of cross-curricular themes with reference to site-specific teaching and learning, inspired by the virtual exchange sessions in the ConCitizen project.

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Chapter 1: Controversial issues and contested narratives in context

In this chapter we elaborate on the definitions that were presented in the introduction. The first part of this chapter introduces and elaborates on the definition and meaning of controversial issues and the impact of context. The second part introduces and discusses the definition of contested narratives and shows, how these are embedded in texts, events, figures, and symbols. In international cooperation as well as in national teacher education a preliminary concept investigation may be relevant. To provide inspiration for such a dialogical process, a template for concept mapping is included in appendix 1.

What do we mean by “controversial issues”?

The Latin root, *controversia*, signifies a dispute, fight, or conflict. In current use it refers to a dispute or an argument in which people hold strong opposing views and often engage in heated discussions. As stated in the introduction, we define controversial issues as:

Issues of public importance that generate conflicting views and evoke strong emotions which result in reactions or avoidance.

One of the key terms embedded in this definition is that we are looking at issues of *public importance* as opposed to private discussions. In this view controversial issues are part of public debate and attention. In a school setting, teachers and students will often have previous knowledge about such issues from the news, social media, or from conversations with family and friends. But their knowledge may be limited by the sources they depend on and possibly be biased and based on prejudices. Therefore, when controversial issues enter the classroom, it is necessary that students learn to seek information and to be aware of the possible bias in different sources. This means that critical thinking, source criticism, and the ability to handle complexity and ambiguity are key competences in dealing with controversial issues, as it is with contested narratives.

Controversy is a dynamic growth point in any area of knowledge and thus a central element in intellectual work (Bridges 1987), but some controversies are related to situations of profound disagreement and polarization, where different value systems, interests and perspectives are at stake. When we take a closer look at the *conflicting views* that may fuel controversies, these are often the kind that create divisions and enhance group identities in societies and classrooms. The opinions of students can be influenced by loyalty to family or community but in classroom discussions,

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students are also aware of self-representation and are often looking for acceptance from others in the group. We will later elaborate on how this can be balanced by structured exercises in argumentation with change of perspective or examination of counterarguments (see chapter 4).

Another aspect of group dynamics is the ways that news channels and social media can influence opinions and fuel conflicting positions. Students may find it difficult to distinguish between knowledge and values or discern facts from normative positions (Flensner & Lippe 2019). An example of this was the public debates and manifestations concerning lockdown, facemasks, and vaccination during the Covid-19 epidemic. Emotional and political polarisation was fuelled by use of social media, where narratives upheld by different groups of people in some cases took the form of conspiracy theories.

The reference to *strong emotions* reflects that emotions are an important factor when people take different positions, based on different sets of experiences, interests, values and affiliations. When emotions are heated, debates on controversial issues become polarised leading to hate speech, overpowering feelings and in categorising of 'us and them'. In schools, the emotional power of controversial issues will occasionally lead to avoidance of the topic out of fear of the conflict potential. But the trouble is that controversies do not disappear just by avoiding them. When conflicts and wars become heated topics and cause polarisation in public debate, this will have repercussion in schools, challenging teachers to navigate. Such issues can be demanding for the teacher, when they are raised unexpectedly by students.

Educational value of teaching controversial issues

Conflicts are a basic condition of human life, which we cannot avoid, but we can decide how we perceive and handle conflicts. Two basic points in conflict-mediation are 1) that it is possible to learn constructive approaches to conflicts, as it is not the conflict as such, but the way we handle it that is decisive for how it develops, and 2) that there is always a form of interdependence between the parts in a conflict, but that does not necessarily imply mutual respect (Vindeløv 2013). The founder of the International Peace Research Institute in Oslo, Johan Galtung (1930-2024) described conflicts as a dynamic interaction between three elements: contradiction (the conflict itself), attitude (the parties' perceptions), and behaviour (the parties' actions). In a more detailed analysis, it can be relevant to distinguish between four dimensions of conflict: A structural dimension (power structures, legislation); an instrumental dimension (aims and means); a dimension of interest (resources, territory) and a dimension of values (moral, ethical, political, religious). Most conflicts

and controversies will contain several of these dimensions, but with escalation the centre of gravity will often move more towards values (Vindeløv 2013:70).

Researchers and educators have emphasised the value of teaching controversial issues (Kerr & Huddleston 2015; Lippe 2022) as a central element in the preparation of young people to participate in democratic societies, where they must be able to address conflict and controversy (Richardson 2010). In an educational context, controversies can be perceived as an important aspect of education for diversity and mutual understanding, and the inclusion of controversial issues can help teachers and learners to develop valuable skills and thought processes with broad educational significance. Controversy is central in academic work and can encourage students to develop critical, analytical approaches to historical events and public disagreements (Richardson 2010; Stradling 1984). Although teachers are aware of major societal controversies, it can be difficult to anticipate whether an issue or question will stir strong emotions among students (Flensner & Lippe 2019).

The various definitions of CI are based on different criteria for, what should be regarded as controversial in education. Some definitions focus on political and social aspects of controversy, while others focus more on the behaviour of individuals and groups (Flensner 2020). In the definition above we refer to both, by combining public importance and emotional reactions. In research literature, different criteria for controversial issues are implemented. Robert Hand (2007) introduced the distinction between an epistemic and a political criterion. He relates the *epistemic* to reason and argues that we should teach as controversial “those matters on which contrary views are not contrary to reason and teach as settled those matters on which only one view is rationally defensible” (Hand 2008:228). He connects the *political* criterion to moral questions, which should be regarded as controversial, when “answers to them are not entailed by public values of the liberal democratic state” (Hand 2007:71). A different approach is taken by Hess and McAvoy (2015), as they distinguish between *empirical* issues that can be answered with evidence and *political* issues that are related to policies, and they make a further distinction between *open* and *settled* issues (Hess & McAvoy 2025). While open issues means that there are competing views or room for further debate, settled issues means that an “appropriate policy” is considered non-controversial (Christensen & Grammes 2020).

Another central point of discussion is the role of emotions. With his focus on reason, Hand argues that a strong emphasis on emotions runs the risk of relativism, but others take a critical position to the epistemic criterion claiming that this “reflects an over-reliance on the decisiveness of reason and a failure to attend to the need for fairness” (Cooling 2012:169; Flensner 2020). In an educational context it seems relevant to consider that all reasoning is derived from a certain perspective and that all social life involves power relations (Flensner 2020).

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In the classroom, issues that cause divisions and conflicts in society and for which “different groups offer conflicting explanations and advocate conflicting solutions based on alternative values” (Stradling, 1984:121), should be handled as controversial, just as the teacher needs to be aware of emotional reactions from students. However, at the same time the values of democracy and human rights constitute the basic framework of schools together with standards of critical reasoning. This is a safeguard against relativism, and as we stress in chapter 4, it also implies a classroom that is not only a safe space, but also a brave space where arguments can be tested and narratives investigated.

Why and how does context matter?

What is considered controversial is also dependent on context and composition of the classroom. It may be difficult for teachers to anticipate which questions will evoke strong emotions among students, but it is important that teachers consider how specific controversial issues are related to the context of the local area, the school, and the students. In the following we highlight the impact of context with reference to research and with examples from the ConCitizen project.

Classroom research has shown that contextualisation is crucial in dealing with controversial issues (Flensner 2020; Lippe 2019). Consideration of context includes several levels from the classroom to local community, society, state, and beyond. While some issues may be controversial on a global scale, the dynamics and intensity of specific issues can play out differently in national contexts, depending on cultural, religious, and political traditions. An example of such contextual differences is the question of civil marriage, which is a controversial issue in Lebanon because marriage is administered by separate religious-based personal status laws and courts for the 18 recognised religious sects in the country. While this means that civil marriage is not possible in Lebanon, it is completely uncontroversial in Norway and other Scandinavian countries. Civil marriage - such as ceremonies held at the Court house - is now more common in Norway than marriage in churches or other religious institutions.

In many European countries, questions concerning freedom of religion and the expression of religion in public space have become controversial. And in some cases, religious practices such as male circumcision, which is practiced in Judaism and Islam, are subjects of heated public debates; other cases concern human rights such as respect for private and family life, the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. In chapter 3 we present a case from the Danish context, namely the controversy regarding the Muhammad cartoons. This became a

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transnational controversy, not least in Muslim countries, but it took different forms due to context.

A key principle in human rights is that states must guarantee the rights and freedoms set out in the conventions “without discrimination on any ground such as sex, race, colour, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, association with a national minority, property, birth or other status” (ECHR, art. 14). But the interpretation of discrimination is not always clear cut, as a state may restrict human rights on grounds of national security, to prevent unrest and crime or to protect the rights and freedoms of others. Recent legislation in several countries concerning religious symbols in public spaces reflects such human rights dilemmas and how religious practice may entail controversy. In 2018 Denmark (in line with several other EU countries) passed a ban on full face cover (such as burka and niqab) in public. The wording of the law specifies that, “anyone who wears a garment that hides the face in public will be punished with a fine” (LOV nr 717 af 08/06/2018). Politicians in favour of the ban argued that the ability to see each other’s facial expressions is an operating public value in Denmark. Some NGOs saw the law as discriminatory and specifically targeting Muslim women, while yet others argued that the state should not dictate dress code for citizens in the broad public space (Ank & Jakobsen 2020). In 2017 The European Court of Human Rights ruled that a similar Belgian law was not a violation of the European Convention of Human Rights, as “the restriction sought to guarantee the conditions of ‘living together’ and the protection of the rights and freedoms of others”, and that it was necessary in a democratic society (see ECHR 2023). This is contrary to for instance the official Norwegian position, where religious symbols including garments covering face or head are allowed in the public. However, some restrictions apply to some professions. For instance, teachers are not allowed to wear garments covering their faces, and judges in court are not allowed to wear garments which cover either face or head, like the Muslim hijab and the Sikh turban.

The question regarding use of religious headgears and face covers has initiated controversy and public debate. In a focus group discussion one of the Norwegian teachers mentioned a controversy in the media in Norway about the use of the niqab, which was “a bit like a hot potato.” But asking the students – at two different schools - “What do you think about this?”, it turned out that they were completely indifferent to the topic, and just thought that “if people want to wear the niqab, is it not okay then?” So, this is another aspect of the impact of context: although an issue is clearly controversial in public debate, this may not be the case in specific classrooms. Nevertheless, it could be worthwhile to include the topic in a class of religious studies with investigation of arguments on both sides as well as the

religious aspects (interpretation of scripture and tradition) and identity issues involved.

Contextual challenges and benefits

In societies emerging from conflict, as the conflict is officially settled or solved, some issues may shift and become less controversial. But even if an agreement has been reached and a process of reconciliation has been completed, fear of the controversy may persist. An example of this was expressed by a secondary teacher from Northern Ireland in a ConCitizen focus group discussion. She explained how teaching about 'The Troubles' (the 30 year long sectarian conflict which ended with the Good Friday Agreement in 1998), aroused tension and fear for many teachers (and other adults), whereas the younger generations seemed more prepared to go along and have the hard conversations about that period. But, in some classrooms, the issue would still be controversial for students, because it is wrapped up in identity politics and reflects the narratives that are passed on in the communities. Thus, the change from controversial to less controversial does not always happen immediately, nor does it apply to all groups of a given society.

As emphasised in the Introduction, even if it is possible to draw a distinction between post-conflict societies and societies without recent violent conflict, some conditions are common if the aim is democratic formation. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Convention of the Rights of the Child emphasise human dignity and freedom, which also includes respect and openness towards cultural and religious diversity. With reference to Biesta (2021:9) we concluded that “the task of education is not to teach students *what* to think, but rather *how* to think”. For democratic practice, contestation is as important as participation (Dahl 2008) and dealing with contested narratives and controversial issues can enhance critical thinking and empathy. An important aspect in this is to enhance students’ abilities to distinguish between emotional reactions and arguments based on subject knowledge.

Acknowledging dilemmas and ambiguities can model the classroom as a public space, where discussions of authentic controversial issues connect subject knowledge with the experiences and interests of students (Jøsok & Kjølsvædt 2023).

As noted in the Introduction, controversial issues and contested narratives are often intertwined in a dynamic way: controversial issues may contain multiple layers of contested narratives that fuel the controversy, and contested narratives are often influenced by various controversial issues. Such interconnectedness will be obvious from the examples we give further down, but we will start with a description of how we understand “contested narratives”, since such narratives are at the core of many conflicts in the world today, thus posing an educational challenge.

What do we mean by “contested narratives”?

To understand the concept “contested narratives”, we need first to explore the meaning of “narrative” (from Latin “narrare” = to tell). As stated in the Introduction, we define a *narrative* as *a meaningful interpretation of something that happened in the past, or something that is currently happening, and which contributes to the understanding of a present situation.*

By combining such narratives (interpretations) with contestation (the act of arguing or disagreeing about something), we reach this definition of “contested narratives”:

Different collective interpretations of events, figures or texts that create conflicting perceptions and feelings about the past, the present and the future.

There are several key terms embedded in this definition. First, such contested perceptions and narratives are *collective*, meaning that distinctive groups of people share various conflicting interpretations of the narrative, or have different narratives about the same event. Those who share collective interpretations of a historical event also share a *collective memory* (see Coser 1992). Second, the definition underlines that the conflicting narratives can be related to *events*, to *figures* and to *texts* dealing with historical or imagined events. Many religious texts are for instance dealing with imagined events that have an uncertain historical basis.

Narrative theory

In line with the definition above, we claim that a narrative is more than an objective statement of an event. Further, a narrative is closely linked to the term “discourse”, which refers to a particular way of talking about and understanding the world - or a section of the world. Discourses are never neutral. Therefore, they can create change, but they can also maintain prevailing power relations. The narratives tie it all together.

“Narrative analysis” is used to uncover meaning and discourses in all kinds of narratives, both oral narratives, historical accounts, literary narratives, religious narratives and media narratives. Of special interest in our context is how we can critically explore the various voices and narration positions. Crucial questions are: Which voices are heard in the story, and through whose eyes do we see and understand what is happening? The specific interpretation and discourse embedded in a narrative, often requires deconstruction and encourages alternative or competing interpretations and narratives, so-called counternarratives.

How are contested narratives related to texts?

If we focus on religious *texts*, an illustrating example is narratives from the three religions originating in the Middle East (Judaism, Christianity, Islam), narratives which sometimes are parallel, sometimes conflicting (Bredlid & Nicolaisen 2024). Stories about the patriarchs in the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) have parallel or rival stories in the Qur'an, where these characters are seen as prophets. Another example is the rival stories about Jesus in the New Testament in the Bible and Isa (Jesus) in the Qur'an. While the Biblical Jesus is perceived as the Son of God, and ended his life on a cross, though rising from the tomb after three days (Matthew 27-28), the Qur'an presents Isa (Jesus) as one of the prophets, who never died on a cross, but was taken directly to heaven (Surah 4, 157-158).

How are contested narratives related to figures and symbols?

Contested narratives can also be linked to *figures* and *symbols*, like for instance the Indian Swastika. In its original, Indian context this is a symbol of peace, important in all the main religious traditions which grew from the Indian soil: Jainism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism. Consequently, the Swastika symbol has been linked to peaceful stories. However, during the Nazi period in Europe the symbol gained a completely different meaning by becoming the main symbol of the Nazis (see Holocaust Encyclopedia). Another symbol from global history is the British Crown, which is a highly contested symbol, linked to national identity and togetherness on the one hand and on the other hand to stories about conquest, colonialism, suppression, and slavery. Therefore, "The Crown" can be seen as an ambiguous and contested symbol. In general, most symbols (as national flags and anthems) are ambiguous, creating both positive as well as negative emotions.

In recent years, statues of historical figures have been at the centre of much controversy in Europe and elsewhere. One of these statues is the one portraying Winston Churchill on Parliament Square in London. Churchill was the Prime Minister of Great Britain during the Second World War and acknowledged as one of the most prominent and important politicians of the 20th century because of his leadership against Nazi Germany. However, he also exemplifies how prominent figures of the past are often ambiguous - especially when judged by today's values. By current standards, Churchill can be conceived as controversial, not at least because of his role in British imperialism and his racist attitudes towards colonised peoples. During demonstrations in Parliament Square, the statue has been defaced several times. In June 2020, during the George Floyd protests (Black Lives Matter), the protesters sprayed graffiti on his statue with the words "was a racist". This, as well as several statues around the country became part of a debate about whether they should remain on public display or not.

The various narratives involved in these examples illustrate how cultural heritage and public monuments can become dissonant depending on its reception and at different points in time (Potz & Scheffler 2022).

How are contested narratives related to historical events?

There are plenty of examples of contested narratives related to *historical events*: what happened, how did it happen and why did it happen? The different answers to these questions reveal that there are multiple interpretations and narratives referring to the same event. The perception of history is not objective, but is interpreted and narrated in different, sometimes conflicting or opposing ways, depending on context and point of view. In relation to wars and conflicts, this is easy to acknowledge and can be illustrated by the opposing narratives related to the crusades in The Middle Ages. While the Christian church and the papacy viewed the struggle against Muslim domination of former Christian areas as a heroic and just struggle, Muslim – and Jewish – populations experienced that the Christian crusaders – in a supposedly "fight for the Holy Land" – were cruelly advancing against those living in the area. In this situation, there was a mutual demonisation of the opponent from both the Muslim, Jewish and Christian sides. Depending on point of view, and whether they have their origin in Muslim, Jewish or Christian tradition, the narratives about these events have completely different heroes and villains (See Maalouf 1984).

Increasing attention to the challenges of teaching history in divided societies has highlighted the need for teachers to incorporate historical thinking and new approaches to 'competing narratives' in history education. A central point of reference for this development in history education is the Canadian professor and founder of the Centre for the Study of Historical Consciousness, Peter Seixas (CSHC 2025; Seixas 2017). In line with his approach to history education, the Finnish professor, Sirkka Ahonen emphasises that history education includes an awareness of how historical myths have contributed to nation building in nineteenth century Europe (Ahonen 2013). After the Second World War, with a critical approach to nationalism, such myths were deconstructed, and historians practised a more objective and multi-perspective approach to the past. Ahonen emphasises that myth is not an antithesis to knowledge, but rather a different kind of knowledge (Ahonen 2019; Ankersmit 2001). As historical facts become connected and meaningful only when built into narratives, presentations of history are not objective, whether they are made by scholars, cultural producers, or vernacular storytellers. But in the analysis of historical narratives, a distinction between public history, academic history, and social memory is helpful. Public history is expressed in monuments, rituals, works of art and literature. Textbooks also belong to public history. Social memory consists of the narratives that are mediated by ordinary people in local contexts. Myths are most

prominent in public and social history, which serve the needs of ordinary people, but also reflect political use of history, while academic history must answer critical questions concerning its evidential base (Ahonen 2019). But the content of history textbooks, as well as the understanding of teachers may mix academic, social and political perspectives on the past – especially in societies marked by conflict and division (Kello 2015).

Postcolonial studies and difficult narratives

The literary scholar Edward Said, by many considered to be the founder of postcolonial studies as an academic discipline, claims that narratives reflect power relation in the world. The narratives create people's perceptions of the world and thus maintain and create power - and counter-power. In the introduction to his book, *Culture and Imperialism*, he writes: "The power to narrate or to block other narratives from forming and emerging, is very important to culture and imperialism, and constitutes one of the main connections between them" (Said 1994: XV). In other words: the narratives of Western culture supported and legitimised Western colonial projects. In his paradigmatic book, *Orientalism* (1978), Said shows how knowledge about the East was produced in Europe as an ideological legitimisation of imperialism and colonisation. Orientalism is not about the East itself, but about the ideas constructed in Europe to define the difference between 'us' and 'them,' attributing supposedly positive traits to oneself and negative traits to the Other. Said further shows how generalisations and stereotypes underpin such "Othering".

Orientalism can be generalized to describe different power relations - not only between "West" and "East" or between "North" and "South". It provides analytical tools to understand different types of Othering - of peoples, religions, classes and genders. We will give some examples of historical and religious narratives that are problematic because of the Othering discourse towards ethnicity - and regarding power relations in general. This problematic, Othering aspect of the narrative is what makes it contested. However, such difficult narratives are sometimes met by counternarratives. The master narrative about Columbus coming to the Americas to civilise the natives, is met with a counternarrative about being conquered and suppressed, and still fighting (see Introduction).

Another example, here from religious texts, is the Exodus narrative in the Bible which tells about God who saved the Jewish people – commanding Moses to lead them out of slavery in Egypt and through the desert (The Bible, Exodus, 1-14). We find a similar narrative in the Qur'an (Surah 7, 20, 28). From the Bible's – and the Qur'an's - point of view this was perceived as a wonderful happening. In Jewish history this has become a "model narrative" for other narratives in the Jewish tradition. The main

motive is “God who saves and sets free his chosen people”, a collective memory celebrated during Pesach, one of the most important Jewish holidays. Christians have traditionally interpreted the Exodus narrative as God’s active intervention in the fight against injustice, and where God stands on the side of the oppressed. For many Christians in Latin America and Africa the Exodus narrative is perceived as the most important biblical narrative and has become a favourite theme in many African American Spirituals, Christian songs created by enslaved people in the United States. The narrative's motive has been an important incentive for African and Latin American liberation theologians and their political struggle for just social conditions (see Breidlid & Nicolaisen 2024). The problem, however, lies in the Othering discourse directed at the Egyptian people, whose sufferings receive little to no empathy in the Biblical narrative. The animated movie, “The Prince of Egypt”, that was shown in European cinemas in the 1990s, became extremely popular, but it also sparked debates. Parents experienced that their children saw something they had never seen themselves, namely the cruel and unjust thing that happened to the Egyptian population. In contrast to the Biblical narrative, the Prince of Egypt considered the suffering of ordinary Egyptians. The film changes perspective - and thus empathy - in favour of the Egyptians (see Breidlid & Nicolaisen 2024). The film narrative, taking the perspective of the suffering Egyptians, as they were struck by ten plagues, including the one where Israel’s God kills all the firstborn of the Egyptians, can be seen as a counter-narrative, taking the Egyptians’ experiences as a point of departure. Heroes and villains are clearly not the same ones in the two narratives.

Discourses and power relations embedded in narratives

According to the French philosopher, Michel Foucault (1926-1984), all ideas and narratives are constructed and shaped in discourses, which thus become descriptions of *normality* and order. Normality is often implied, in the sense that we do not need to explain it, because it is perceived as natural and self-evident (Breidlid & Nicolaisen 2024). Developing his understanding of discourse through his works on madness, Foucault discovered a fundamental pattern for how society regards normality (Foucault 1964). This may apply to narratives about a range of topics, like what are normal gender roles, what is normal class division in society, etc. Perceptions of normality are always embedded in human practice, both in institutions and in actions. And since these practices exert power and control, it may be challenging for individuals to think differently. The dominant narratives related to for instance religion and culture have been crafted by power elites, most often men from higher social classes, and the normality expressed in these narratives is often taken

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for granted (Breidlid & Nicolaisen 2024:512-513). To expose the power relations and discourses involved, it is necessary to deconstruct the narratives.

Foucault claimed that language is power, and that it is important to quench the *power structures* embedded in the narratives by deconstructing the discourses and – in the classroom - make the students aware of power relations and power structures embedded in the narratives. All narratives reflect a certain discourse, defining what is important, normal, right - or wrong. They can therefore be criticised and deconstructed, and counternarratives can be created. It is particularly important to be critical when investigating different positions in the narrative, such as heroes, perpetrators, victims, and others. What is the perspective of the narrator? Do any other voices or narratives exist, which represent a different perspective? When the power relations are not explicit in the narrative itself, the teacher's role is to guide the students to read between the lines – and to be aware of “the presence of the absence”: Who is not visible – or insignificant – in the narrative? Postcolonial studies are particularly concerned with the awareness that is required when narratives are promoting Othering discourses that directly or indirectly suppress or dehumanise groups of people (ethnic groups, religious groups, sexual minorities, women etc.) and when they distinguish sharply between us and them.

For a multifaceted analysis of historical events or monuments, the distinction between the three domains mentioned above (public history, academic history and social memory) can help students to understand the social significance of narratives and enable them to deconstruct powerful myths (Ahonen 2019) and realise that public history also reflects the political *use of history*. A central aim in history education is thus to make pupils aware of, how historical narratives function in contemporary societies, and how they are used – and sometimes manipulated - by politics, the media and the public (Kello 2015; Stradling 2001).

Exploring contested narratives and discussing controversial issues can help students to attain “the ability of critical reflection and argument, not take a position too quickly, to question claims of neutrality, to develop a desire for more information and to be tolerant of uncertainty” (Kello 2015:37). This also implies reflection on their own positions and willingness to investigate how these are embedded in social memory. In the classroom the interpretation and representation of specific events will often be influenced by public history and reflect the dominant point of view, regardless of the students' background. A Norwegian secondary school teacher highlighted this in an interview and used the approach to “The Cold War” as an example:

“I think there are 40 countries represented in our school with 300 students, and they are allowed to immerse themselves in topics related to their parents' country of origin. When it comes to the Cold War, the traditional

history teaching puts heavy emphasis on the United States and the Soviet Union, and then it is common to have a little Vietnam war and a little Korean war and then the Berlin Wall. But it [The cold war] had also huge consequences in Africa, for example, and then it can be just as useful for the students in question, to understand a conflict there in the light of the dynamics of the Cold War [...]. African students often show interest in what is happening on the African continent – and why. And a large proportion of African countries became communist and have continued such a mindset.” (Teacher, Norway, Focus Group Discussion)

This example illustrates how some discourses and narratives tend to be dominant in the classroom or textbooks at the expense of deviating minority narratives. It is important to critically ask whether any other narratives exist, which represent a different perspective than the dominant one, narratives which reflect the experiences of minority students - or minority groups in the society – and which may open new perspectives.

In many conflicts there are obviously layers of contested narratives involved in the conflict and controversy at stake. The next section will illustrate this through contextual examples from the five countries involved in the ConCitizen project.

Conflicts and controversies involving contested narratives

The five countries involved in the ConCitizen project, Cyprus, Denmark, Lebanon, Northern Ireland and Norway, illustrate different ways in which contested narratives are involved in conflicts and the controversial issues at stake. We will give a brief overview of some characteristics of the five national contexts and indicate how contested narratives and controversial issues are intertwined.

We start with Northern Ireland, Cyprus, and Lebanon, which have all suffered from deep conflicts and have endured long-term national traumas (see chapter 2 for details).

For thirty years (1968-1998) *Northern Ireland* suffered from a violent sectarian conflict, “The Troubles”, between the Protestant unionists, who wanted to stay part of the United Kingdom, and the Catholic nationalists, who wanted to join the Republic of Ireland. The conflict was extremely violent. The fragile peace agreement in 1998 left underlying issues unresolved and it seems that the Brexit process has rekindled tensions and narratives. Conflicting narratives regarding the events’ “what, how and why” are in play.

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After the Turkish invasion in 1974, *Cyprus* has been divided into a Greek Cypriot and a Turkish Cypriot part. There have been numerous education interventions by both sides to raise awareness about “national memory”. The education systems have aimed consistently to cultivate a single sided memory of conflict (Bekerman & Zembylas 2012). Instead of challenging students to deal with narratives from the opposite side, only monolithic narratives about the Other are promoted. With its long and complex historical roots, the Cyprus conflict is often described as one of today’s “frozen conflicts”.

Lebanon is a society of high cultural, religious, and political complexity. Out of the many conflicts the country has suffered, the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990) has probably been the most devastating in modern times, and teaching about this period remains a serious challenge for educators. Different parties have their own narratives, often contradictory, making an agreement on a common national narrative to be taught an almost impossible political task. Consequently, successive governments have decided to exclude the Lebanese Civil War from the curriculum. Lebanon has become a fragile state constantly living at the brink of a new civil war. At the time of writing, the war between Israel and the Lebanese based Shia Islamic Hezbollah has made the situation even more unbearable and dangerous for citizens and refugees living in Lebanon. As for Northern Ireland and Cyprus, contested narratives regarding political issues are at the core of every political or social discussion and fuel old and new narratives.

Even more politically stable, but still diverse societies, like the Scandinavian ones, have their contested narratives, often linked to different perspectives of majority and minorities, or more generally to power and master narratives. Contested narratives from *Denmark* and *Norway* involve for instance different perceptions of indigenous peoples’ rights. In Norway, we find contested narratives regarding the Sami people’s rights against the Norwegian government, and in a Danish context we find contested narratives regarding Greenland and the Inuit people’s rights. However, such conflicts are not at the center of the society and cannot be equated with the deeply divisive conflicts in Northern Ireland, Cyprus, and Lebanon.

On the other hand, typically contested narratives representative for diverse, yet politically stable societies, are often embedded in the major lines of conflict, such as uneven economic distribution in the society, discrimination based on ethnic or gender identity, and contested narratives related to economic growth and the environmental cost of this growth.

Contested narratives and controversial issues with transnational implications

Generally, contested narratives can create or prolong a conflict when linked to legitimisation of power and dominance, since such narratives make conflicting perceptions and feelings visible. This will often mean that privileges and normality constructions are in play. As different interpretations of something that happened in the past or is still happening, contested narratives contribute to the understanding of the present and set guidelines for the future. This is especially apparent when it comes to violent conflicts and wars, which often entail contested narratives that legitimise the warring parties' agendas.

At the time of writing, there are two wars taking place near - or on - the European continent, wars that are of global concern and set the agenda for debates all over the world - also in universities and classrooms. One is the *Russia-Ukraine war*, which started full scale when Russia invaded Ukraine February 24, 2022. There are different interpretations of these events forming various contested narratives. At least in the initial phase, the Russian president Vladimir Putin was eager to legitimise the Russian invasion by claiming that Ukraine is a Nazi and fascist country (The New York Times 2023). He claimed that it was therefore necessary both to save Ukraine from this fate and to save Russia from Ukrainian aggression, since they conspire with the West to clamp down on and destroy Russia. Scholars have emphasised yet another motive behind Putin's aggression against Ukraine, namely the idea of rebuilding the Russian Empire. They claim that in this way, he maintains nostalgic notions of Russian greatness and is concerned with his own legacy as a nation-builder on a par with Ivan IV or Peter the Great (Diesen 2022; Termansen 2023).

The Ukrainian - and mainstream Western - narrative emphasises that Ukraine, an independent democratic country, illegitimately was invaded by a totalitarian aggressor who wanted to incorporate their country into Russia, which was a violation of international law (Harding 2022). Another narrative, primarily aiming to understand Putin's reasons for invading Ukraine, maintains that Russia during the crisis in 2021 made several demands on NATO and the West. One of these was assurances that Ukraine would never become a member of NATO, and that the alliance would withdraw several forces from Eastern Europe. Such a demand reflects the grand idea of a Russian 'heartland', which is equal to the former Russian empire (Termansen 2023; Suslov 2020) rooted in a *geopolitical imagination* (Suslov) with medieval roots. This refers to Putin's ideological use of concepts about Russian history and power such as "Holy Russia," and "Russian civilisation" to construct and legitimise Russia as a sovereign great power with the right to territorial expansion (Termansen 2023).

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The other extensive violent conflict near Europe at the time of writing is the war between Israel and the paramilitary group Hamas and its allies, related to a particularly complicated conflict, with a centre of gravity in Gaza. The Israel-Palestine conflict has lasted for many decades, but the last round of violence sparked off in October 2023, with the Hamas massacre on more than 1200 Israelis on October 7, followed by the Israeli warfare with killings of tens of thousands of civilians in Gaza, and causing a humanitarian disaster among the Palestinian people.

The strongly disputed perceptions, interpretations, and stories of *what, how, and why* involved in these events are too complex to provide a fair and comprehensive representation here. The conflict and the narratives have deep roots in history – or in contested perceptions of history - and have huge transnational implications, causing heated debates and emotional reactions in many classrooms all over Europe and beyond. Based on a Swedish empirical study, aiming to explore how the conflicts in the Middle East are generally dealt with in Swedish schools, Karin Flensner found that the controversy was not so much related to the epistemological nature of the question, but rather to the students' (and teachers') emotional reactions and their positions on this issue within a given classroom context (Flensner 2020:9). However, this study was conducted before the last conflict between Israel and Hamas flared up in October 2023. There is reason to believe that the intense warfare that has taken place since then has also influenced European classroom discussions, beyond merely an emotional engagement. In chapter 5 we introduce the inquiry approach to history education, which implies that students should study the fundamental causes of specific conflicts, in order to understand the rationale behind the actions on both sides of the conflict (see 5.3).

Regarding the Middle East conflict, the opposing narratives in play here and the ongoing violence fuel the Othering discourses and the dehumanising war going on. After the violence erupted in Gaza in October 2023, antisemitism and accusations of antisemitism have increased in European countries. In a classroom context it is crucial to distinguish between the activities of the Israeli government and ordinary Jews living all over Europe, and that critique of a government is not the same as antisemitism. Similarly, it is crucial to distinguish between Hamas and Palestinian civilians.

The two conflicts mentioned above – and the narratives embedded in these – represent transnational challenges and are conflicts that may surface unexpectedly in the classroom or emerge within subject content, in either history education, religious education, or citizenship education. Based on our interviews with teachers in the five countries, it was clear that especially the Israel-Palestine conflict was among the frequently occurring topics, often raised by students. The Ukraine-Russian war was, not surprisingly, mainly mentioned by Danish and Norwegian

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teachers, who live closer to this geographic area and have received many refugees from Ukraine. The narratives related to the respective conflicts are not all mutually exclusive, but examples of contested narratives that have come up in discussions in most classrooms in Europe and beyond. In a teaching and learning context, it is crucial though to approach them with a critical eye, examining the discourses, the power relations and the validity of the narratives.

This is also the case when confronted with narratives not necessarily related to violent conflicts, but to political ideologies and ideas with global implications. At the time of writing, it is natural to think about the US President Donald Trump and his many “wars”, starting with the “tariff war”. By declaring April 2, 2025, as 'Liberation Day,' Trump demonstrated his perception of a 'great America' as a nation that had been exploited. From that day, he imposed new and extremely high tariffs on imported goods, arguing that such tariffs will create a more balanced economic playing field for US exports and encourage domestic manufacturing. However, Trump's trade policy narrative is highly controversial, given that economists generally agree that tariffs lead to higher consumer prices, retaliatory tariffs from other countries, and negative impacts on consumer sentiment and stock prices. This competing narrative describes April 2 as the start of a “tariff war”, not a day of liberation. Given that China originally was subject to the largest tariff, another narrative about these events, is that this is primarily an economic and technological race between two great powers, US and China. During 2025, the US president Donald Trump has continued spreading his view of an alternative World Order, where he himself and the United States of America should be recognised as the dominant leading power, especially regarding the Western Hemisphere, including Central and South America, as well as Canada and Greenland. Europe, for its part, defends what has been perceived as a rights- and rules-based world that emerged after World War II. With the rise of obvious 'alternative facts,' as well as distorted representations of historical and current events, it is crucial to develop an awareness that not all positions or narratives are equally valid, and that it therefore is important to construct valid representations of the past (Pace 2024).

Global issues and international conflicts as those mentioned above are controversial issues with several layers of contested narratives. For the teacher it is relevant to consider how such issues can be connected to subject knowledge and to look at the different categories of controversial issues and the sources they involve.

What may be causes of controversial issues and contested narratives?

Since an event or an object, and a narrative about this event or this object, is not the same, but depends on a certain perspective and discourse, contested and competing narratives may be easy to discover. Even though competing narratives and controversies are often related to the different perspectives of majorities and minorities in a society, whether ethnic, religious or other kinds of minority, this is not the only sources of contestation but may also originate from other sources.

One of these are differences in *political ideologies*, both within a specific country and within Europe and beyond. The political climate in Europe today is characterized by a deep division between democratic ideologies and more authoritarian ideologies. This results in controversies about political solutions for – and ideals about - the good life. Differences regarding political ideologies are especially easy to observe in conflict societies, where the population often is divided along two main narratives. An example is the case of Northern Ireland, where Protestant unionist and Catholic nationalists have competing narratives about the events that have taken place and where narratives about “what, how and why” are in play. The competing narratives may also influence on how teachers choose and present maps over the territories. One of the participants in the ConCitizen project told that she was shocked when she as a child eventually realised that she and the other British in Northern Ireland actually lived on the same island as the Irish people.

Maps may be good indicators of political ideologies and narratives. Traditionally, a country’s size and location on world maps reveals a lot about the prevailing narrative regarding global importance. For instance, historical world maps produced in Europe have traditionally shown Europe as much larger in relation to other continents than it actually is. Geographical size reflects political power. Critical exploration of maps may therefore be a valuable part of a learning process.

Contested narratives and controversies may also be related to *gender*. Old historical texts, both secular and religious, are written by men, and have a patriarchal perspective. These texts have downplayed – or made invisible - women’s achievements. However, stories about women who have been hidden and forgotten are brought to light today, be it writers, philosophers, painters, resistance fighters, or others. This creates fertile ground for counternarratives and for deconstructing the gender perspectives in the old narratives (Breidlid & Nicolaisen 2024).

Currently, in Europe and in other Western countries, there is a focus on another kind of controversy related to gender identity, which has resulted in a heated and emotional debate. There are two main positions in this matter: One is the traditional view of gender based on biological criteria (genitals and chromosomes), which

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conclude with two genders, male and female. This perspective takes a critical stance towards the concept of non-binarity and the revision of personal pronouns. On the other side, we find people who argue for recognition and respect for an individual's self-identification regarding gender. This includes the right to define their gender independently of biological factors.

Still another cause of controversy is *generational differences*, which are found in all societies. Sociologists talk about «generational conflict», a term used when different generations have different views of the world. Generational conflicts can arise especially when children and parents are involved in different cultures, for example due to major social changes or migration, but is relevant across cultural variations, since modern societies are changing rapidly.

Socioeconomic differences may also be the cause of conflicts and contested narratives. In social studies, inequality typically refers to uneven distribution of resources and money in society, which again will lead to uneven distribution of other goods that can be bought with money, such as food, housing, clothing and travel. This results in economic and social inequalities among the population. There are competing narratives regarding the underlying causes of such socioeconomic differences in a society. One main narrative is that the differences are a social problem where the responsibility lies with the politicians. Another main narrative is that this is an individual problem and therefore the individual's responsibility. These narratives follow the classic left – right positions in the political landscape.

Finally, controversies and contested narratives may be related to *centre versus periphery*, terms which are used in political science to describe political conflicts between different areas or regions. The basic idea is that political conflicts between regions are usually between a privileged centre and a marginalised periphery, often labelled as “the outskirts”. An example from history is the Norwegian master narrative—originating in central Southern Norway—that the country was not severely damaged during the Second World War. This narrative is highly contested by the population in the Northern part of Norway who have a different story to tell. In the North they experienced bombed and burned towns during the war. Especially in the county in the far North, where the Nazis used scorched earth tactics before they retreated, the consequences were catastrophic. Currently, across Europe, there are often striking differences in attitudes and priorities between people in the central urban areas and people in rural areas. Due to increasing centralisation, people in rural areas seem to be more conservative and concerned with protecting traditional livelihoods, such as animal husbandry, and local jobs. Naturally, since urban people are not personally threatened in the same way, due to centralisation, they seem to be more concerned with international topics such as climate, wildlife protection, etc. These differences are often reflected in political sympathies. That said, it is important

to emphasise that we are talking about general trends, not about individual points of view and priorities.

Categories of CI and CN from concept- and curriculum mapping

Through sharing examples from the five participating countries, the ConCitizen project identified five overarching categories of controversial issues and contested narratives. The categories are not exhaustive, as they reflect the specific contexts of the participants. These are the five categories:

- Identity
- Dealing with the past
- Colliding rights
- Meeting the Other
- Power

The concept and curriculum mapping showed that social cohesion is at the forefront in the curricula of all five countries, emphasising democratic values that make the students competent to live together in a complex world and with an uncertain future. The various curricula also make room for contested narratives and controversial issues, although to varying degrees due to the national context. In post-conflict societies like Cyprus, Lebanon and Northern Ireland, there is sometimes hesitance about bringing up certain issues in subjects like history education, religious education and citizenship education, emphasising mitigation of risk. Scandinavian countries like Denmark and Norway are obliged through the curricula to teach controversial issues and contested narratives despite their sensitive nature, focusing on the classroom as a community of disagreement (Iversen 2019), as discussed in chapter 4 below.

Although other research has identified other categories (see for instance Eriksen, Goldschmidt-Gjerløw & Jore 2022) we are using the five areas identified by the ConCitizen project (see above) as analytical categories to investigate controversial issues and contested narratives in the three subjects: history education, religious education, and citizenship education. Different CN and CI appear in the three subjects. For instance, in history education contested narratives become visible when the master narrative of a given society's past meets and breaks with the narratives of minorities or the less powerful. In other cases, narratives of different groups may be confrontational, or a dissonant – or ambiguous - heritage may be

visible. In religious education contested narratives are emerging, when stories from different religions turn out to rival each other; and in citizenship education controversial issues are on the agenda when freedom of religion and freedom of speech emerge as colliding rights. We have given these examples for the three subjects, fully aware that one and the same controversial issue and the same contested narratives may be discussed in all subjects – from different angles. In chapter 5 and 6 we will return to these five analytical categories and provide examples of controversial issues and contested narratives in the three subjects.

In this chapter we have introduced the definitions of controversial issues and contested narratives and emphasised, how a closer analysis will often reveal that there is a dynamic interplay between the two. Therefore, we recommend considering this interplay and maintaining an awareness of context and discourses. The next chapter will elaborate on the arguments for teaching CI and CN and specify some of the challenges and benefits for teachers and students.

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Chapter 2: Why should we teach contested narratives and controversial issues?

The aim of this chapter is to discuss the importance of including controversial issues (CI) and contested narratives (CN) in educational curricula and engaging young people with these issues in classrooms. We will explore three main questions:

- Why focus on teaching controversial issues and contested narratives? How will including such topics benefit young people?
- What are the challenges of teaching controversial issues and contested narratives? How do they differ from one context to the other?
- How can teachers be better prepared to teach contested narratives and controversial issues? What support do they need to handle these issues in the classroom?

The discussion will build on previous research and insights from our own surveys and focus group discussions with teachers from Lebanon, Northern Ireland, Cyprus, Denmark and Norway.

Although the project highlights a distinction between CI and CN (see chapter 1), chapter 2 largely deals with challenges common to both concepts. As such in this chapter we will not distinguish between CI and CN.

What are the benefits in teaching controversial issues and contested narratives?

In this section, the rationale for teaching controversial issues (CI) and contested narratives (CN) is discussed, primarily in relation to the benefits for young people, and as a consequence the potential benefits for society. It begins with a brief synopsis of the main arguments from academic literature, before the views of teachers and student teachers who participated in the ConCitizen project are presented.

What does academic literature say?

In terms of previous research, meaningful engagement of young people with controversial issues (CI) and contested narratives (CN) produces numerous benefits, which are summarised below under three broad themes: engagement with significant

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societal issues; development of democratic skills and capabilities; cultivation of tolerance, acceptance and emotional literacy.

Engagement with significant societal issues

CI and CN are aligned with important aspects of society, such as culture (Evans et al. 2000), religion and ethics (Flensner 2020), politics and economics (Camicia 2008). As such, they are often highly topical issues to which young people are exposed on a daily basis outside the classroom through social media or simply because of the context in which they live (Jerome and Elwick 2020). Thus, it is argued that young people should be given the freedom to discuss these issues of enduring societal significance within a safe and nurturing environment (Hess 2009).

This discussion is particularly important where young people may be absorbing the perspectives of their community or their family, without thinking through a range of broader perspectives for themselves. Discussing such issues in classrooms can therefore provide young people with a platform to explore topical issues in a space where they can begin to engage with different perspectives (Barton and McCully 2012). Of course, this in and of itself creates some controversy, because it may result in cognitive dissonance, where young people are being exposed to ideas contradictory to those with which they are familiar. As such, teachers must not only equip themselves with sufficient knowledge of these issues and effective pedagogical skills but also ensure they are well versed in the context in which they teach (Misco and de Groof 2014).

Given the societal relevance of CI and CN, arguably, failure to deal with these issues in the classroom would leave a serious gap in young people's general education. Consequently, teachers may need to create spaces to deal with these issues, even if they are not addressed on the prescribed curriculum (Hess 2009).

Development of critical thinking, democratic skills and capabilities

A second rationale discussed in the literature for teaching CI and CN centres around the development of young people's democratic skills. Grappling with the multiple perspectives associated with CI and CN requires young people to analyse, categorise, compare, and contrast a range of perspectives as well as justify their own view. As suggested by Lintner (2018:14), this develops their ability to challenge "conventional thought". As a result, young people are engaged in higher-order and critical thinking (Barton and McCully 2012), developing competence in the evaluation of information, decision-making and deliberation: key skills needed if they are to be engaged democratic citizens (Camicia 2008).

It is argued that this will positively influence how they apply their knowledge and skills outside of the classroom setting. In a sense, learning about CI and CN in the

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classroom becomes a vehicle through which young people can begin to consider how these issues might play out in society. Thus, providing opportunities for young people to experience controversy in a safe environment, strengthens their capacity to participate in a democratic society (Pace 2021).

Cultivation of tolerance, acceptance and emotional literacy

Empirical research indicates that dealing with CI and CN provides young people with opportunities to develop not only their critical thinking, noted above, but also their interpersonal skills.

Discussion of these issues in general exposes young people to different opinions; deliberation around these opinions encourages young people to see the reasonableness of others' perspectives (Emerson 2012). Further, in heterogeneous classrooms where students hold a range of differing views, encouraging young people to engage in respectful group dialogue, listen sensitively to what others in the class have to say and afford respect to another's perspective on the controversial issue or contested narrative, creates a climate where tolerance and acceptance can be cultivated (Hess 2009).

In addition, young people can develop their emotional literacy through connecting these issues to their interpersonal skills, thinking about how they and others feel about the issue. This shifts the dynamic in the classroom from solely cognitive engagement with the debates surrounding the CI and CN to include affective elements of learning, involving values and emotions (Emerson & McCully 2014). Whilst this may pose concerns for teachers in relation to handling such emotions in the classroom (see below), integrating emotional literacy into the teaching of CI and CN can promote empathy, resilience, and critical consciousness among young people, ultimately contributing to their holistic development (Zembylas & Kamdani 2012; Middendorf 2014).

What did the teachers in this project say?

The ideas outlined above from the academic literature resonate with research findings from the ConCitizen project. According to teachers across the five countries, highlighting CI and CN is important because students naturally raise them in class, pointing to the topical nature of these issues.

First, social media exposes young people, often at an early age to a plethora of social, religious, political and cultural issues in local and global contexts, which are then raised in class. Secondly, prevalent context specific issues in the societies in which young people are growing up influence the topics they raise in class. This is especially the case in communities with a history of conflict where contested

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narratives largely relate to different historical interpretations. Notably teachers in Lebanon and Northern Ireland reported that they were likely to deal with these issues on a weekly basis (more frequently than teachers in the other countries).

In addition, there was a consensus among teachers on the importance of engaging with CN and CI in classrooms for the “maintenance of democracy” and “encouragement of dialogue”. For example, teachers in Denmark, Norway, Cyprus and Lebanon highlighted the importance of nurturing critical thinking among students, especially in relation to topics that might be significantly influenced by parents, media and the students’ environment.

The rationales for teaching CI and CN suggested by teachers varied in relation to the age range of students they were teaching. Secondary school teachers’ main rationale was to help students understand challenges they come across in their daily lives and learn how they can use this knowledge to contribute to society, especially at a time when there is a significant increase in fake news, hate speech, violence, as well as religious and political indoctrination. It was suggested that providing students with the chance to discuss both the present and the past, especially in post-conflict and conflict-affected societies, might create a better future, engaging young people that will become contributors, leaders and decision-makers in their respective societies. One teacher in Northern Ireland noted the readiness of young people to discuss these issues, despite their controversy:

“I think sometimes when teaching about the Troubles [...], it surprises me that the young people are quite prepared to go along and have the hard conversations that I couldn't have imagined happening taking place when I was at school. But then every now and again you'll have a conversation with a class that will show you just how much these issues are still controversial and do still matter and are so wrapped up in identity politics and wrapped up in the stories that we tell ourselves about who we are.”
(Teacher, Northern Ireland, Focus Group Discussion)

Primary school teachers generally saw value in teaching CN and CI, through the appropriate methodologies, to increase the skills and capabilities of their students, especially those related to communication, dialogue, empathy, and conflict resolution. This suggests a focus amongst these teachers on the broader holistic development afforded through engaging with these issues.

In both primary and post-primary contexts, teachers highlighted the intrinsic value of engaging with contested narratives and controversial issues to develop active and inclusive citizens, with critical thinking skills and the ability to engage with multiple perspectives. Notably this was the case for both teachers in conflict-affected

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societies (such as Lebanon, Cyprus and Northern Ireland) and teachers in diverse societies not affected by deep-rooted conflicts (such as Norway and Denmark).

Another argument for teaching these issues in post-conflict settings was to pave the way for sustainable reconciliation. By opening discussions in classes and teaching students how to think critically, it was suggested that teachers can provide a platform to challenge divisive “popular” narratives and contribute to the creation of a more inclusive discourse, combatting fake news, hate speech, and incitement to violence.

Notably, teachers across the different contexts all saw value in teaching CI and CN, and as such aim to include them in their lessons at least once a month to ensure that critical topics are being discussed in a way that develops students’ knowledge and dialogue skills.

In sum, academic literature, previous empirical research findings and the views of teachers in this project align in suggesting that there is a strong rationale for engaging young people with CI and CN in the classroom: the development of young people who are not only educated about significant societal issues, but who also possess the critical democratic skills and emotional literacy to navigate the often complex contexts in which they live. Moreover, there is a compelling argument that this will not only add to the holistic development of the young person, but also positively influence engagement in their immediate contexts (such as the classroom and school) and ultimately impact on society as a whole.

What are the challenges of teaching CI and CN?

This section summarises the challenges of teaching controversial issues and contested narratives, primarily in relation to the barriers (or perceived barriers) faced by teachers. It begins with a synopsis of the main arguments from academic literature, including empirical research, before the views of teachers who participated in the project are presented.

What does academic literature say?

Previous studies indicate that there are several contextual reasons as to why some teachers are apprehensive around teaching controversial issues and contested narratives, which are summarised below in four broad themes: concerns about the practicalities of teaching CI and CN; professional competence; the emotional welfare of young people, and personal accountability.

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Practical concerns

Studies suggest that teachers have several concerns regarding the practicalities associated with teaching CI and CN. First, as Rossi and Pace (1998) note, it takes time to prepare a lesson on these issues. This, compounded by the pressure to prepare students for examinations and cover the curriculum in a market-driven education system (Giroux 2002), leaves teachers feeling that they have little time to adequately explore CI and CN in their classrooms (Bartell et al 2019). As a result, teachers often avoid these complex issues if they are not on the statutory curriculum, or if they are on the curriculum, to deal with them in a factual way without much time devoted to discussion and deliberation (Hess 2004). Research studies also show that some teachers have concerns around their students' academic ability to handle complex issues and consider it too difficult to manage a classroom context where these issues are being discussed (Hess 2009).

Professional competence

Many studies suggest that teachers' concerns regarding teaching CI and CN lie in their lack of confidence in handling these issues. Research points towards several reasons for this:

- lack of knowledge about these issues to teach them adequately
- lack of training or support in their initial teacher education or since to deal with CI and CN
- concerns regarding having insufficient pedagogical tools, teaching methods and resources to deal with these issues
- concerns regarding how they are to handle overly emotional responses from students around these issues (Chikoko 2011)

As a result, teachers can feel overwhelmed by the knowledge, skills and preparedness required to teach CI and CN (Rossi 2006).

Concern for the emotional welfare of young people

Research indicates that many teachers are concerned that engaging with these issues might have a negative emotional impact on some of their students and thus are concerned about their emotional welfare. Teachers, particularly in conflict-affected societies, are concerned that addressing these sensitive issues in the classroom could make the world of their students more chaotic and more upsetting. For these teachers sometimes the classroom creates a space of calm away from the trauma of the society they live in, and as such is a place where CI and CN should be avoided (Barton and McCully 2012).

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Personal accountability

Finally, some teachers are concerned about the responses they might receive from school leaders or from parents if they teach these issues in their classrooms.

Teachers are personally anxious about being accused of or indeed complicit in indoctrination, and therefore they then choose to avoid these issues (Hess 2004; Tannebaum 2013).

However, in response to these concerns, research also suggests that young people want to engage in these issues and are ready to do so. This can be successful provided that teachers are skilled and experienced in handling CI and CN within a supportive school and broader community context (Emerson, Orr & Connolly 2014; Donnelly, Loader, McLaughlin & Emerson 2024).

What did the teachers in this project say?

Again, the ideas outlined above from the academic literature resonate, for the most part, with research findings from the ConCitizen project. Notably, 'lack of knowledge' emerged as a key issue for those involved in the project; an issue which is not overly discussed in the academic literature in this area.

In general, teachers in all five countries suggest that teaching contested narratives and controversial issues is often avoided for various reasons. While some do not have the time nor ability to incorporate such topics in their lessons, others fear the reaction of parents or school leaders and principals.

Several teachers, most notably primary school teachers, also felt that they do not have enough experience or knowledge to teach CN and CI, which most often leads them to avoid such issues altogether. Without a comprehensive understanding of historical, cultural and political contexts surrounding those topics, they felt limited in their ability to lead a discussion, address controversial questions, and provide a solid framework for students to develop their critical thinking.

Whilst teachers in our study did not specifically mention the reasons for this, the lack of knowledge might be due to two main reasons inferred from other responses to the survey: insufficient teacher training or limited access to resources such as documents, articles, tools, methods, and activities, which make it difficult for educators to supplement their curriculum with additional topics that might raise controversy. When they feel that they are not well-equipped, whether in terms of knowledge or resources, teachers noted that they lose confidence and avoid going into difficult discussions, especially in settings where they are viewed by young people as the adult "who knows everything".

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Furthermore, time constraints and an already overloaded curriculum increase pressure on teachers, preventing them from adequately addressing contested narratives and controversial issues in class. Teachers suggested that being pressured by school administrators, who want to ensure that all “official” requirements are covered by the end of the year, might push teachers to prioritise compulsory topics, instead of engaging with in-depth discussions. This does not mean that those subjects themselves do not cover CN and CI, but the way they are handled differs from one teacher to another, from one school to another, and from one context to another. Notably, as one teacher stated, engaging in such issues without sufficient time to explore them properly could be detrimental to young people:

“There isn’t time to go in depth, and such issues require in-depth discussions; otherwise, they could do more harm than good.” (Teacher, Cyprus, Focus Group Discussion)

Pressure from school principals is not only limited to covering the “official” curriculum but also extends to ensuring that there will not be any backlash or conflicts from parents, especially if what is discussed in class does not align with parental viewpoints. Indeed, fear of negative reactions was a main reason why teachers in all five countries sometimes avoid focusing on CN and CI. This arguably affects students negatively, limiting their exposure to diverse perspectives (other than the ones they are taught in their own communities), and as noted above, the development of their critical thinking skills.

In addition to cross-contextual challenges, teachers in Norway highlight that some students coming from a different background (i.e. minority non-nationals) might lack contextual knowledge and the conceptual apparatus to engage in discussions related to CN and CI that are particular to Norwegian culture and history. Of course, this depends on the students’ status, residency timeframe, environment, community and several other factors. But this does not mean that the teachers necessarily avoided these discussions. In Cyprus, the use of national symbols (both Greek and Cypriot), the national anthem, and language are topics that teachers fear might garner negative reactions by colleagues or community members. This is extremely challenging because similar topics are recurring and are usually discussed in different classes throughout primary and secondary schools.

Particular challenges were also presented by teachers in Denmark, who considered that addressing contested narratives and controversial issues, by labelling them as so, could give the impression that those are specific topics that can only be discussed in a certain time and place, and within the framework of a certain subject. They also spoke of the dichotomy in a teacher’s role, as an expert or as a facilitator, which raises several questions: Is a teacher’s role limited to the moderation of

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classroom discussions? Do teachers have the responsibility of knowing everything related to a particular subject? What if an issue comes up naturally? What if a student brings up a topic with which the teacher is unfamiliar? Do teachers have the right to share their opinions on issues in class? What about the effects of that on the mental and psycho-social well-being of the student? All these questions present challenges that teachers face daily when they come across CN and CI in their teaching.

Lebanese teachers share the same worries; they connected insufficient training with a fear of indirectly indoctrinating their students: should they give their opinions or present additional information? Further, as one teacher noted, fear of teaching these issues can result in avoiding engagement with different perspectives and diversity in general:

“I think we always think of CI as taboos, so we are afraid of raising such topics. We emphasise on similarities instead of embracing our differences.”
(Teacher, Lebanon)

In terms of avoidance, teachers in Northern Ireland were more likely to agree that these were issues for “other teachers”, but not of concern for them or their subjects, while teachers in Norway in a few situations preferred to steer clear of certain sensitive and controversial topics to protect students and their feelings. Survey results from the five countries supported this claim, indicating that teachers lack confidence to deal with the emotional repercussions of “difficult discussions” and are concerned that it might become too difficult to manage the class.

Notably, some teachers indicated that they did not consider any topic to be too controversial to teach, provided the methods used to deliver the topic were appropriate and the classroom climate secure:

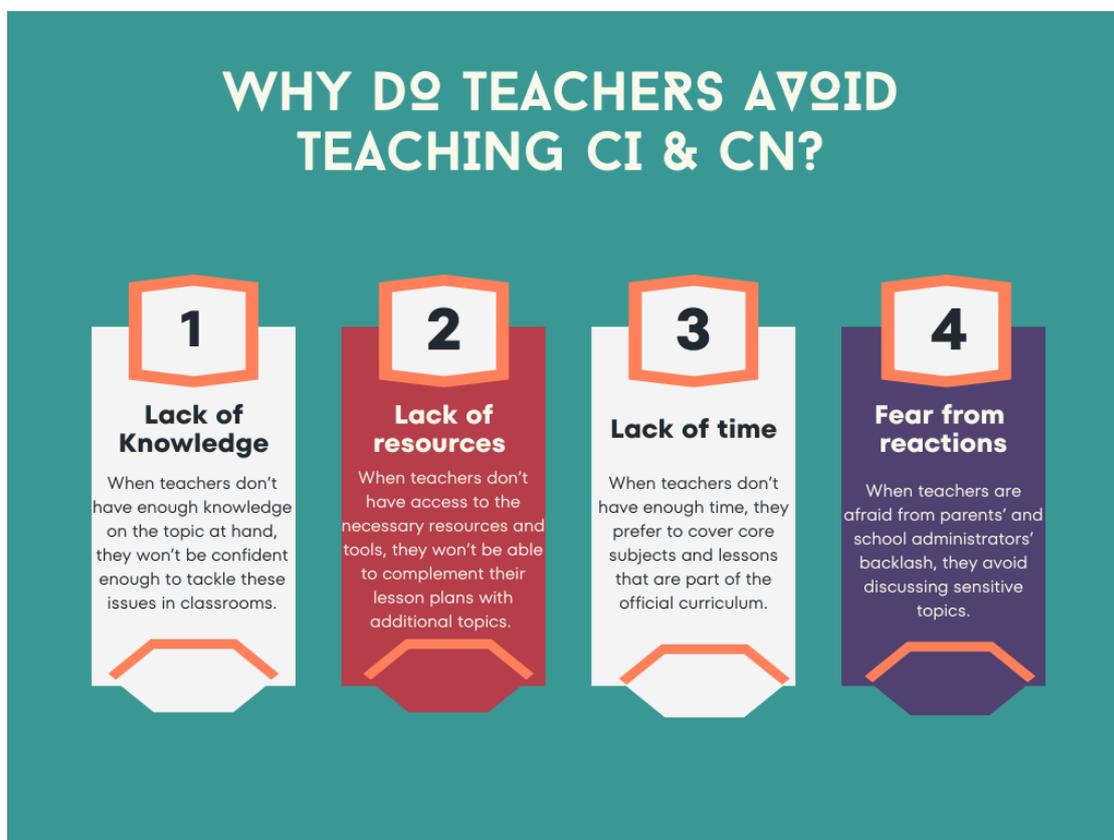
“I do not think that any topic is too controversial. It all depends on how you present them to your students and the relation between the teacher and the students and how safe the students feel in the classroom environment.”
(Teacher, Norway)

“I try to adopt the “different viewpoints” strategy where students are allowed to express their opinions on a certain topic, and where I, myself, try to present the different angles of a certain issue/topic.” (Teacher, Lebanon)

This suggests that if teachers are supported with appropriate classroom strategies to teach CI and CN and with approaches to develop a conducive classroom climate, they will be more inclined and more confident to tackle these issues in the classroom.

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The figure below summarises the four main cross-cutting challenges for teachers across all countries in the project:



In sum, academic literature and the views of teachers in the project largely align to suggest that a range of challenges exist for teachers who are seeking to engage effectively with CI and CN: challenges related to time, resources, knowledge and skills; fear of negative reactions; concerns for the emotional wellbeing of students. As the diagram above indicates, teachers across all five countries agreed on the four first challenges, particularly challenges related to time, resources and knowledge. “Concerns for the emotional wellbeing of students”, which is acknowledged in academic and research literature, could not be identified as a crosscutting theme in our empirical material. However, this was highlighted by some Norwegian teachers who mentioned that they in a few situations preferred to steer clear of certain sensitive and controversial topics to protect students and their feelings.

Despite these genuine concerns however, there is a clear commitment amongst a significant body of teachers to address CI and CN, in recognition that for them it is essential to promote critical thinking through engaging with difficult, but meaningful discussions that can go beyond classroom settings. Teachers therefore need to be supported in tackling these issues, discussed in the final section of this chapter.

What are teachers' needs in relation to teaching CI and CN?

Teachers require ongoing support if the benefits of teaching CI and CN are to be realised in their classrooms. This includes ongoing access to resources and training, development of subject knowledge and skills to handle emotional responses, in the context of a supportive school environment (Chikoko 2011; Pace 2021; Donnelly et al. 2024). Findings from teachers in this project point towards specific needs in relation to training of skills; developing supportive classroom climates; classroom strategies and access to resources.

Training of skills

Based on the results of the survey and focus group discussions, there was a consensus among teachers from Denmark, Norway, Cyprus, and Northern Ireland that their initial teacher training had not adequately equipped them with the necessary skills to deal with contested narratives and controversial issues in different classroom settings. Surprisingly, teachers in Lebanon were more positive. This could be attributed to the fact that most of the teachers who were engaged in Lebanon had received some sort of additional training throughout their career, such as the “Alwan Programme: Education on Living Together in the Framework of Active and Inclusive Citizenship.” In Northern Ireland, mid-career teachers were positive in relation to their initial teacher education, but less positive in relation to support given to them since (i.e. continuous training and development). More experienced teachers considered that they did not receive adequate training at the beginning of their careers but felt more supported in terms of skill development ever since. This is an indicator of the development of teacher education in Northern Ireland, where in recent years there has been a greater emphasis in initial teacher education on teaching CI and CN, but there is still a lack of career-long complementary trainings.

Developing supportive classroom climates

Across all five contexts, teachers highlighted that they need support in developing safe classroom climates and classroom strategies that facilitate discussions related to contested narratives and controversial issues. More particularly, teachers in Cyprus felt that they need tools to deal with “offensive comments.” Those in Norway and Lebanon focused more on the importance of receiving additional background knowledge on the topics at hand, while educators in Northern Ireland expressed their need for strategies that would lead to better classroom discussions.

In the focus-group discussions, another central point was that teachers prefer specific strategies and didactic examples in alignment with formal curricula instead of general educational packages. This implies a need for adjusting teaching materials

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to the different national contexts, but also highlights the need for practical training possibilities:

“We do not want just another ‘educational package’, but we want training, and we want strategies and concrete examples aligned with the curricula and approved formally so that we feel safe teaching these topics” (Teacher, Cyprus, Focus Group Discussion)

Classroom strategies and access to resources

Currently, teachers are using a variety of tools to teach CN and CI. For example, while role play and teacher presentations ranked low among teachers in all five countries, the use of emotionally engaging materials, including audio-visual tools and personal stories, was notable across contexts, especially in Lebanon and Northern Ireland. However, there was some concern that personal stories might be biased, and there is a need for teachers to be well-equipped to represent multiple perspectives in the classroom.

Therefore, academic institutions and continuous learning initiatives, responsible for the formation of new teachers, could provide training in classroom discussions management, multi-perspectivity and how to avoid teacher bias. However, this should not be restricted to theoretical knowledge only, but could also include concrete strategies and techniques, with a focus on case studies, practical exercises, and exchange of experiences that can be easily adapted based on different contexts. Insights from Lebanon also confirm that methods of teaching CI and CN are not static; on the contrary, they depend on the context and topic at hand. However, use of these techniques should aim to create safe and brave spaces (see chapter 4) for students to share their opinions, and for teachers to develop their abilities, skills, and knowledge to be able to lead group discussions, role play, personal stories, and case studies.

Access to different resources has also emerged as a common need among teachers in Lebanon, Denmark, Norway, Cyprus, and Northern Ireland. It is not only important to develop new resources, but also to collate existing ones. Other types of resources can include short tutorials and the experience of “seeing other teachers teach” to learn from them and develop their own tools. In fact, teachers seemed to agree that discussing such topics with colleagues is important to build competence in dealing with CN and CI.

Conclusion

This chapter set out to explore the rationale for teaching CI and CN, the challenges faced by teachers in different contexts in exploring these issues in their classrooms, and how teachers could be best supported.

In conclusion, there is a strong rationale for engaging with controversial issues and contested narratives in the classroom, aligned with developing students' political and emotional literacy, critical thinking and tolerance. However, the concerns that teachers have in relation to these issues need to be addressed, such their own professional competence, concern for students' emotional welfare and fears concerning back-lash from senior leaders in schools and parents.

Therefore, teachers need to be given tools, strategies and resources to support them in overcoming the barriers to dealing with these issues and encourage them to engage with the opportunities that discussing these issues present for their students. In relation to this, the following points should be taken into consideration:

- The needs of teachers vary with experience, and in relation to the age of their students.
- Support needs to be flexible and adaptable, in order to respond to differing contexts.
- Consideration needs to be given to the place of CN and CI in statutory curricula and the space available to deal with these issues.
- Whilst classroom strategies (including those needed to create a conducive classroom climate) need to be based on sound theoretical and research-informed evidence, to be useful to teachers they need to be practical in nature.
- There is a clear need for strategies to tackle the challenge of finding balance between what is taught in school and what students listen to and learn at home.
- Adequate strategies for teaching CI and CN need incorporate into teachers' official training, and ongoing professional development.

Finally, it is important to note that whilst there are challenges to teaching CI and CN in classrooms, it is evident from the discussion in this chapter that, overall, the rationale for dealing with these issues is stronger than the arguments for avoiding them.

Reflective questions

- What do *you* see as the benefits of teaching controversial issues and contested narratives?
- What do *you* see as the challenges of teaching controversial issues and contested narratives? How is this influenced by your own experiences, the context in which you teach and the types of children and young people you are teaching?
- What are the professional needs *you* have in relation to engaging with controversial issues and contested narratives?

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Chapter 3: Contextualised examples

Introduction

This chapter will provide examples of controversial issues (CI) and contested narratives (CN) from the various countries involved in the ConCitizen project. The chapter is structured according to the national contexts: Cyprus, Denmark, Lebanon, Northern Ireland, and Norway. Each national section starts with a word cloud that highlights the most important examples of CI and CN that could be included in each country's history education, religious education or citizenship education at primary or secondary school level. The actual word clouds are based on inputs from teachers or NGOs, student teachers and education experts participating in the project. Some of the examples are contextual and primarily important in the specific national context, while others are transnational issues, however initiating different debates in the different national contexts. For each country, three examples are then chosen and explained in more detail. The selected examples were highlighted both for their significance in society as well as for their ability to be integrated in the existing curricula.

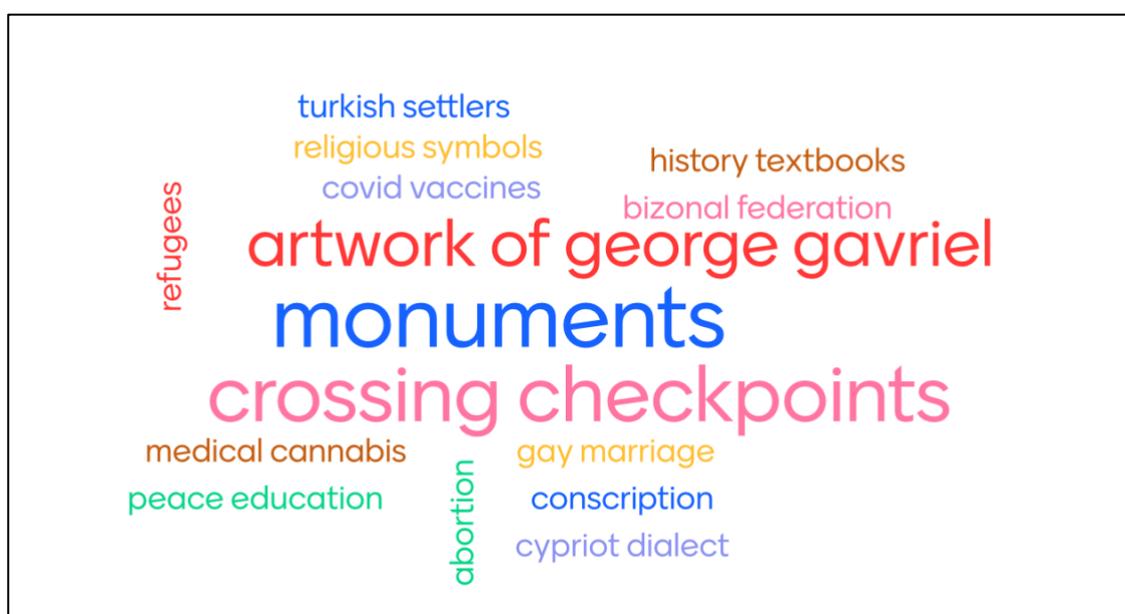
Describing an example of a CI or a CN in a short space is intentional to make it easy for the teachers to use, but at the same time it should be considered that such short descriptions are not exhaustive and do not always do justice to the complexity and nuances of the different sides of the topic. This is particularly the case given the sensitive nature of some of these topics and their ability to invoke intense emotions when discussed. Further reading has been provided at the end of the chapter for those teachers interested in learning more about a specific issue before they teach about it in the classroom.

The context is very important as each country has its own historical, political, religious and cultural sensitivities. Each country also has a different status in terms of its democratic culture, its record of human rights protection, the extent and nature of conflicts and the state of peace. Lebanon, Northern Ireland and Cyprus are deeply divided societies due to their post-conflict or conflict status. Norway and Denmark are not conflict-affected societies in the traditional sense but are still divided on certain topics and have their own collective traumas. However, we also chose topics that can be transnational in nature to show that at their core many controversial issues can be found across borders. Therefore, we encourage teachers to use examples from other countries and to investigate what is at the heart of the issue that may also be present in their own country, albeit with different dynamics, details and characteristics.

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Moreover, we encourage teachers to read through examples from other countries and try to use these first with their students before elaborating on a domestic CN or CI. Studying conflict issues in foreign contexts provides important cognitive and affective distance that may help students comprehend local issues in more depersonalised and less emotionally loaded ways. It also encourages students to look at the causes and dynamics of controversial issues and contested narratives that are universal across contexts and are part of being human in a diverse, digital and increasingly polarised world.

Cyprus



Word Cloud, CI/CN in the Cypriot context

Example 1 (History education): Monuments of Georgios Grivas Digenis [CN]

Georgios Grivas Digenis (1897-1974) is a controversial figure in Cypriot history, and particularly within the Republic of Cyprus. He was the military leader of the EOKA-A (National Organisation of Cypriot Fighters) movement, which fought for independence from the British colonial government between 1955-59.

The ensuing so-called 'Cyprus Problem' was one that involved several internal and external actors, most importantly, the Greek Cypriots, the Turkish Cypriots, Greece, Turkey and Britain. The majority of Greek Cypriots (which was also the majority group in the island, around 82% of the population) regarded themselves as 'Greek' and wanted union with Greece. On the other hand, most of the Turkish Cypriots

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(18% of the population in Cyprus) viewed Turkey as their own 'motherland' and pursued a policy of division of the island. After an intense struggle against the British colonial government, Cyprus gained its independence in 1960.

More than a decade after the independence, Grivas still insisted that Cyprus should unite with Greece. He opposed power-sharing arrangements with the Turkish Cypriots and headed the paramilitary organisation called EOKA-B. This organisation is believed to be responsible for several atrocities including attempted murders against the President of the Republic of Cyprus, Archbishop Makarios. EOKA-B led a failed military coup against the Cyprus government on July 15, 1974, with the support of the Greek military junta, to forcefully achieve union with Greece which had been denied when Cyprus was granted its independence from the British in 1960. Five days after this failed attempt, Turkey invaded Cyprus on the 20th of July 1974 leading to thousands of casualties, missing persons from both sides and refugees. Around 162,000 Greek Cypriots and 48,000 Turkish Cypriots were displaced (Gürel, A. Hatay, M. and Yakinthou 2012). The island remains divided until today. Although General George Grivas died of heart failure in January 1974, six months before the coup, he is still regarded by many as ethically responsible for the military takeover that followed.

Grivas' legacy often evokes strong emotions and disagreements in public discourse amidst the contested historical narrative of the Cyprus conflict, and his statue has been repeatedly vandalised with paint thrown on it (Theodoulou 2021, 2022; see photo). In 2023, violence erupted during the annual memorial service commemorating his death. Some Greek Cypriots view him as a patriotic hero and freedom fighter for his role in the struggle for independence. Others are very critical of his extremism against the Turks and Turkish Cypriots, his targeting of civilians particularly during the intercommunal conflict in the 1960s and more importantly, his role in EOKA-B that staged the coup. Critics of Grivas view him as an extremist figure who is partly responsible for the division of the island, and some argue that had it not been for the coup, perhaps Cyprus would not have gone through the war of 1974 and still be divided today.



Statue of Georgios Grivas in Limassol splashed with pink paint. Photo credits: Cyprus Mail

Example 2 (Religious education): (Irreverent) artwork of George Gavriel [CI]

The following is an example of how religious symbols are used politically and made subjects of public debate. George Gavriel is an art teacher who works as a high school principal at a public school in the Republic of Cyprus. He is also a painter. In September 2020 he sparked a public controversy due to his artworks which he had posted on the social media platform Facebook.

His paintings were viewed by some as blasphemous, provocative and offensive towards Christians and towards the Church of Cyprus as they depicted Jesus Christ naked, as a football fan, drinking alcohol, as a refugee etc. They argued that art also has limits and should not be used as a medium to insult religious symbols and institutions, and by extension the believers. Gavriel's paintings also included a dog urinating on the then Archbishop as well as a dog defecating on Georgios Grivas Digenis statue (see above as well as the image below), which was seen as irreverent towards religious and political figures. The Ministry of Education and Culture responded by starting a disciplinary investigation to determine whether he could keep his position as a high school teacher. In the end, the process was aborted, and George Gavriel kept his position. Those supporting Gavriel argue that the criticism as well as the disciplinary procedure are attempts at censorship and they vehemently support his artwork in the context of freedom of expression.



Painting by George Gavriel depicting a dog urinating on Georgios Grivas Digenis. Photo credits: George Gavriel. In this painting, Grivas, a controversial political figure, is seen as standing in front of the Pentadaktylos mountain range which is under the control of the Turkish Cypriots since the coup. See further examples of George Gavriel's work at <https://www.instagram.com/gavrielpainter/?hl=en> (This page contains images which may be discomfoting or offensive to some individuals).

Example 3 (Citizenship education): Crossing the checkpoints/cross points [CI]

After the Turkish invasion in 1974, most of Cyprus' Greek and Turkish Cypriots have lived separately in northern and southern parts of the island, separated by a UN-controlled buffer zone. The checkpoints separate the internationally recognised Republic of Cyprus in the south predominantly inhabited by Greek Cypriots, from the self-declared Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus in the north, inhabited by Turkish Cypriots and Turkish settlers.

Since 2003, several checkpoints have opened along the UN-patrolled buffer zone that separates the northern and southern parts of Cyprus. These checkpoints were originally established after the Turkish invasion of Cyprus in 1974, when the island was effectively divided. For nearly three decades, movement across the divide was heavily restricted. The reopening of crossing points in 2003 allowed, for the first time in years, people from either side of the island to cross the Green Line, facilitating contact between the Greek Cypriot and the Turkish Cypriot communities. However, since the opening of the checkpoints, crossing these has become highly

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controversial reflecting a range of narratives and motivations. For some, particularly conservative voices, crossing is seen as an act of betrayal and a legitimisation of the other side, reinforcing a nationalist narrative that upholds division and mistrust. Others refrain from crossing not (only) for ideological reasons, but out of fear and concerns about personal safety or the perceived threat posed by the other community — illustrating a narrative rooted in insecurity and trauma.

Conversely, there are individuals who cross to revisit their former homes and reclaim a sense of personal history and loss, driven by a narrative of displacement and memory. Finally, some view the act of crossing and interacting with the ‘other’ community as a deliberate gesture of reconciliation — an effort to build trust and foster rapprochement between the island’s divided populations. These different perspectives reveal how the seemingly simple act of crossing is embedded in complex and often competing understandings of identity, security, and the past.



Roadblock in the Buffer Zone in Nicosia. Image credits: Roman Robroek

Denmark



Word Cloud, CI/CN in the Danish context

Example 1 (History education): Teaching the colonial past [CN]

The colonial past, in the Danish context, refers primarily to the former colonies in the Danish West Indies (US Virgin Islands purchased by the United States in 1917), Iceland (independent republic in 1944), the Faroe Islands and Greenland (still parts of the Danish Realm as self-governing regions). In Denmark, just as in several other former empires and colonies, there has been an increasing awareness of the controversial issues regarding teaching the colonial past, particularly during the past decade. The narratives regarding the historical relations between Denmark and Greenland are highly contested and contain the most controversial issues.

A Danish master narrative about Denmark as a good and benevolent colonial power and the indigenous Inuit people of Greenland as passive beneficiaries has traditionally dominated the perception regarding the relations between Denmark and Greenland. In recent decades, this master narrative has been contested by counter-narratives depicting Denmark as a malevolent colonial power and the Inuit people as either victims or - in recent times - as active agents shaping their own history.

These narratives involve several controversial issues, centred on different views about the historical relationship between Denmark and Greenland, as well as questions of identity and power relations. An illustrative example could be the disagreements in the beginning of 2010 on the need for the establishment of a reconciliation commission. While local politicians from Greenland were actively working for an establishment of a reconciliation commission, the Danish Prime

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minister refused to participate and stated that we (i.e. the Danish people) do not have a need for reconciliation (Andersen 2021).

Another example, highlighting controversial issues regarding identity among the people of Greenland, is when a statue in the capital city of Nuuk in June 2020 was covered in red paint and tagged with Inuit symbols and the word “decolonise” (see photo below). The statue was built in 1922 by the people of Greenland themselves, depicting the Danish Norwegian missionary Hans Egede (Enge 2020; Kleemann-Andersen 2021). In the aftermath this led to a public vote in the municipality of Nuuk on whether the statue of Hans Egede should be removed or not. The public vote resulted in a majority voting in favour of keeping the statue in its original place on a hilltop overlooking the sea (Hyldal 2020; Kleemann-Andersen 2021). This case shows that the narratives about the historical relations between Denmark and Greenland are not only a question of a “Danish” vs. a “Greenlandic” narrative. Both within the Greenlandic and within the Danish society the narratives regarding the historical figure Hans Egede are multiple and contested.



The statue of Hans Egede in Nuuk splashed with red paint. Photo credit: Kunstkritikk

While issues like these have evoked strong emotions and have been seen as issues of great public importance in Greenland for a long time, that has not necessarily

been the case in Denmark. A large part of the population in Denmark has until recently not been aware of the colonial past and its implications on the people and society of Greenland today and have therefore seen this part of history as rather insignificant and not especially controversial.

This has changed with Donald Trump's second term as President of The United States. His repeated statements about a takeover of Greenland by The United States have led to a renewed interest in Greenland and increased awareness of the complexity of the Danish Greenlandic relationship among both Danish politicians and the Danish public at large. With the pressure from the current American government, the communication and cooperation between Greenland and Denmark is undergoing significant changes. While the Danish government is implementing formal recognition of the mistakes of the past, the new political coalition in Greenland has chosen a cautious approach to the question of independence, while highlighting that the cooperation with Denmark must be on truly equal terms.

Example 2 (Religious education): The Muhammad cartoon crisis. Freedom of expression and religious minority rights [CI and CN]

The Muhammad cartoon crisis is probably one of the most serious foreign policy crises in Denmark since World War II. In 2005, the teacher and journalist Kåre Bluitgen claimed that due to fear of reactions from some Muslims, he could not find an illustrator for a book on the life of the Prophet Muhammad. This stirred up a public debate in Denmark about freedom of expression and problems of self-censorship in relation to Islam. In this context, the Danish newspaper *Jyllandsposten* decided to ask professional cartoonists in Denmark to 'draw the face of the prophet.' While some declined out of fear, referring to the recent murder of Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh (in 2004), the paper was eventually able to publish 12 cartoons, most of which depicted the prophet Muhammad, but some of them with an ironic twist towards the newspaper. The cartoons were accompanied by a text by editor Flemming Rose highlighting freedom of expression as a central feature of secular democracy, arguing that all citizens must be willing to suffer taunt, mock, and ridicule – with no exception for religious people. Some Danish Muslim organisations objected to the depictions, filed a judicial complaint for blasphemy against the newspaper and appealed to the Danish government as well as embassies of Islamic countries to act. The conflict escalated in several countries in the Middle East to protests, violent riots, and boycotts of Danish goods. In Denmark, one of the cartoonists was violently attacked and other cartoonists received death threats.

The Muhammad cartoon crisis had both national and international repercussions such as the murder of the French secondary school teacher Samuel Paty in 2020

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and the two deadly attacks in Copenhagen in 2015 at a free speech debate and at the central Synagogue. A recent study from the Danish Centre for Social Science Research about teacher experiences with controversial issues in primary and secondary school, showed that 25% of the teachers have avoided specific issues, which they regarded as controversial, and that the two most often mentioned issues are the Muhammad cartoon crisis and the war between Israel and Hamas (Mortensen et.al. 2025). For the teachers that have avoided some controversial issues, 45% declare that they have avoided the cartoon crisis. Politically it is an ongoing discussion whether the cartoon crisis should be a mandatory part of the history education curriculum. In relation to this, it is also discussed whether the cartoons should be shown during teaching, or the teacher should avoid showing the actual drawings, either out of concern for minority students, or out of fear for violent reactions. Proposals to make the cartoon crisis a mandatory topic in lower secondary school have been presented by a coalition of both left-wing and right-wing parties, but so far, they have been voted down by the sitting government (Hoffmann 2024). Supporters of mandatory inclusion argue that the cartoon crisis is a defining moment in recent Danish history, highlighting key themes such as freedom of expression, secularism, press responsibility, and civic courage in the face of intimidation. Opponents, however, caution that compulsory teaching – especially if it involves showing the cartoons – risks alienating Muslim students, escalating tensions in multicultural classrooms, and possibly provoking security concerns for teachers. Some also argue that pedagogical autonomy should be respected, and that sensitive topics can be addressed effectively without necessarily using controversial visual materials. So far, the issue is left to teacher autonomy, but with teaching resources available – some of which include links to the original newspaper print (see link under references: *Danmarkshistorien* [The History of Denmark]).

The debate involves several controversial issues. First, the possibly colliding rights - on the one hand, a religious minority's right to non-discrimination and on the other hand, the scope of freedom of expression. Furthermore, the debate is linked to identity and power relations. A mostly secular-oriented majority position argues that freedom of expression includes the right to criticise religion, while another position argues that the cartoons were insulting and ridiculing the Prophet Muhammad and thus demeaning towards a religious minority (for a thorough discussion of the dispute in relation to international human rights law, see Human Rights Watch 2006).

In addition, the case contains several layers of contested narratives: Is it a national Danish conflict between different citizens, or is it an expression of a broader conflict between the West and the Muslim world? Was it a smear campaign against Islam and Muslims or a fight for fundamental democratic norms and principles? As the cartoon crisis grew into an international political conflict, authoritarian states as well

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as radical groups tried to exploit the conflict for mobilisation (Klausen 2009; Skovgaard-Petersen 2020). The use of images in Islam contains yet other contested narratives, with some groups upholding a strict interpretation of the ban on images (*aniconism*), while others are aware of the historical use of images in different parts and periods of the Muslim world – including depictions of Muhammad in miniature book illustrations (Skovgaard-Petersen 2020). Generally, the Prophet Muhammad is depicted with his face veiled, but in some illustrations, however, the Prophet's face is shown several times, as in the image below. Such historical sources may open new perspectives, when teaching about the cartoon crisis.



Miniature from the Persian poet Nizami's *Khamsa* (1388) depicting the prophet Muhammad's mystical ascension to heaven on the winged horse Buraq, accompanied by the archangel Gabriel- Photo credits:

<https://www.davidmus.dk/islamic-art>

Example 3 (Citizenship education): Gender and identity [C]

The debate on gender identity in Denmark is complex and evokes strong emotions. Some argue for greater recognition and respect for an individual's self-identification regarding gender, including the right to define their gender independently of biological factors. Often, representatives of this perspective argue that a person is *assigned* a gender at birth, rather than being *born* male or female. This reflects the position that gender is not (solely) biologically determined but socially constructed and experienced. Much of the debate around gender identity hinges on language, which is not merely descriptive but constitutive: the words we use shape how we understand and relate to others. This perspective has led to a desire for a) more inclusive and flexible legislation, such as allowing legal gender transition without the

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requirement of medical treatment and b) respecting the personal pronouns that individuals choose to use such as 'they' and 'them'.

On the other hand, there are those who uphold a more traditional view of gender based on biological criteria like genitals and chromosomes. They argue that biology matters, and they see changes in legislation as problematic and fear the consequences of allowing a more fluid understanding of gender, both legally and socially. This perspective takes a critical stance towards the concept of non-binarity and the revision of personal pronouns. In between these two positions, one can find considerable numbers of people who are still quite open and uncertain about how to navigate between these two opposite poles.

The fact that gender, gender identity, and gender roles are sensitive topics in Denmark is evident from a 2022 documentary, *Danmarks yngste dragqueen* (Denmark's youngest drag queen). The TV crew follows 12-year-old Jeppe, who aspires to be a drag queen and has always loved dresses, glitter, and large wigs. The documentary, which aired on national broadcaster DR, portrays Jeppe's journey as he prepares for his first drag performance and navigates the support and criticism he receives from his surroundings. The documentary sparked widespread public debate: while some praised it for supporting Jeppe's right to self-expression, others criticised the programme for involving a child in what they viewed as adult or sexualised performance culture. The program also sparked many public discussions that were not directly addressed in the documentary. For instance, some were highly critical of the fact that a state-funded television company was seemingly supporting and even promoting transgender rights and ridiculing and even undermining traditional gender roles. These critics also viewed drag queens as individuals who were promoting a particular form of sexuality that children should be protected from. On the other side, there were those who supported Jeppe's right to explore his own gender identity and who were critical of stereotypical gender roles and the expectations regarding gendered interests and clothing. The drag queen community defended itself against the notion that their performances represent a form of sexualized behaviour and they explained that the difference between being a drag queen and being transgender is significant; dressing in "women's clothing" does not necessarily mean that one is a woman.

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A Danish documentary from 2022 follows 12-year-old Jeppe, who wants to be a drag queen. [Danish Broadcasting Corporation, 2022]

Gender and identity may contain several controversial issues in a Danish classroom. It is related to inclusion and consideration of how schools should perceive the minority student who falls outside of "the norm". Should the minority student conform to majority norms? Who defines the norms? The topic is further connected to the power of interpretation of concepts and forms of address: Who decides when a language is derogatory, limiting, and hurtful? Is it the speaker or the recipient or a third party? Finally, it may be linked to cancel culture and arguments for or against censorship of old books, narratives or art that support stereotypical gender perceptions or express derogatory comments about gender.

These topics evoke strong emotions among both students and parents and can be difficult to handle for teachers.

Lebanon



Word Cloud, CI/CN in the Lebanese context (forb: Freedom of Religion and Belief)

Example 1 (History education): The Lebanese Civil War [CN]

The Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990) is one of the most contested and controversial topics related to Lebanon's history, and teaching about this remains a serious challenge for educators. Different parties have their own narratives, which tend to be contradictory, making an agreement on a common narrative to be taught an almost impossible political endeavour. As a result, successive governments have decided to exclude it entirely from the curriculum. Currently, the timeline in history books stops at Lebanon's independence in 1943.

In brief, the Lebanese Civil War started due to various reasons, including sectarian tensions, political instability, regional influence and external interventions (see photo below). It caused hundreds of thousands of deaths (estimated between 150 000 to 250 000) and destroyed most of the country's infrastructure. Although the Lebanese Civil war is usually referred to as "one" war, it can be seen as different "sub-wars", with different warring parties acting in each sub-war. It started with the early clashes involving Christian and Muslim militias, as well as Palestinian fractions; then came the Syrian intervention and influence, the Israeli invasion, the internal multi-party conflict, and finally the Taif agreement (the political agreement that ended the Lebanese Civil War and aimed to restructure Lebanon's political system).

The Lebanese Civil War entails several contested narratives. First, there is disagreement on how the war *started*. Different political parties have different narratives, each blaming the other for the initiation of the war. In other words, these narratives might glorify or justify their own actions while demonising those of others. Second, there is no agreed-upon narrative on what happened *during* the war. And,

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since several events were happening all at once, it would be practically impossible to signify one “narrative” as the correct one. In addition, there are different perceptions of how the war *ended* and of the Taif agreement in general. While some considered that the general amnesty law was needed, as there was no way to identify who should be penalised and who should not, the majority believed that it absolved war criminals and did not leave space for transitional justice and memory healing.



The bus of “Ain El-Remmaneh” is considered a symbol of the Lebanese Civil War. Many believe that the incident, involving Christian Phalangists militiamen attacking its passenger of Palestinian guerilla fighters and civilians, marked the “official” start of the war. Source:

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ain_el_Remmeneh_Bus_Massacre_1975.jpg

Example 2 (Religious education): The “Bikini/Burkini Ban” and Freedom of Religion and Belief [CI]

On May 21, 2023, in an unprecedented move, the municipality of Sidon in Lebanon, an area predominantly Sunni Muslim, banned Western female swimsuits (bikinis) and alcohol on public beaches, claiming that both offend the religious nature of the area and people living in it (Ghoshn 2023). A month later, in response to this “Bikini Ban”, several other beaches, such as those in Damour and Byblos, forbade women from swimming using their ‘burkinis’. The term burkini is a combination of bikini and burqa and signifies a swimsuit covering the whole body except the face, the hands, and the feet. These tourist friendly cities used the same type of arguments about offending people living in their areas. But, in the case of Byblos and Damour, people were supposedly offended by the burkinis, not the bikinis (Taleb 2023).

These two incidents brought about a debate, both in the public sphere and in schools - particularly during religious education classes, and in some cases led to public

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protests (see photo below). The debates centred around the implications of the ban on freedom of religion and belief, as well as on freedom of expression. Human rights in Lebanon tend to be controversial, mainly because several residents consider them Western concepts that do not resonate with the language of the local community. However, the Bikini/Burkini ban sparked more controversy for the following reasons:

First, the nexus between human rights and religious traditions can be complicated. While supporters of both these bans (bikinis and burkinis) argue that they align with the nature of the areas they are imposed in, opponents view it as an infringement on personal freedoms, especially on women's right to express themselves and wear what they want. Opponents also fear that such measures may reflect or accelerate a broader trend toward religious conservatism, or even extremism. *Second*, there can be a lack of awareness of 'Freedom of Religion and Belief' (FORB) in Lebanon and of what it entails. Religious and civic education in schools sometimes overlook the importance of discussing such issues with students, out of fear that such discussions might pull them away from their initial religious belonging. *Third*, there is a close connection between religion and politics in Lebanon with an equal distribution of seats in parliament between Christians and Muslims and a further subdivision into eleven confessional branches. While many consider the close connection between religion and politics necessary in a country with a long and complex history of religious diversity, others believe that religion and politics should be completely separate, especially on issues related to human rights and personal freedom.



Women protesting against the Bikini Ban in Sidon, after the municipality imposed restriction on “indecent” swimwear and alcohol. Source: Al-Jazeera (<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/5/22/lebanon-swimwear-protest>).

Example 3 (Citizenship education): The presence of Syrian refugees in Lebanon [CI]

Since the start of the war in Syria in 2011, the situation of Syrian refugees in Lebanon has raised a lot of controversy. According to the UNHCR, Lebanon hosts approximately 1.5 million Syrian refugees, the highest percentage of refugees per capita and per square metre in the world (UNHCR 2025). The arrival of refugees has been a long-term controversial issue in Lebanon, a country already struggling with corruption, high unemployment rates and finite resources. A large majority of refugees live in challenging circumstances, most often in camps (see photo below) with limited access to necessities including food, clean water and sanitation as well as medical and educational services.

After the economic situation worsened in 2019, followed by the deterioration of the Lebanese Lira, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the Beirut Port explosion, antagonism towards refugees — particularly Syrians — has significantly increased. This hostility intensified after the kidnapping and killing of Pascal Suleiman, a senior official in the Lebanese Christian political party Kataeb, on April 7, 2024. His death, reportedly at the hands of Syrian nationals, triggered widespread public anger and fuelled rising narratives calling for the return of Syrian refugees to Syria (Middle East Eye 2024).

The issue of Syrian refugees in Lebanon has always been controversial but intensifies significantly in certain circumstances for the following reasons: *First*, the question of “return”: While the recurring narrative in Lebanon calls for the return of “refugees”, especially those who can return safely, others argue that there are many other criteria to consider. *Second*, mobility restriction and acts of violence against refugees: Following news of different kidnappings and killings by Syrians, several local authorities have imposed travel curfews on Syrian refugees, restricting their mobility and confining them to their houses during certain hours of the day. Similarly, several individuals all over Lebanon are attacking random Syrians and physically abusing them. All these acts, often being labelled as “revenge”, constitute different violations of human rights – an issue on which Lebanese people do not seem to agree. *Third*, impact on the economy and on demographics: Many consider that the presence of Syrian refugees in Lebanon increase unemployment rates, as they believe Syrians take away job opportunities from the Lebanese. There is some truth to this. as they are willing to work more at a lower rate. Furthermore, the increase in the number of refugees, since 2013, has altered Lebanon’s demography (e.g. the percentage of Muslims increase in comparison to Christians), which has increased the sense of fear among different groups in Lebanon (Fouad 2024).

Since the fall of the Assad regime in Syria in December 2024, it is estimated that some 200.000 Syrian refugees have voluntarily returned to Syria, and by July 1, 2025, Lebanon’s government initiated the implementation of the country’s first

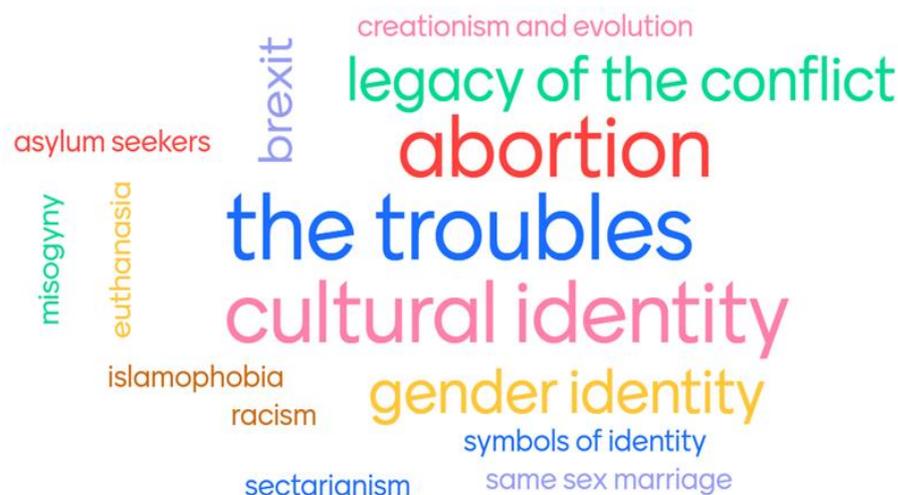
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official, internationally supported plan for Syrian refugee return. Although the plan has promises, severe challenges and dilemmas persist (see: Century International Report 2025). Therefore, the presence of Syrian refugees is still a controversial issue.



An informal refugee settlement in the Beqaa Valley. Source: Creative Commons - Russell Watkins/Department for International Development.

Northern Ireland



Word Cloud, CI/CN in the Northern Ireland context

Example 1 (History education): The ‘Troubles’ [CN]

The most recent phase of sustained conflict in Northern Ireland (colloquially, ‘The Troubles’) is usually dated from the late 1960s through to the signing of a peace agreement in 1998 (known as the ‘Good Friday’ or ‘Belfast’ Agreement). The ‘Troubles’ is most commonly depicted as an internal conflict between two ethno-religious groups with competing national aspirations: the Protestant majority community aligned to a largely Unionist/Loyalist political agenda (i.e. those whose political motivation is to maintain the union with Britain); and a Catholic minority aligned to a largely Nationalist/Republican agenda (i.e. those whose political aspirations are the reunification of Ireland). However, other perspectives also point to the role played by the British state, not only in the ‘Troubles’ but across centuries of conflict in Ireland. Thus, for some, certain acts during the ‘Troubles’ are seen as legitimate aspects of political struggle, whilst for others these are considered acts of terrorism. As such the origins and nature of the ‘Troubles’, and the explanation for its protraction over thirty years are deeply contested, with conflicting perceptions coming from different sections of the Northern Irish society.

Moreover, the violence during the ‘Troubles’ had a significant impact on a small population of around 1.6 million people, with over 3 700 people killed and 47 000 people injured in 16 200 bombing and 37 000 shooting incidents. Thus, very few people in Northern Ireland remain unaffected by its impact and it is widely accepted that the trauma from these past events continues to affect society, making this a highly emotive issue.

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In addition, many legacy issues related to the 'Troubles' remain unresolved as Northern Ireland continues its slow transition to a peaceful society. These involve highly contested matters such as obtaining justice for victims of the conflict, truth recovery processes and the recent highly contentious 'Legacy Act'. This latter legislation was introduced by the British Government in 2023 in order to deal with unsolved killings from the 'Troubles' and to offer conditional amnesty to individuals involved. This was strongly opposed from many quarters in Northern Ireland, especially from victims' and survivors' groups. Following a change of government there is (at the time of writing) a process to repeal the legislation on the grounds that it denies justice to the bereaved and injured. Unsurprisingly, History teachers who are often tasked with teaching this aspect of the past, identify it as one of the most contentious aspects of their curriculum when asked to identify contentious issues as part of this project.



Bomb incident in central Belfast in 1970's (photo by Norman Richardson)

Example 2 (Religious education): Abortion [CI]

Northern Ireland is generally considered to be a relatively conservative and religious society. One issue which is therefore considered highly controversial is abortion, covered in the Religious Studies curriculum in most post-primary schools under 'Christian Ethics'. Notably, the core Religious Studies curriculum is essentially Christian, prepared exclusively by the four main Christian Churches. Thus, in this aspect of the curriculum, students are expected to consider: 'the debate around abortion, taking account social, political, biblical, church and other ethical viewpoints; the views of pro-life and pro-choice groups; the status of the embryo, the sanctity of life and alternatives to abortion' (Council for Curriculum and Assessment 2017). For many teachers and young people this evokes strong emotions and conflicting views which are difficult to navigate. The issue has become even more pertinent in Northern Ireland given recent changes in legislation in relation to abortion.

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Until 2020, in most circumstances, it was a criminal offence in Northern Ireland to have or perform an abortion. The 1967 Abortion Act which made terminations legal in Great Britain up to 24 weeks was never extended to Northern Ireland. This meant that abortions were allowed only if a woman's life was at risk or there was a risk of permanent and serious damage to her mental or physical health. As such, in many cases women from Northern Ireland had to travel to England to access terminations of pregnancy. Since then, periodic attempts were made to change this situation. In particular, these focused on decriminalising abortion and ensuring that abortion services were available in health care facilities in Northern Ireland. This ultimately resulted in a change to the law, in March 2022, permitting abortion in all circumstances in the first 12 weeks of pregnancy, and beyond that in other defined cases.

Several legal challenges have since been brought in an attempt to change this new framework, and as such there has been much public debate, and public protests, involving both pro-choice and pro-life lobby groups. These legal challenges and public protests exemplify the issues at the heart of the debate surrounding abortion: the women's right to reproductive health and choice, and the sanctity of life of the unborn child. The ongoing public nature of these debates in Northern Ireland therefore heightens the sensitivity surrounding this issue, making it a highly emotive topic for teachers to discuss.

Example 3 (Citizenship education): Expressions of cultural identity [CI]

Contested identities are the hallmarks of the world in which children and young people grow up in Northern Ireland, with symbolism relating to competing national and political identities as highly visible features of society and as the subject of much controversy and debate. Often this symbolism is bolstered by religious and cultural differences, evoking sectarian responses. Further, years of conflict have resulted in significant community separation, with approximately 90% of children and young people attending schools which are mainly or wholly representative of their perceived cultural community. Many children and young people therefore lack awareness of 'the Other' which can all too easily lead to prejudice and identity stereotyping. Teachers of citizenship in Northern Ireland therefore identify addressing expressions of cultural identity as a core controversial issue in the curriculum.

Documentation from the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) specifically identifies three controversial issues in relation to culture: the issue of flags, the 'war on terror' (which could include the role of symbols and images seeking to legitimise violent opposition to the state, alongside issues of legacy and justice), and the ways in which people commemorate the past, including the distant

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past. In Northern Ireland there has recently been a period called the 'Decade of Anniversaries', where it has been discussed, how the events of 100 years ago that lead to the independence of Ireland, the partition of the island to create Northern Ireland (and extensive violence from a wide range of actors), could or should be remembered. Discussions about how to commemorate events in the recent past, especially the history of the Troubles themselves, includes disputes over the legitimacy or otherwise of actions by state and non-state actors.

Expression of cultural identity takes a range of forms in NI. Some symbolism is attached to national identity. For example, the flying of Irish or British flags in the separate communities is seen as a marker of a local community's identity and political aspirations and interpreted from those outside such communities as designed to intimidate those with alternative identities (see Nolan et al. 2014). Other symbolism reflects the historical nature of cultural identity in Northern Ireland. Examples of this include: murals (paintings on walls in communities) depicting events from the recent past or further back in history (see photo below); annual commemorations of events, such as the defeat of the Catholic King James by the Protestant Prince William in 1690 (commemorated annually on July 12th by the Protestant/Unionist community; see photo below), or commemorations of internment (imprisonment without trial introduced in 1971 and recognised annually on August 9th in some Catholic/Nationalist communities). Symbolism is also attached to issues such as football teams supported, sports played (see Hargle & Mitchell 2020), language spoken (see Meredith 2024), and even the names of towns and cities.



Republican mural commemorating Bobby Sands, a member of the Irish Republican Army (IRA) who died on hunger strike in prison in 1981 (photo by Norman Richardson)

Whilst attempts are made to address these issues through the right to freedom of expression, as noted above, sectarian attitudes often prevail, resulting in a lack of acceptance of the right of the 'Other' to express their identity (see further resources

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for teachers from the Council for the Curriculum, Examination and Assessment 2019; 2015).



Children in Orange march, 1976 (photo by Norman Richardson)

Norway



Word Cloud, CI/CN in the Norwegian context

Example 1 (History education): The fight for the Sámi people's rights [CN and CI]

The Sámi people, including traditional nomads, reindeer herders, and fishermen, is the indigenous population mainly living in northern Scandinavia. The Sámi people in Norway have fought for cultural autonomy and for specific rights as indigenous people. It is still a controversial issue to what degree the Sámi people should have specific rights, and it is connected to various contested narratives. The dominant narrative about the current situation in Norway emphasises the country as a democratic, pluralistic, and tolerant society, while other, competing narratives emphasise that Norway historically has behaved like an ethnic state, pursuing a dominant, colonial, and sometimes depriving policy. Therefore, the status of the Sámi people in Norway is a controversial issue, representing dilemmas and challenges. For example, there is a need on the one hand to balance the Sámi people's traditional reindeer herding rights and the respect for their cultural practices with – on the other hand - the need to advance environmental goals and develop renewable energy projects in Norway. Balancing Indigenous rights with the urgency of 'the green shift' has become a contentious and complex policy challenge.

It is important to provide some further historical context to understand this topic. From the 1850s, the Norwegian authorities subjected the Sámi population to an intensive policy of assimilation (the 'Norwegianization policy'), that resulted in their marginalization. The schooling system played a crucial role in the cultural deprivation of Sámi children who were sent to boarding schools to be assimilated into a 'civilised Norwegian lifestyle' and language.

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Since the beginning of the 20th century, Sámi leaders have worked for Sámi rights, and especially from the 1970s the debate concerning Sámi issues was elevated to the national level. At this time, the government made the controversial decision to dam the watercourse of the Alta-Kautokeino River, situated in central Sámi areas. Like other indigenous peoples, the Sámi traditionally have a deep respect for the natural resources on land and in water that provide their livelihood. In a marginal Arctic area such as the one in question, encroachment on nature and the development of large water courses may lead to permanent damage and changes in animal and plant life. In turn, this could change the conditions for agriculture, reindeer husbandry and fishing. Many Sámi – and others – protested against new encroachments on nature and the authorities' policies that gradually destroyed their livelihoods and caused them to lose their time-honoured rights. Many Sámi had to move and demanded compensation (Hætta 2002:207). Despite the massive protests in 1979, which initially actually prevented work on the construction road, roadworks started up again in January 1981, and the Sámi lost their case (see photo below). However, the protests resulted in the Sámi Act (1987), with the purpose of enabling the Sámi people to safeguard and develop their language, culture, and way of life. Another result was the establishment in 1989 of the Sami Parliament elected by and among the Sami population. In 1990, Norway (as the only country with Sami population) ratified the International Labour Organisation's "Convention on Indigenous and Tribal people".

In October 2021, the Norwegian Supreme Court stated that newly installed windmills at Fosen (in Mid-Norway), intended to contribute to Norway's supply of sustainable energy, "violates Sámi reindeer herders' right to enjoy their own culture". Since the power company and the government were reluctant to remove the windmills, crowds of young Sámi activists and supporters filled the streets in Oslo in spring 2023, exerting pressure on the Norwegian government.

At the same time, another event was taking place: a governmental reconciliation initiative aiming to reveal the historical suppression of the Sámis was in the final stages of completing its official report. This was part of the work of the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission*, established in 2019 to lay the groundwork for the recognition of the experiences of the Sámi (and some other 'national minority' groups) during the enforcement of the assimilation policy by the Norwegian authorities (Stortinget [Parliament] 2023). A month after the 2023 demonstrations in Oslo, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission presented their investigations of the "Norwegianization Policy and Injustice", stating that "a significant proportion of the population agrees with negative stereotypes about the groups". Was this merely an echo of the past, or evidence that the Norwegian Government still governs in ways

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that suppress the Sámi population? Are minorities' rights in the democratic country of Norway still under pressure by the majority population?

The Sámi case is an example of a controversial issue (CI) that contains several contested narratives (CN). It is a CI because it concerns the question of indigenous people's specific rights in a modern society. Even though the Sámi people are officially recognised as such, practice may differ, as do the opinions among the Norwegian majority population. This is even more the case when facing a dilemma between indigenous rights and environmental concerns. The topic is also a CN: Sámi narratives of being dominated and exposed to a strict assimilation policy, versus the dominant Norwegian narrative of being a democratic, pluralistic, and tolerant state.



Demonstrations against the construction of a hydroelectric power plant in the Alta-Kautokeino River.

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Folkeaksjonen_mot_Altautbyggingen_\(6263033681\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Folkeaksjonen_mot_Altautbyggingen_(6263033681).jpg) Riksarkivet (National Archives of Norway), via Wikimedia Commons.

Example 2 (Religious education): The role of Christianity in a secular society [CN and CI]

Is Norway a Christian or a secular country? This is a controversial issue. Public and political life appears to reflect two competing visions of Norway as a Christian nation but also as a pluralistic society defined by secular norms. This tension is at the heart of the contested narratives Norwegians have about what kind of society Norway is and ought to be.

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Christianity occupies a dual role in Norwegian public life. On the one hand, it remains the religion of the majority population, enshrined in the Norwegian Constitution, and often proclaimed as the nation's main religious heritage. Christian values, alongside humanistic values (e.g. human dignity and human rights), are defined as the ethical foundation of the nation. On the other hand, Christian faith has been in decline for several decades, and Norway is often seen as a secularised country. The main organisation for secular humanists (see: Norwegian Humanist Organisation 2025) has been very successful in Norway, receiving public funding in the same way as religious faith communities since 1981. This organisation, having more than 130 000 members per 2023, has been visible critics of the dominant role of Christianity in the public sphere. To conceptualise Norway today as a 'Christian nation' is thus seen as controversial to many. There is an established narrative tradition in Norway of viewing the nation's history in relation to its Christianisation, but contemporary Norway increasingly regards itself as culturally and religiously diverse. As the King of Norway declared in a speech in 2016 (see photo below): "Norwegians have immigrated from Afghanistan, Pakistan and Poland, Sweden, Somalia, and Syria [...]. Norwegians believe in God, Allah, the Absolute - and nothing" (Kongehuset [The Royal House] 2016). Nevertheless, the same King decided to keep the Constitutional demand (§ 4) that obliges the King to "always profess the Evangelical Lutheran religion" (NRK 2016).

This dual role of Christianity as dominant and dormant is also expressed in public schools and in the mandatory religious education (RE) subject covering religions, worldviews, and ethics. It is dominant in terms of the curriculum as politicians have decided to devote around 50% of its content to Christianity. The name of the subject was also changed in 2013 from "Knowledge of Religion, Philosophies of life and Ethics" to "Knowledge of Christianity, Religion, Philosophies of life and Ethics".

At the same time, quite a few Christian students from the majority population hide their Christian identity, possibly fearing they would be seen as "un-cool". This was the conclusion of a researcher that observed classes in RE across three schools in Oslo and in a town in eastern Norway, meeting more than 400 students: In his study, not a single ethnic Norwegian openly revealed a Christian identity (Iversen 2012). This contrasts with minority students who proudly declare their Muslim, Hindu, Sikh - or Christian identity. Today, being an openly Christian student in the ostensibly Christian Norwegian state can be tricky, especially in Oslo and in urban areas in the South-East of Norway. On the other side, Christian churches have recently noticed an increase in young churchgoers. World unrest, such as war and climate change, are cited as reasons why more young people are turning to church (NRK 2024). Further, on their website, the Norwegian Church writes in March 2025 that the proportion of 15-year-old members who are confirmed in the church (and not in a

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secular ceremony) increased in 2024 for the second year in a row (*Den Norske Kirke* [The Norwegian Church] 2025).

Regarding RE, other research has found that there are challenges connected to a secularistic normativity versus religious discourses in many Scandinavian RE classrooms (Breidlid 2014; Flensner 2020). Students of various religious beliefs, such as Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Sikh - or other, often find together in arguments based on a religious discourse versus a dominant secular mindset. Such tensions in the RE classroom requires awareness by the teacher regarding discourses and regarding her or his own position (Breidlid 2014).



Screenshot from video recording of the Norwegian King's Garden speech in 2016. <https://www.aftenposten.no/norge/i/aLJX5/kongens-tale-nordmenn-er-troendere-innvandrere-tror-paa-gud-og-allah-og-liker-grieg-og-kygo>.

Example 3 (Citizenship education): Values, identity, and diversity of opinions in the wake of the terror attack 22. July 2011 [CI]

On the 22nd of July 2011, a bomb exploded in the government quarter in Oslo, killing eight people. The same afternoon, another 69 people, mostly young people, were killed in a mass shooting at Utøya, a small island not far from the capital city. This was the most significant terror attack in Norway during peacetime and was planned and carried out by the right-wing extremist Anders Behring Breivik. His target was the Labour Party, the democratically elected government, and the Labor Party's youth organisation (AUF). He specifically chose the island of Utøya (which does not have permanent inhabitants) because it hosted the annual summer camp for the Labour Party's youth organisation, making it a symbolic and strategic attack on the Labour party and its future leaders.

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The terrorist justified the attack as a defence against a politically controlled and secret "multicultural project". The attack was ideologically motivated and may be regarded as an attack on Norwegian societal and national self-understanding. In many ways, 22nd of July can be understood in the light of different perceptions of what it means to be a Norwegian today.

After the attack, social and political discourses were concerned with humanistic and democratic values and how the society should protect and promote such values. Several debates on understanding the attack's causes and consequences occurred, illustrating this as a controversial issue. Some argued the attack revealed a failure to confront racism and right-wing extremism; others argued that limited space for immigration criticism had contributed to radicalisation. Was the attack related to a lack of room for diversity of opinions, where voices critical of immigration were not recognised or taken seriously? Or was it the result of a failure to address existing racism and ethnic nationalism? A broader concern emerged over how to build a society that genuinely includes both the majority and the minority populations, while allowing for disagreement and open debate.



Utøya island, showing one of the buildings where the shootings took place. Photo: Hans O. Torgersen. <https://www.aftenposten.no/norge/i/mB70Ov/slik-var-terrordognet-22-juli-2011>.

In 2020, the July 22 terrorist attack was explicitly included into the Norwegian curriculum. Furthermore, primary and secondary education and training are now expected to help prevent "Extreme Attitudes, Actions, and Terrorism" (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training 2020:4). Thus, further discussions and criticism followed regarding the responsibility and accountability of education and teachers in counter-terrorism measures. The attack on July 22 is now a part of Norway's recent history, and it serves as a possible starting point for teaching

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associated topics and perspectives concerning controversial issues in schools and society.

Reflective questions

- What is the controversial issue or contested narrative about? (Use the references and further reading to find more detailed background information).
- How can a specific example from another country be applied in your own national context? What are the similarities? What are the differences? What do these similarities and differences show regarding the various national contexts? Do you know of other similar cases to the ones outlined above?
- What kind of challenges do you anticipate when teaching a specific example? What strategies can you put in place to prevent these or to mitigate their effects?

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Chapter 4: How can we teach controversial issues and contested narratives?

Introduction

How can teachers create conducive classroom environments where young people can engage with controversial issues (CI) and contested narratives (CN)? Drawing on previous research and insights from the ConCitizen project, this chapter will explore these main questions:

- What roles can the teacher take when teaching controversial issues and contested narratives?
- How can teachers create conducive spaces for engaging with these issues?
- How can teachers handle unanticipated controversial issues that might arise in the classroom?

The role of the teacher

What stance should teachers take when teaching controversial issues and contested narratives? Some studies claim that a neutral stance in whole class discussions is the most appropriate position for a teacher to take (Deardon 1981; Hand 2008). It is argued that this allows for a range of different perspectives to be explored in the classroom, without the imposition of the teacher's values, thus developing tolerance towards differing views, encouraging critical thinking and the ability to evaluate evidence and arguments (Cotton 2007). Further, it is suggested that taking a neutral stance, safeguards against teachers either being accused of or complicit in indoctrination (Deardon 1981).

This type of neutral stance has been identified in empirical research studies as one of 'balance' (Hess 2004, 2009) which enhances heterogeneity of perspectives and leaves the 'truth' open in the classroom (Kello 2016). The assumption is, however, that in adopting such a neutral approach the teacher is cognisant of the need to present multiple perspectives and indeed possesses the knowledge of such perspectives to do so.

However, on the institutional level, schools are based on certain values, which teachers should know and refer to. In contexts such as Norway and Denmark, the

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teacher is expected to distinguish between values and beliefs. While teachers are supposed to promote certain values, they are expected to teach in a balanced way and not promote their own personal beliefs or convictions. Formal values may also be expressed in very specific terms. For example, the Danish school aims state that teaching must be “conducted in a spirit of intellectual freedom, equality, and democracy,” while the Norwegian framework declares that education shall be based on values such as “respect for human dignity and nature, as well as intellectual freedom, charity, forgiveness, equality, and solidarity.”

While the formal system of education provides a framework and guidelines, in practice teachers are constantly interpreting the “system of education.” Bakker and Montessori use the concept “normative professionalisation” to describe the interaction between the teacher as a person, the profession and the social and political context (Bakker & Montessori 2016). They see a need for teachers to be aware of their personal values and to reflect on the interplay between formal and personal values in their practice. Such consideration may add relevant nuances to the ideal of neutrality. Self-reflection means that the teachers are aware of their own values as well as the values of the specific school and the fundamental values that are expressed in policy documents and school curricula. In comparison between different school systems, we found that the space for teacher autonomy is dependent on national context. Therefore, the consideration of teacher neutrality must be related to context, but the aspects we discuss below are generally relevant.

In practice, the idea of ‘neutrality’ can be problematic. For example, teachers may consider themselves to be neutral but privilege certain perspectives (Hess 2004), often through the way in which they speak about the issues or ‘give away’ their view through body language, tone of voice etc. (Emerson 2012). Further, some teachers confuse the idea of neutrality with politically centred perspectives (Kandel-Cisco & Flessner 2018). As such, Tamir (2015) suggests that those teaching from a self-declared neutral position often present ideas located in the ‘centre’ of political opinion as neutral facts rather than as one of many perspectives. Kello (2016) claims that ‘neutral’ teachers often strive to ‘smooth over’ controversial issues, aiming at finding a ‘common ground’ or consensus. Such an approach can leave the issue underexplored, and teachers may then, unintentionally, dampen the controversy or even be tempted to omit it (Tamir 2015). Heybach (2014:50) contends further that neutrality as a shield against indoctrination is a “myth”. Instead, he argues that neutrality as a stance reduces teachers to apolitical “automatons” and leads to uncritical, unchallenging teaching. These perspectives, which problematise the idea of neutrality, align with those who argue that education can rarely, if ever, be a neutral endeavour, as it will, for most teachers, inevitably have an end goal of developing democratic citizens, committed to pursuing social justice (Freire 1970;

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Giroux 1988; Ladson-Billings 1995). The concept of normative professionalisation mentioned above add some nuances to the discussion of neutrality, as it enhances the awareness of the interplay between the formal system of education, the school ethos, and the personal values of teachers. The goal of developing democratic citizens may refer to formal aims or a specific school ethos, but each teacher needs to reflect on the meaning of these values and how they come into practice in the classroom.

It has been suggested that approaches other than teacher neutrality may be more appropriate, and perhaps more honest, stances to take. For example, it has been suggested that rather than aiming at neutrality, teachers should consider their own views carefully and aim to take an 'impartial' stance, ensuring that they present multiple perspectives whilst being cautious not to privilege their own perspectives. An 'impartial' stance also creates space for teachers to play 'devil's advocate' as a way of introducing different perspectives to their classes (Kelly 1986).

Reviewing the various forms of both partiality and impartiality in the classroom, Kelly (1986) concludes by advocating 'committed impartiality' as his preferred stance. This stance, he argues, urges teachers to create a respectful classroom where competing viewpoints receive a "fair hearing", and where teachers "state rather than conceal their own views on controversial issues" (Kelly 1986:130). He cautions though that they should do so by avoiding "heavy handed advocacy" and should be "judicious" (130) in deciding when and how to state their opinions.

Kelly and Brandes (2001) conducted a study on how student teachers' perspectives shifted out of neutral over the course of their teacher education. Based on this they advocate that teachers should adopt a stance of inclusive and situated engagement. This approach, they suggest, is 'inclusive' in that it seeks to attend to perspectives of excluded minorities. It is 'situated' in that teachers acknowledge that they are located within a "particular landscape of identities, values, and social situations from which they view the world". Finally, it promotes 'engagement' in that it requires teachers to make their viewpoints known, and to ensure that these are open to critique. Teachers are, therefore, expected to "model reasoned inquiry and action" (Kelly & Brandes 2001:452).

Emerson (2012) suggests that teachers should reflect on the range of stances they might take, critically evaluating each in relation to the context in which they are teaching, the young people they are teaching (including their age and maturity), the nature of the issue with which they are engaging, and their own positionality on these issues. Some of the stances she encourages teachers to evaluate are summarised in Table 4.1 below.

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Teacher Stance	Description	Considerations
Neutral Facilitator	The teacher always acts as a neutral facilitator – never expressing a personal view at all.	The ideal of the neutral facilitator does not consider that teachers will often reveal their own position through the tone of voice, the use of language, and the use of body language.
Impartial Facilitator	The teacher recognises that while he/she has his/her own views, he/she provides a fair and balanced representation of a wide range of perspectives.	Many teachers aim to adopt an impartial stance. However, this again is difficult to achieve, particularly if the teacher has very strong views on a topic.
Declared Interests	The teacher states his/her position on an issue, particularly if he/she has strong views on it - so that the students know where he/she stands.	This is particularly important if the views of the teacher are already well known in the community. However, teachers can strive to carefully model to students not only why they have arrived at their own views but also how to show respect for a range of other views.
Devil's Advocate	The teacher deliberately expresses a view contrary to the view of the class, in a situation where there is consensus among the students on a certain issue. This allows the airing of more perspectives on the issue.	There also will be times when students' views need to be challenged, and teachers may then act as devil's advocate, particularly when the class appear to hold the same view. In this case the teacher can deliberately inject controversy to ensure that students are exposed to a wide range of perspectives.
Official View	The teacher takes the official view, representing the formal system of education, the view of the school or the view of the community.	In many schools, teachers are expected to present the official view - in faith schools particularly on issues of morality. In some cases, this may be challenging for the teacher.

Reflecting on different teacher stances (based on Emerson 2012)

Notably, whilst the debate in the literature on teacher stance, and in particular the question as to whether teachers should give their views in class is extensive, very little attention is paid to the extent to which young people should be asked to give their views. Indeed, it is often assumed that whilst teachers should conceal their views, young people should be encouraged to express theirs. Bigelow (1997)

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considers this to be disingenuous: teachers claiming to have no view, whilst expecting young people to declare theirs. Emerson (2012) recognises that this might be due to teachers' concerns that sharing their view could add to a climate of 'right-answerism': young people will feel silenced by the teacher's perspective and feel the need to agree with what the teacher has said. She offers a way of managing this dichotomy: teachers should, for example, avoid asking students, 'What is your view?', and instead reframe the question as, 'What might someone think about this issue?' or 'What is the range of views on this issue?' Teachers could also assign students a range of different views and ask them to argue for a particular view during the discussion, regardless of their personal view. This, she suggests, not only develops young people's critical skills, but also ensures that a range of views are explored in the class without young people feeling exposed to expressing their own opinion. This approach is often termed "distancing". By encouraging students to investigate or argue for different views on a specific question they establish a distance to their own position and feelings about the issue at hand and try to understand other perspectives. Further, she contends that this provides a useful strategy for addressing Bigelow's (1997) critique noted above: multiple perspectives are explored without any of those perspectives necessarily being linked to either the student or the teacher (Emerson 2012).

Above we have primarily addressed teachers' stance and teachers' neutrality to controversial issues. However, this book is also concerned with how the teachers should handle the challenge of contested narratives. Here, also, is a neutral stance, or "committed partiality" (Kelly) normally a constructive approach, apart from cases of conspiracy theories. Approaches to contested narratives are elaborated in chapter 5.3 below, where we focus on multi-perspectivity and collective memory.

Regarding the discussion of teacher neutrality, we may add that 'taking the official view' will often imply a process of interpretation and careful consideration by the teacher, including context. The Norwegian researcher Marie Lippe discusses criteria for what should be taught as either controversial or as settled, using the example of ritual male circumcision (Lippe 2021). Both male and female circumcision have caused major disputes in Norway. While female circumcision was quickly banned as a harmful practice, male circumcision is still legal. The question is whether male circumcision should be taught in Norwegian schools as a settled issue, or if it should be taught as a controversial issue. To make an informed choice, the teacher must look at both the arguments supporting the practice, based on various knowledge producers (e.g. religious specialists, anthropologists, WHO etc.) and to the current public debate. Based on the contradictory positions regarding this issue, she concludes that male circumcision should be taught as a controversial issue, while, on the other hand, female circumcision should be taught as a 'settled' issue, since it is

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generally considered a harmful practice. This means that what should be taught as controversial, or as settled, is not always given (see chapter 1). In any case, the teacher should consider what subject knowledge and which sources for analysis are relevant and illustrate different positions in current public debate on the matter. In the case of ritual circumcision, this could be both legal knowledge (what does the national law say about this matter?), knowledge about religious traditions and human rights.

The role of the teacher: Findings from the ConCitizen project

The empirical data from the ConCitizen project revealed that in conflict-affected contexts or in contexts with a recent history of conflict (such as Lebanon, Cyprus and Northern Ireland), classroom discussions about CI and CN occur regularly, permeating subjects such as history education, religious education and citizenship education. This does not mean that teachers in other contexts do not face the need to tackle these issues in their classrooms. Across all contexts it was noted that current societal issues, often related to ethics, gender, politics, culture and other forms of social debates, could also arise as controversial in classrooms.

Teachers across all the contexts recognised that they face an increasing challenge within their classrooms with the rise of globalisation and transnational issues that affect children and adults alike. Even though, as discussed in chapter 2, some teachers may avoid teaching CI and CN, out of fear, anxiety, or lack of confidence, the teacher participants in this project were keen to engage with these issues and to adopt a productive role in the classroom.

Moreover, it was evident that these teachers broadly adopted 'impartial' stances, seeking to present multiple perspectives in addition to students' own expressed views. As a teacher from Lebanon expressed:

I try to adopt the (different viewpoints) strategy, where students are allowed to express their own opinions on a certain topic, and where I, myself, try to present the different angles of a certain topic.

Some teachers also indicated that they used deliberate strategies to encourage students to engage with a range of perspectives without asking those students to give their own views:

I often have discussion groups where each group is given one point of view, and then they must find arguments for that point of view. Then, it does not matter whether they mean it or not. Just to create some distance between the claims and the individuals. [...] Then the more argumentative comes in: How do you build an argument? (Teacher, Norway).

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Resonating with the literature discussed above, student teachers who participated in the virtual exchanges also reflected on the notion of neutrality in the classroom, and on how to find balance between a 'neutral stance' and engaging in open conversations, where personal views were expressed. Notably, a key learning point identified by participating student teachers in the project was the extent to which a teacher *could* and *should* be neutral. Through dialogue with other student teachers, they experienced a change of positionality in relation to neutrality, as they began to consider a range of other potential stances, such as those outlined above.

The classroom climate

Much of the literature on teaching controversial issues focuses on the need to foster open, trusting classroom climates in which young people are enabled to express their views as well as listen to the views of others as they seek to understand alternative perspectives (Reynolds et al. 2020). Empirical evidence suggests that teachers play a pivotal role in this, in that they can create a conducive climate by attending to power dynamics in the classroom and building positive relations between the young people there (Lusk and Weinberg 1994; Lintner 2018; Saetra 2021) so that young people feel heard and respected. Moreover, teachers need to model and encourage critical inquiry, while also attending to the emotional dimensions of engaging with controversial issues (Middendorf et al. 2014; Jerome & Elwick 2020; Donnelly et al. 2024). As McCully and Emerson (2014) suggest, balancing both the cognitive and affective domains of learning is crucial in attending to these issues. In the following we discuss strategies which influence the classroom climate, like safe and brave spaces, difficult knowledge and sensitivity, pedagogies of discomfort and empathy, and communities of disagreement.

Creating safe and brave spaces

When teaching includes CI and CN, there are often strong emotions at play. Teachers are therefore often advised to establish a 'safe space' before they teach such issues. A safe space is commonly defined as a metaphorical space in which students are sufficiently comfortable to take social and psychological risks by expressing their individuality (Barrett 2010).

Jackson's (2014) characterisation of a safe space, or a desired classroom atmosphere in relation to religious education, is equally applicable to other subject areas in which CI and CN are addressed. In particular, he identifies the following:

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- A safe space is a place where students are encouraged to express themselves without fear of judgment or ridicule and express their views and positions openly, even if these differ from those of the teacher or peers.
- In a safe space sensitivity is shown to the belief and values positions of individual students.
- A safe space is a place with commonly agreed procedures for expression and discussion.

Notably, Jackson (2014:49) points out that it is not possible to make a classroom entirely safe, only to make it *safer*. In line with this, Callan (2020) argues that the concept of a safe space has become a politicised battleground between two opposing views. According to Callan, on the one hand, there are those who believe a safe space is a place where they can express their opinions freely - even if those opinions are based on stereotypes, non-academic knowledge, and are offensive to others. On the other hand, there are those who view a safe space as a place where they are not contradicted, questioned, or subjected to offensive remarks. Callan (2020) introduces a distinction between "dignity safety" and "intellectual safety." Dignity safety refers to the respect that every person is entitled to simply by virtue of being human. This means that one should *always* feel secure from, for example, racism and discrimination. In contrast, he argues that no one is entitled to intellectual safety, as a fundamental aspect of education is to challenge students' knowledge and beliefs, and to analyse historical sources that may contain racist and sexist content.

Other scholars who discuss controversial issues and contested narratives in education argue that a safe space must be complemented by a *brave* space (Flensner & Lippe 2019). In a brave space, individuals are willing to engage in dialogue even when they know they will be challenged and may be affected or unsettled by what others say and believe. This implies a willingness to give up intellectual safety. The most important characteristic of a brave space therefore is that it is a place where one can feel confident enough to ask curious, critical, and possibly sensitive questions but also be willing to answer the same kinds of questions oneself.

Difficult knowledge and sensitivity

Research on controversial issues will sometimes use categories such as sensitive issues or difficult knowledge. In chapter 1 we defined controversial issues as: *Issues of public importance that generate conflicting views and evoke strong emotions which result in reactions or avoidance.* We noted that research includes a discussion

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on the criteria for determining whether an issue is settled or controversial. Some issues that are considered settled in the context of society may still be sensitive, as the content is emotionally challenging. In history education, subjects such as genocide or slavery include 'difficult knowledge' (Britzman 1998; Johannesen 2024), as the students are confronted with photographs, objects, or memory sites. Difficult knowledge refers to content that exceeds what we are willing and able to understand and creates a psychological reaction when it is confronted (Simon 2011; Johannesen 2024). While the physical and emotional reaction in confrontation with the suffering of other people means that such issues can be categorised as sensitive and that they may enhance ethical commitment or consideration, they are not necessarily controversial.

In her study of the teaching of genocide in history education, Johannesen found three types of student reactions. The first was to 'stay' with the difficult elements and express shock and dismay. The second was to use humour, sarcasm or irony to create a distance. And the third was to use moral comprehension in their processing (Johannesen 2024). For the teacher this means that it is necessary to be aware of the emotional sensitivity as well as the ethical potentials in the confrontation with difficult knowledge. While it is not a goal to avoid sensitive issues, it is important to offer space for reflection and processing of such difficult knowledge (Bormann 2018; Johannesen 2024). And for some issues the teacher also needs to consider whether some students are more sensitive to specific issues because of family or community history.

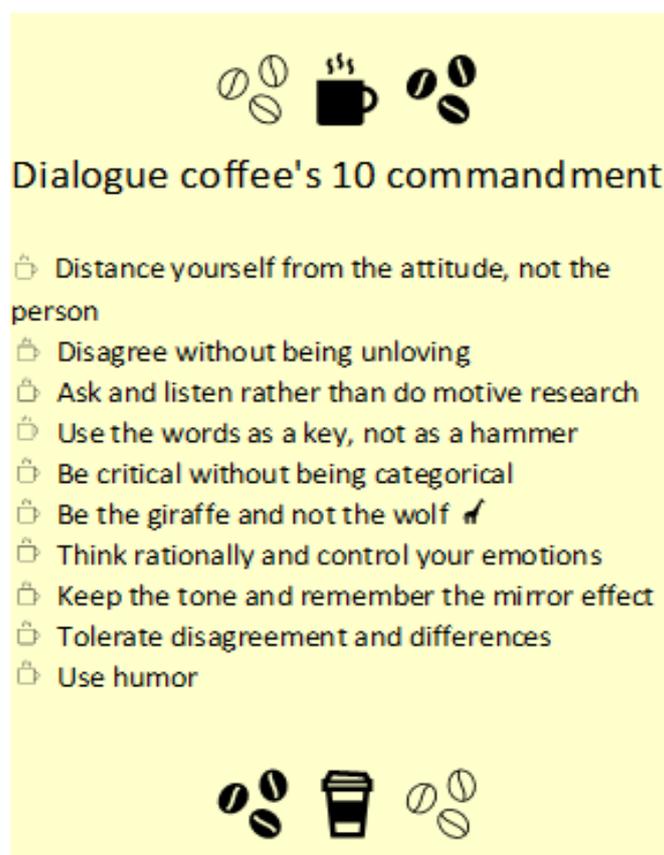
Difficult knowledge may lead to a degree of discomfort in the classroom. However, as Judith Butler (2005) argues, individual and social transformation when dealing with sensitive issues may be impossible without enduring some sort of discomfort, or "ethical violence". Indeed Shoshana Felman (1992), writing in the context of her work on stories of suffering and trauma in relation to teaching about the Holocaust, claims that discomfort can be both inevitable and ethical under certain conditions. She argues that if teaching does not hit upon some sort of crisis, if it does not encounter either the vulnerability or the explosiveness of a (explicit or implicit) critical and unpredictable dimension, it is perhaps "not truly taught" (Felman 1992:53). She concludes that she views her role as a teacher as creating the highest level of intellectual challenge in the classroom that students can handle without becoming overwhelmed, while also respecting their personal boundaries (Felman 1992:53).

It is relevant to consider how Felman's strategy can be related to the affective classroom, where *brief moments of discomfort* are intended to develop a more inclusive classroom. To establish *brave spaces*, with room for such brief moments of discomfort, requires dialogical skills. We recommend that in advance of working with sensitive and controversial issues, teachers and students agree upon what form of

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dialogue is to be used. We suggest using dialogue to involve the Other in a joint exploration – and behave inquisitively and not try to convince the Other. In a dialogue, the Other has co-influence or co-determination. It is important to emphasize that dialogue is not primarily giving or receiving information - if we only transfer information and do not listen and exchange thoughts, we cannot call it a dialogue. In a dialogue, one strives to speak at eye level and avoid criticism and preconceptions of the Other. This means using dialogue where the practice of “share - dare – care” is in focus (Bloch-Poulsen 2006). Dialogue is a way of relating to other people and other cultures and contexts.

In virtual exchange on controversial issues and contested narratives, students were introduced to ten principles or “commandments”. These are designed by a Danish NGO, *Brobyggerne* [The Bridge Builders], founded by the Kurdish-Danish former member of the Danish Parliament, Øzlem Cekic. After receiving a significant amount of hate mails, she wondered: “Who are those people threatening me and my family?” She began to invite herself to coffee at the home of the perpetrators. Her experience is that only through dialogue and honest curiosity is it possible to counteract polarization and increase mutual understanding. We find that the same ten principles apply when the content of the dialogue is controversial issues and contested narratives.



Brobyggerne [The Bridge Builders] 2025

Fostering Pedagogies of discomfort and empathy

As discussed above, dialogical skills are required to establish brave spaces, with room for brief moments of discomfort. Boler's (1999) pedagogy of discomfort highlights why paying attention to discomforting feelings is important to take into consideration when teaching CI and CN (see also Zembylas & Boler 2002; Boler & Zembylas 2003; Zembylas 2010, 2015, 2023). As a response to feelings of discomfort, cultivating empathy makes an important contribution in handling the challenges emerging from difficult knowledge (Zembylas & Papamichael 2017).

Pedagogy of discomfort is grounded in the assumption that discomforting emotions are important in challenging dominant beliefs, social habits and normative practices that sustain stereotypes and social injustice, and in creating openings for empathy and transformation. As Boler proposed, pedagogy of discomfort as a teaching practice "begins by inviting educators and students to engage in critical inquiry regarding values and cherished beliefs, and to examine constructed self-images in relation to how one has learned to perceive others" (1999:177). Pedagogy of discomfort, then, has as its aim to uncover and question the deeply embedded emotional dimensions that frame and shape daily habits, routines, and unconscious complicity with hegemony.

In teaching CI and CN, a major challenge is how to connect the experience of discomfort with the experience of empathy. There are three important qualities in empathy (see Halpern & Weinstein 2004) that make it particularly important for teaching these issues. First, it entails seeking the individual perspective of another; this can serve as an important motivation and encouragement to put oneself in another's circumstances and to recognize that he or she possesses the same rights. Second, empathy involves a genuine effort to get to know the Other and his or her perspectives. Third, empathy involves emotional as well as cognitive openness, and the toleration of ambivalence. The ability to tolerate ambivalence entails viewing differences as an enriching part of creating an ongoing workable relationship. For these reasons, becoming able to empathise with the Other's experiences and narratives is probably one of the most challenging goals in teaching CI and CN. 'Pedagogies of empathy', are those pedagogical practices that offer opportunities so that students cultivate the qualities discussed above.

Some pedagogical strategies for promoting pedagogies of discomfort and empathy include the following:

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- developing a supportive emotional atmosphere and a trusting, open relationship between teacher and students
- being sensitive to students' personal biographies; sharing one's biography and explicitly acknowledging how the teacher and students feel about the issue at hand
- emphasizing the importance of teachers and students reflecting critically on their emotions
- creating opportunities for teachers and students to gain experience of working with less contentious issues and moving gradually to more controversial ones
- recognizing and examining multiple perspectives and interpretations
- using familiar active approaches such as discussion, small groups, and independent learning as short-cuts into controversy

The dynamics between discomfort and empathy reflect the challenges that students as well as teachers may experience in diverse classrooms, where different values, biographies and narratives are in play. The critical inquiry of values and beliefs can enhance the ability to question prejudices and the perception of the Other. Critical self-examination and the development of empathy relate to psychological and emotional processes that support the effort to know and respect the other person.

But in the teaching of contested narratives, we need further consideration, especially regarding different interpretations of historical and current events or religious texts. As mentioned in chapter 1 it is helpful to distinguish between public history, social memory, and academic history. While public and social history serve the needs of ordinary people and reflect the political uses of history, academic history must answer critical questions concerning its evidential base (Ahonen 2019). In the classroom, teaching contested narratives and controversial issues needs to combine an awareness of the emotional dimensions with academic tools. The critical investigation of narratives, both historical and current, will in some cases reveal that narratives can be based on false assumptions or reflect values which conflict with democratic societies and human rights. To empathise with the other as a person includes the courage to pose critical questions and to disagree. In line with this point, the next section will discuss, how teachers can develop constructive “communities of disagreement”.

Developing communities of disagreement

The sociologist and educationist Lars Laird Iversen defines a community of disagreement as “a group of people with different opinions who share a common

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challenge or problem” (Iversen 2014). Such communities are found in several arenas, for instance national societies, religious communities, or classrooms. Iversen applies the expression “irreducible disagreement” to indicate that the disagreement in these cases also persists after the facts have been clarified. Since it is a question of a real disagreement, communities of disagreement may function as a key to democratic processes.

Iversen (2017) argues that the school is an arena where values are tested and that open, safe, and challenging classrooms can foster reflection, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills, thereby shaping the citizens of tomorrow. Contrary to this, suppression of opinions and dissent may lead to arguments not being heard, and aspects of knowledge and information being left unexplored. There is a widespread understanding that good communities depend on participants agreeing on specific values, but Iversen argues that a community can exist even if different values are held. A basic recognition of disagreement, and not consensus or concealment, may stimulate pupils to creative thinking and active participation in the classroom, which can foster democratic skills. Iversen outlines three approaches to promoting such communities of disagreement (Iversen 2017:113-114):

Distinguish between expression and self-presentation: Since pupils are often concerned about whether raising their opinion will affect their social status in the class, it can be useful for the teacher to facilitate discussions where the individual pupil does not have to identify with the arguments, she/he gives. Structured argumentation exercises can be useful, for instance discussions where participants must switch points of view halfway through. Another strategy (as also mentioned above) is the “devil's advocate”, where a student has the task of finding counterarguments. Such strategies separate what is said from who says it, and ideas can be examined without the students' status being at stake. Not at least, they are exposed to various angles of an issue, which can improve the multi-perspectivity embedded in the class as a community of disagreement (Iversen 2014).

Separate idea production from idea assessment: Coming up with new ideas is a cognitive process different from the cognitive process involved in evaluation of the same ideas. The brainstorming strategy focuses on doing one thing at a time. The first step is to produce as many ideas as possible; the second step is to start a critical evaluation process, where good ideas are identified and further developed, while useless ideas are put aside. The students' task is to list as many arguments as possible for both sides of the issue in focus. Such an exercise may also help to weaken the bond between expression and self-presentation.

Establish standard norms for interaction: There are already several established forms of interaction, discussion and argumentation within a group. Conversations

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regarding basic rules for discussion and disagreement in a class are important strategies towards well-functioning communities of disagreement, since a common understanding of the desired *form* will affect the constructiveness of such interactions. Iversen mentions that to be aware of domination techniques (see Ås 1979) could be a possible starting point, as this helps to deconstruct such techniques and be conscious of the power mechanisms embedded in them. Since established norms create ideas about what is considered 'normal', they also create the contrast: notions of what is 'abnormal' or 'different'. By “norm-critical pedagogy” we are referring to teaching and perspectives that critically engage with exclusionary norms in the society. Established norm sets, and norm-critical tools, can be a starting point for classes to create their own interaction norms adapted to their specific situation.

Creating constructive communities of disagreement also relies on the development of constructive dialogue. In addition to opportunities for practical conversation in small and large groups, the students should also be equipped with skills to identify communication patterns and contribute constructively to a conversation.

The classroom climate: Findings from the ConCitizen project

Findings from the ConCitizen project confirm that some teachers avoid CI and CN out of fear that classroom conversations may become too heated. The virtual exchange sessions between student teachers made them aware of how difficult knowledge and pedagogies of discomfort can both increase the students' knowledge of a specific topic and enhance empathy. This was expressed by one of the participants in a reflection note after the virtual exchange:

I have learned that it is very important to use difficult knowledge as an entrance towards working with CN and CI because when you use pedagogies of discomfort in the classroom the students will learn to manage their feelings, when these issues and narratives come up and then be better able to control them, when they meet a similar situation later in life. It is essential to touch these difficult subjects so that it makes a difference in the life of the students. In the end, the goal should be to raise awareness and develop respect, trust and understanding.

Most of the participants agree that creating a safe classroom climate is essential. When students feel safe, they also feel more empowered to engage in controversial discussions and to express their opinions without fear of repercussion. Some teachers highlighted the importance of laying ground rules and procedures (a 'classroom contract') to help deal with offensive comments and manage heated discussions.

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In addition, some student teachers highlighted the value of background knowledge and classroom management techniques. Teaching students to engage in dialogue and deal with confrontation is important, but this should be in alignment with a consideration of context. Most importantly, it was emphasised that trust builds good relationships between students, allows them to get to know each other better and ensures that discussions remain constructive rather than too confrontational. As one of the participating student teachers expressed,

The valuable lesson I have acquired is that establishing a foundation of trust within the classroom environment serves as the cornerstone for initiating any discussion session, irrespective of the contentious or discomforting nature of the topic at hand.

However, trust also requires an effort from teachers, who should know how to react to overly heated exchanges and handle rude or offensive comments without sidelining active participants or making them feel unsafe to share their opinions. One student teacher described this as 'disarmament methods', where the teacher supports students to engage in classroom conversations without being too confrontational. Choosing and implementing appropriate practical strategies in the classroom will often entail dilemmas for the teacher. How different strategies work will also be dependent on the context, the students, and the teacher-student relationships. The next paragraph will further discuss some practical strategies.

Practical strategies

Practical strategies that can be implemented in the classroom to develop a conducive climate are discussed in academic literature, previous research and support resources on teaching CI and CN (McCully 2004; Emerson 2012; Council of Europe 2020; Oxfam 2018; Reynolds et al. 2020). Drawing on the issues raised by teachers and aligned with the principles from literature discussed above, this section summarises dilemmas in and discussions of practical strategies.

A basic practical strategy is the establishment of 'ground rules' or 'class contract' to guide conduct and dialogue in the classroom. Involving the students in the formulation of ground rules will enhance their experience of a shared responsibility.

Therefore, it is important that rules are:

- developed and agreed collaboratively with students
- adhered to by both the students and the teacher

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- clear, concise and specific (an overlong list of ground rules becomes impractical to use)
- inclusive, reflecting diverse perspectives
- transparent, with the rationale behind each rule clearly articulated
- regularly revisited and reinforced
- flexible, adapted as necessary

A further development can address basic principles for:

- respectful communication
- equality of opportunity in contributions to discussions
- distinguishing between person and attitudes
- acknowledgement that we can 'agree to disagree'

There are different approaches to why and how rules should be established in the classroom. On the one hand, Iversen argues that the school is an arena where different values are tested and negotiated. His aim is to create open, safe, and challenging classrooms that will stimulate reflection, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills. This is in line with the idea of the classroom as a brave space, where it is possible to ask critical questions, be confronted with difficult knowledge and tolerate disagreement and differences.

Emerson (2012) on the other hand, suggests that whilst ground rules can usefully articulate the expected behaviour, conduct, or 'decorum' in a classroom, it is also necessary to agree on core values. She argues that this can be achieved by asking students to articulate the values they feel should underpin the ethos of the classroom. In her view, the teacher can also share their own values, and where appropriate draw in the values that underpin the school ethos itself. As mentioned above in the discussion of teacher stance, the framework of values for schools is context dependent. In Norway and Denmark, freedom of mind is explicitly mentioned in the national aims of public schools. As this should be balanced with other values such as equality and respect for human dignity, the definition of core values may entail dilemmas and conflicts.

Using human rights as guiding principles can be helpful in addressing such dilemmas, discussing with students how to deal with collision of rights or contrasting values. For example, freedom of expression, freedom from discrimination, the right to security of person, right to privacy etc. Emerson (2012) argues that once a set of

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core values has been agreed upon, it is important for students to explore what these mean in practice, and that they are involved in formulating them in a student-friendly way and practice them together with the ground rules in the classroom. Useful strategies include students summarising the values in a short 'catch-phrase'; students developing a graphic or formal statement to summarise their agreed vision. These can then be used before and during discussion of CI or CN to remind students of the values that should underpin what they say and how they express views. However, if the aim is to create challenging classrooms and stimulate critical thinking, this should be combined with opportunities for reflection and investigation of the core values adjusted to age and maturity.

Despite best efforts to ensure respectful relations and constructive classroom climate, situations can arise when students make inappropriate, biased or offensive comments. In such situations the teacher is challenged to act but may be afraid to make the situation worse. A possible reaction is to remind students about the ground rules and agreed values, but if this is not followed by further measures, the teacher might miss an opportunity to embrace the situation as a 'teachable moment': an unexpected opportunity to learn something; a chance to impart additional knowledge or skills. Initially, it can be helpful to take a moment to pause and decide, whether to address the comment immediately, take it separately with the student after class or declare that this is something the class will come back to next time. If the teacher decides to address the situation immediately and use it as a teachable moment, she or he could try to clarify the student's comment by asking questions, establishing facts about the issue and providing a basis for understanding of the situation for the whole class (see University of Michigan 2020).

Unanticipated issues

Controversial issues can be part of the curriculum and the lesson plan, but they can also be raised unexpectedly by students in the classroom. As stated by Journell (2018:3):

“Even if a teacher could somehow remove all issues from the formal curriculum, there is no way to prevent students from raising issues on their own, and once they do, the teacher either has to acknowledge those issues as valid or dismiss them.”

Sometimes there is difference between what the teacher perceives as controversial and what the students perceive as such. In chapter 1, we mentioned a Norwegian teacher who raised the issue of the use of the niqab among Muslim women. She assumed this would spark a heated debate, as was the case in the media, but it

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turned out to be completely uninteresting for the students. However, several students in the same class came up with an unexpected and controversial comment about the European, especially Norwegian, treatment of the Ukrainian refugees versus the treatment of other refugees. The students insisted that the Ukrainian refugees were received and treated in a much kinder way, compared to how they themselves, as Syrians or refugees from North Africa, had been treated. They wondered whether the reason for this (perceived) discrimination was the difference in skin color. In this case, the teacher was caught off guard, feeling uncomfortable, confronted with this unexpected and personalized issue.

However, in most cases the teachers should not be that surprised, since the issues raised by the students are mainstream controversies, also emerging in society and in media, such as freedom of speech, rule of law, gender issues and LGBTQ communities, terrorism, the economy, as well as migrants and refugees (Cassar et al. 2023). In addition, wars and conflicts which represent transnational challenges and cause polarized public debate, such as the wars and conflicts in the Middle East, are issues that may be raised by students in the classroom. Nevertheless, this requires the teachers to navigate wisely, since it is generally more demanding for the teacher when questions are raised unexpectedly by the students than when they are prepared as part of the lesson plan.

It may be useful here to distinguish between “teaching controversial issues”, and “addressing unplanned controversial issues” which arise sporadically, unexpectedly, and authentically in the classroom (Cassar et al. 2023). While some teachers tend to avoid any unplanned issues, others choose to address them. Even when an issue is expected to arise in class, as in the wake of a terrorist attack, teachers may struggle to make sense of the events in real time, or they can be taken off guard by the way in which the issue manifests itself in the classroom (see Breidlid 2021).

Unanticipated issues and questions can arise in any classroom at any time, and the teacher must decide quickly whether she will address the issue or not. As elaborated in chapter 2, many teachers tend to avoid controversial issues, even if they are part of the lesson plan. They experience challenges related to time and resources, but even more related to knowledge and skills, as well as fear of negative reactions from students, parents and school leadership. Cassar et al. (2023) claim that avoidance both related to “teaching controversial issues” and to “addressing unplanned controversial issues” has increased among teachers all over Europe, especially after the murder of schoolteacher Samuel Paty. This happened outside his school in Paris after showing cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad during a class on freedom of expression.

Cassar et al. found that a crucial part of the rationale for teachers who addressed unanticipated issues raised by students, was that they acknowledged the classroom

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as a 'political site'. This is in line with Journell's statement that "Teaching is innately a political endeavor, and any number of routines that teachers undertake on a daily basis could be considered political acts" (Journell 2017:112). Those teachers are also more inclined to apply strategies which open the topic for exploration in the classroom, and make the students find out as much as they can on different sides. This is, however, easier to implement in countries with open curricula that can be interpreted in many ways.

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Chapter 5: Didactic reflection and practice

Introduction

This chapter explores concepts and pedagogical strategies for teaching controversial issues and contested narratives. In the first section, we introduce key concepts, such as collective memory, historical consciousness, literacy, and multi-perspectivity. In the next section, these concepts are related to subject didactics for history education, religious education, and citizenship education. This is followed by a didactic model for planning, conducting, and evaluating lessons that address CI or CN. The model consists of four aspects the teacher should consider in the planning of CI or CN in a subject. At the centre, we place the question: How is this a controversial issue or a contested narrative? The four dimensions of the model describe the didactic interplay between 1) subject content, 2) challenges, 3) context, and 4) competences. With reference to these four aspects, chapter 6 unfolds didactic examples from history education, religious education, and citizenship education. The aim is to pay attention to the art of teaching, provide examples of how the teacher can plan for and practice the inclusion of CI and CN in specific school subjects, and discuss which challenges the teacher may encounter.

Pedagogical strategies and approaches

In this last part of the book, we move from general teaching strategies to didactic questions about how teachers can include CN and CI across and within the various school subjects. The strategies and approaches presented here are informed by previous chapters of the book and elaborated further through relevant research related to our field of interest. A central question to consider is how the teaching of CI and CN can contribute to the broader goals of education in democratic societies.

To promote democratic competences and values, something that is becoming increasingly urgent in a polarised world, it is necessary that the teaching of CI and CN is based on academic traditions. The teacher needs to select relevant and reliable sources of knowledge and encourage students to be critical in the investigation of different positions. Through a dialogical approach, students can learn how to reach out with open minds to those who have other opinions, perspectives and experiences than themselves. In a school context, it is the teacher's responsibility to establish meeting places where different perceptions can encounter and challenge each other. In the ConCitizen project, we facilitated virtual meetings

between whole classes from the five different national contexts (see format at: <https://www.kp.dk/en/concitizen/#concitizen>). Such virtual exchange sessions can introduce students to controversial issues and contested narratives from other contexts than the ones they are familiar with. The virtual exchanges used controversial monuments and memorials as a starting point for analysis and dialogue among teacher students. In chapter 6 we demonstrate how such an aesthetic exercise with a selection of monuments and memorials can be structured and used either for virtual exchange or in the classroom.

Based on experiences from the ConCitizen project, we find the key concept *multi-perspectivity* particularly useful. This term refers to narratives where more than one perspective is represented. The concept is often used in relation to fiction that employs multiple narrators who may sometimes present opposing perspectives, thereby creating multiple narratives. The term may also be used in relation to various religions where we find narratives about the same person or event, told and understood in different ways and from different perspectives.

Context awareness and use of multi-perspectivity may further be applied on historical or political processes when sources that represent different positions are used to describe the same events. Teaching multi-perspectivity demands clarity in the teacher's choice of sources combined with an awareness of genre and discourse, position, context and interests at play. It is the teacher's task to ensure that the students can distinguish between different sources and analyse critically the various positions. With the increase of fake news and 'alternative facts', filter bubbles and biased or distorted representation of historical and present events, this is crucial. When the intention is to cultivate democratic values and empathy towards others, this involves an awareness of how historical thinking skills are involved in constructing *valid accounts* of the past (Pace 2024), and that not all positions or narratives are equally valid.

The following sections present and discuss our main approaches in dealing with contested narratives and controversial issues across subjects. Drawing on an awareness of collective memories and their strong influence on contested narratives and current controversies, the final section discusses the necessity of critical literacy when dealing with multi-perspectivity.

Collective memories as sources of controversy

When working with contested narratives and controversial issues it is necessary to be aware of how the past is interpreted and narrated in the present, and how narratives differ depending on the perspective from which they are told and the purpose behind their telling. This applies to texts and art, but also to memorial sites,

as elaborated in chapter 6. Multi-perspectivity in relation to history is linked both to the concept *historical inquiry*, and to the concept *use-of-history*. The latter is mainly used in the Scandinavian countries and is defined by the Swedish researcher Kenneth Nordgren in this way: “To ‘use history’ is to pick up a narrative, a notion, or a myth about the past; verbalize it; and start a chain of communication” (Nordgren 2016:496). Critical analyses of uses of history are concerned with the present and how the past is used in the present. This often relates to the concept of *collective memories*, which are memories (or interpretations) that are shared by groups of people. The fact is that a historical event is interpreted and narrated in different ways due to context and point of view. A classic example is the incidents in India 1857, when Indian *sepoys* (soldiers) rebelled against British colonial rule. The various narratives about these events are in sharp conflict with each other, often demonising the opposing side. While the British call the rebellion ‘The Indian Mutiny’, Indians mark this as “The First War of Independence”, celebrating and commemorating the leading figures of this uprising against the colonial power (Erl 2009:110).

Obviously, collective memories is a crucial concept when dealing with contested narratives. How do collective memories work, and how can the teacher use this as a key to teaching strategies? The French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs (1877-1945) developed his theory of collective memory (*La mémoire collective*) from the idea that human memory functions within a collective context, and that we use contemporary ideas to reconstruct the past (Coser 1992). Examples of such collective contexts can be war memorials and national anniversaries, but also collective family memories or a group’s stories about important events in the past. Halbwachs emphasises that different groups may have conflicting collective memories, and that collective memory therefore always is selective (Coser 1992).

The sociologist of religion, Danielle Hervieu-Leger introduced the image of religion as a “chain of memory” to highlight how collective memory is affirmed and manifested in religious acts of recalling a past, which gives meaning to the present and has implications for the future. In religious texts, the narration of past events is intertwined with myth and legend, and the aim is not to give a factual description of historical events, but to uphold and pass on a collective identity through ritual practice and ensure that the “chain of belief” is passed on from one generation to the next (Hervieu-Leger 2006). However, although the concept of collective memories can be applied across different subjects, the analytical approach is dependent on the subject content and the type of sources involved.

Not only written sources, but symbols, too, may be sources of controversy. In addition to monuments and memorials built on basis of historical events or figures, contestation may also relate to items which turn into meaningful symbols. The British Crown is one example. When the British colonial power described India as “The

Jewel of the Crown”, this demonstrated the Crown as a contested and ambiguous colonial symbol. Similar ambiguity is often the case regarding other national symbols, such as anthems, flags, and banners. Ambiguity is also connected to certain garments, as, for instance, the Muslim hijab. While many outsiders - and insiders - consider the hijab as a symbol of submissiveness, quite a few Muslim women claim that they are wearing this garment with pride and of own free will. This makes the hijab an ambiguous symbol. As the concept mapping and interviews with teachers revealed, such topics may turn out to be controversial issues creating debate based on assumed – and sometimes conflicting – narratives. To deal comprehensively with presuppositions embedded in controversial issues and contested narratives, it is crucial for the teacher to make the classroom a safe community of disagreement with room for brave dialogues.

Collective memory related to current events and their symbols

In chapter 3, we present contextualised national cases illustrating controversies and contested narratives that have created debates and strong emotions. One of the cases discusses questions regarding the human right of the Sámi indigenous people to run traditional reindeer herding versus the engineering companies that have set up windmills in the same area to achieve 'the green shift'. At least two different narratives are related to this controversy – and to the windmill as a symbol. Similar controversies are also found in other countries with indigenous peoples. In addition to controversies found within a national context, there are transnational issues and controversies that create strong emotions across national boundaries and influence the national debates. In Europe today this is especially seen through collective memories and contested narratives about past and present events in the Middle East and in Ukraine. In this situation, symbols, like the Palestinian headscarf, the Israeli flag, and the Ukrainian flag and anthem, are significant markers all over Europe and beyond. Further, in Norway, for instance, the PST (The Norwegian Intelligence Service) warns that there is an increased terror threat in Norway because of the war in Gaza (PST 2024). One reason why such contested narratives might easily act as driving forces for actions and attitudes is that they are often related to identity - and to collective memory.

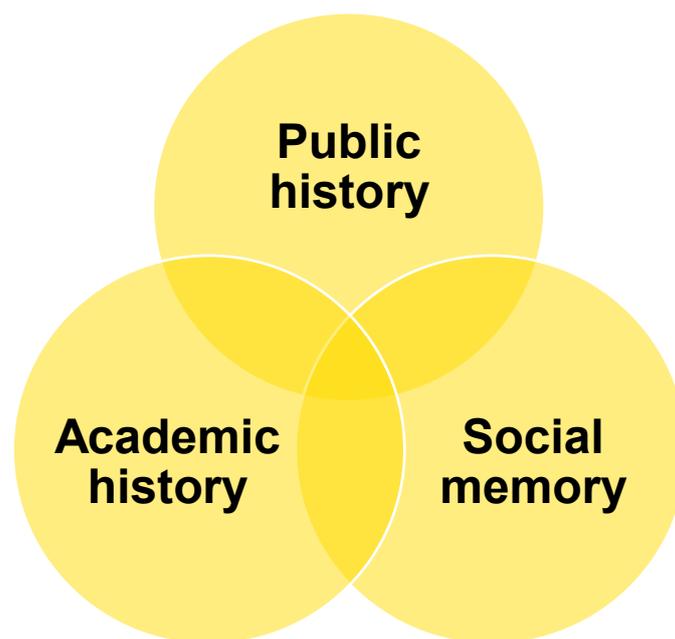
Collective memory, contested narratives and historical consciousness

The existence of multiple narratives related to a historical event shows that the perception of history is not objective, but is subjectively interpreted and narrated in different, sometimes conflicting ways. A classic example is the opposing narratives about the crusades in The Middle Ages. Depending on point of view, and whether

they have their origin in Muslim, Jewish, or Christian collective memory, stories about these events have completely different heroes and villains (see Maalouf 1984).

Teaching history in a European context includes a consciousness about how historical myths have contributed to nation building in nineteenth century Europe. As Ahonen emphasises, myth is not an antithesis to knowledge, but rather a different kind of knowledge (Ahonen 2017; Ankersmit 2001). Chapter 1 introduced Ahonen's distinction between public history, academic history, and social memory. While public history is expressed in monuments, rituals, works of art and literature, social memory consists of the narratives that are mediated by ordinary people in local contexts. We find myths both in public history and in social memory, where they serve the needs of ordinary people, and at the same time reflect political use of history. Academic history, on the other hand, must address critical questions regarding its evidential base (Ahonen 2017).

However, when it comes to the content of history textbooks and the role of individual teachers, these may combine and mix academic, social and political perspectives on the past – especially in societies marked by conflict and division (Kello 2015).



Three domains of history (Ahonen 2013)

Academic discussions about collective memory initially focused mainly on material sites of memory, which we can call 'places of remembrance' or 'memorial sites', such as battlefields and monuments. Today, the discussion also revolves around collective memory as a dynamic and ongoing process, influenced by the present situation, involving negotiation and reconstruction of the past through selective remembering and forgetting, sometimes described as *remediating the past* (Erll & Rigney 2009).

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Consciousness about these mechanisms is useful to develop a teaching strategy in a diverse and brave classroom environment, where contested narratives, based on different remediated collective memories, are addressed.

Collective memory may also relate to events described in religious texts and narratives, some of which have an uncertain historical basis and are often intertwined with myths or legends. In addition, stories from religious scriptures and from religious histories sometimes represent challenging narratives, since these stories (from all religions) are told from specific perspectives and – as old stories – may be challenging in relation to modern democratic values.

Further down, we mention examples of conflicting narratives from different religious traditions. But, even within the same broad religious tradition, conflicting narratives or conflicting interpretations of narratives exist among individuals, or among different groups, such as Sunni Muslims and Shia Muslims, rooted in distinct interpretive traditions and - in this case – in different hadiths. Shia Muslims often emphasise the narratives about martyrs who ended their earthly lives fighting the other, in this case the Sunni Muslims, as it happened at the battle of Karbala. These martyrs are commemorated in Shiite religious celebrations every year during *Ashura*, where narratives about their martyrdom strengthen the collective memory for this branch of Islam. The historical events are not only mediated to the believers, but also remediated, including new martyrs along with the first ones, shedding new light on martyrdom and its religious implications in Shiite tradition.

How can the teacher deal with contested narratives - religious or secular - in the classroom? As stated in the Introduction, historical traumas transmitted as collective memories (Kello 2015; Ahonen 2020) is complicated, but by applying critical approaches to these memories, fixed historical narratives can be disturbed, facilitating the recognition of others' suffering which constitutes the first step towards solidarity with the Other.

A critical approach to religious narratives emphasises the difference between the religious discourse of the story and the historical context of the written narrative. Analysed as historical sources, religious texts reveal a lot about the interests and mentality of the group that created these narratives, showing how they reflect the historical time of writing and editing, but the historical validity of the events they describe must be analysed in comparison with other external sources. This approach reflects the definition of “religious literacy” that has been adopted by the American Academy of Religion:

“Religious literacy entails the ability to discern and analyse the fundamental intersections of religion and social/political/cultural life through multiple lenses. Specifically, a religiously literate person will possess 1) a basic

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understanding of the history, central texts (where applicable), beliefs, practices and contemporary manifestations of several of the world's religious traditions as they arose out of and continue to be shaped by particular social, historical, and cultural contexts, and 2) the ability to discern and explore the religious dimensions of political, social and cultural expressions across time and place" (Moore 2014).

In this sense, religious literacy (which some researchers prefer to call "religion and belief literacy", see: Goldsmiths University 2019) includes the ability to distinguish between the religious meaning of the text (from an inside position) and the academic analysis of the text (from an external position). In her elaboration of the definition, Moore emphasises the "difference between the *devotional expression* of particular religious beliefs as normative and the non-sectarian *study of religion*" (Moore 2014). For some students such a distinction may be difficult and provoke inner conflict or dissonance like some emotional reactions to critical investigations of fixed historical narratives. Bekerman and Zembylas (2012) claim that including dissonant heritage in teaching can be the first step in the breaking of 'us and them' dichotomies through the challenge to include the Other's memory. In religious education, encountering alternative versions of a familiar religious narrative can stimulate awareness of religious diversity, while the academic approach can teach students to move between primary and secondary discourses, as we will explain in the next section.

Critical literacy and multi-perspectivity

In one and the same class students have different opinions and various attitudes – partly based on their family values, norms, and worldviews, which we call *primary discourses*. The primary discourse also includes certain narratives. Some of these narratives reflect collective memories closely linked to the students' home values and identity. At the same time, the main task for the school is to facilitate learning. This means equipping students with critical skills to navigate new and diverse perspectives and approaches to different issues, also when these break with familiar narratives and perspectives. In contrast to understanding oneself exclusively within a "primary discourse", the competence to master *secondary discourses* is a main objective for the school, according to the sociolinguist James P. Gee (1989). He claims that mastery of secondary discourses is at the core of *literacy*, which again is closely linked to the concept of multi-perspectivity, since literacy enables individuals to perceive the various texts and issues from different angles and thereby make it possible to take the perspective of the "Other".

Such critical literacy involves developing students' ability to read texts and approach issues critically and reflectively, and includes both thinking, reading, and writing.

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Awareness of critical literacy may help teachers fostering a classroom identity – a sense of community – that transcends different perceptions and conflicting narratives related to memorial sites, symbols, events, and texts. How then can a teacher promote such a community of disagreement – and multi-perspectivity - across subjects?

We can consider two main approaches to contested narratives:

- present one narrative as the truth and the others as wrong or false
- present conflicting narratives as representations of different discourses or perspectives

Due to the widespread occurrence of conspiracy theories and echo chambers today, there are likely several cases where the teacher may need to argue for *the first option*. Some narratives must be exposed as false, when their truth claims cannot be validated, and the arguments do not hold. It is important for the teacher to be conscious of – and teach the students – the difference between fact-based knowledge and opinions. This is a challenge in many classrooms today (Breidlid 2014; Kleve & Penne 2012). Exchange of factual arguments should be a fundamental part of classroom discussions.

A special challenge relates to conflicting religious texts. As mentioned in chapter 1, there are for instance different narratives in the Bible and the Qur'an about the same event or the same character. Students, not at least in a multi-faith class, may ask, or discuss: "Which narrative is the correct one or which narrative is the oldest one?" According to academic standards and a historical-critical approach, which are the guiding principles of a non-confessional approach to religious education, the texts in the Bible, as the oldest texts, are the original ones. However, Muslim students may have another understanding, based on the Islamic religious discourse, which claims that the narratives in the Qur'an represent the original and correct versions since the Qur'an for them is the result of direct revelation of the original narratives, while they regard narratives of the Bible as distorted (see Breidlid & Nicolaisen 2024). In a classroom context, the teacher should assist the students to explore the difference between academic and religious discourses. Giving the students perspectives on the historical origin of stories in a critical and balanced way may help the students develop a meta-perspective on religious and literary texts, a perspective that is necessary to achieve cultural and religious interpretive competence.

In other cases, when multi-perspectivity is the ideal, *the second option* is to be preferred: to promote a classroom as a community where there are room and acceptance for conflicting narratives, different views, and seeing things from others' perspective, thereby enabling resistance to mainstream narratives - and making the

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classroom a community of disagreement. At the same time, such an approach may contribute to a critical – and sometimes painful - evaluation of one's own position, and foster empathy towards other students and their experiences and points of view. As one of the students in the virtual exchanges (VE) stated, when asked about the advantages and challenges of applying a pedagogy of multi-perspectivity – after having practiced this in the VE: "(Such) critical thinking develops and encourages students to put themselves in others' shoes." Through continuous practice within a community of disagreement, where students listen to each other and engage in reasoned, respectful arguments to achieve mutual understanding, they will acquire both intellectual and social skills necessary for participation in a democratic society, since - in essence - a democratic, multicultural nation embodies a community of disagreement.

In a school context it may be useful to distinguish between Ahonen's three domains: public history, academic history and social memory in the analysis of historical events or monuments, since such a distinction can help students deconstruct powerful myths or narratives (Ahonen 2013). Public history also reflects the political use of history. A central goal in history education is to make students aware of how historical narratives function in society, and how they are currently used by politicians, the media and the public (Kello 2015).

For teachers and students, it is therefore necessary to reflect on their own positions and on how these positions are partly due to the social memory they are rooted in. In the classroom the interpretation - and presentation - of specific events will often be influenced by public history and reflect the master narrative regardless of the students' background, as was obvious from the example of the "Cold War" in the Norwegian classroom (see chapter 1). This example illustrates how some narratives tend to be dominant in textbooks and classrooms at the expense of minority narratives, which is contrary to the ideal and educational aim of multi-perspectivity.

As mentioned in chapter 1, teachers should be particularly aware of the challenges posed by narratives (in texts or in public debate) that promote discourses of otherness that directly or indirectly dehumanise groups of people. This requires deconstruction of the discourses in play and awareness of power relations in the narratives. When it comes to texts, power relations are not always obvious or explicitly stated in the narrative. The teacher should then guide the students to read critically between the lines and be attentive to themes and characters that are underemphasised. This involves being aware of "the presence of the absent": Who is not visible – or insignificant - in the narrative?

In this way critical literacy may be linked to *critical pedagogy*, which challenges traditional power structures and promotes critical thinking and social justice, following

the tradition of Paulo Freire (2018). Freire's educational philosophy sees literacy as a deeply political and transformative practice, moving beyond traditional ideas of literacy as just technical skill to frame it as a form of cultural action for freedom (Mayo 1995).

In sum, awareness of contested narratives can enhance development of empathy and critical thinking. Critical thinking is crucial to reveal the various discourses or traditions represented in the actual narrative, whether these are mediated in texts or through memorials, symbols, or stories about an event. The analytical approaches based on collective memory, critical literacy and multi-perspectivity, can further enhance awareness of how controversial issues often entail various contested narratives.

The five content areas mentioned in chapter 1: identity, dealing with the past, colliding rights, meeting the other, power, can be applied as analytic categories when investigating CN and CI. However, different CN and CI are emerging to the surface in the three subjects (history education, religious education, and citizenship education). This will be evident in the next sections.

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Subject didactics: concepts and approaches

This section presents different types of subject didactics that are of relevance for the teaching of CI and CN in history education, religious education, and citizenship education. Initially the teacher can investigate the formal curriculum to see how it is possible to include controversial issues and contested narratives in each subject and on specific levels. As schools and teaching are regulated by the state, the local government, or the local school board, the inclusion of CI and CN should be adjusted to the formal framework. Inspiration for this can be found in appendix 2 from the curriculum mapping we did in the ConCitizen project. This way the teacher can investigate the possible inclusion of CN and CI in school law, learning objectives, syllabus and guidance notes for teachers and endorsed teaching materials (see appendix 2). A similar mapping may help the individual teacher or a team of teachers to clarify the options and generate ideas both in terms of subject content and methodologies. While curricula, teacher autonomy and teaching methodologies may vary between different countries, the aim of the following is to highlight concepts and approaches that can be applied and adapted by teachers in different contexts.

History education

Multi-perspectivity in history education

The subject of history can be taught in different ways. The traditional way of teaching history is focused on the transfer of knowledge about the past to pupils and students. Very often this implies teaching the master narrative about the national past. Such a traditional way of teaching history is not open for studying counter-narratives, for working with the ways in which history is constructed and used, or for enhancing critical thinking and analytical skills. In other words, the traditional way of teaching history does not include multi-perspectivity and is not a fruitful way of teaching contested narratives and controversial issues.

In a publication from the Council of Europe, multi-perspectivity in the subject of history is defined as “...a way of viewing, and a predisposition to view, historical events, personalities, developments, cultures and societies from different perspectives through drawing on procedures and processes which are fundamental to history as a discipline” (Stradling 2003:14). This way of defining multi-perspectivity in the subject of history is closely linked to what many researchers refer to as *historical inquiry*. In the words of Barton and Levstik *historical inquiry* is about “...the critical components of reflective thought - asking questions, gathering and evaluating relevant evidence, and reaching conclusions based on that evidence” (Barton & Levstik 2004:188). The concept *historical inquiry* is then again linked to other

concepts such as *historical reasoning* (e.g. van Drie & van Boxtel 2008), *historical thinking* (e.g. Seixas & Morton 2013) and *historical competencies* (e.g. Körber 2015).

The definition of multi-perspectivity in the subject of history in the booklet published by the Council of Europe in 2003 focuses exclusively on the past. That means viewing the past from different perspectives. In the words of Wansink, Akkerman, Zuiker and Wubbels the notion of multi-perspectivity in the context of history education refers to a wider epistemological idea "...that history is interpretational and subjective, with multiple coexisting narratives about specific historical events, rather than history being objectively represented by one "closed" narrative" (Wansink et al. 2018:496).

As noted above, when working with contested narratives and controversial issues it is necessary to include studies of how the past is interpreted and narrated in the present and how these narratives differ according to the perspective from which they are told and according to the purpose of communicating them. In this way multi-perspectivity in the subject of history is closely linked not only to the concept of *historical inquiry* but also to the concept *use-of-history*.

Use-of-history is a concept mainly used in the Scandinavian countries, where it is used as "...a third and complementary goal for the teaching of history" (Nordgren 2016:496). The first two being knowledge about the past and historical thinking skills. As mentioned above, *use-of-history* means "to pick up a narrative, a notion, or a myth about the past; verbalize it; and start a chain of communication. To put a historical culture in motion, in this sense, is a performative expression of a historical consciousness" (Nordgren 2016:496). When the students are working with critical analyses of uses of history their focus is not on the past and is not about obtaining knowledge about the past. Critical analyses of historical interpretations focus on contemporary contexts and on understanding how the past is employed today.

In the following we will elaborate a bit further on a) what an inquiry-based approach to teaching history implies and how it can be a fruitful way of teaching contested narratives and controversial issues, and b) how students can study the ways in which narratives about the past are used in the present as a way of both approaching and deepening the understanding of contested narratives and controversial issues.

In chapter 6 we present an example of how the teacher can use an inquiry-based approach and work with the concept *use-of-history* on a specific topic.

Historical inquiry

When confronted with issues that generate conflicting views and evoke strong emotions in society, one way of dealing with them is to turn to the past for orientation. This means studying past events to get a better and more balanced understanding of a controversial issue in the present.

The first step in the process of *historical inquiry* is to generate relevant research questions. When, for example, the controversial issue concerns a violent conflict between two groups of people in the present, a relevant historical research question could concern the fundamental causes of this conflict. In the process model of *historical thinking* by Hasberg and Körber this step begins with uncertainty and a need for orientation. Thereafter the teacher must facilitate a process that activates the knowledge, conceptions and judgements that the students have achieved earlier in school or elsewhere. Building on these preconceptions the teacher must facilitate a process which makes it possible for the students to generate relevant historical research questions (Körber 2015:24-25).

In the second step, the students should work with primary and secondary sources to construct their own interpretations and judgements of the past. This step includes what van Drie and van Boxtel have termed “use of sources”, “contextualisation”, “argumentation”, “use of substantive concepts” and “use of meta-concepts” (van Drie & van Boxtel 2008:89-90). When dealing with contested narratives and controversial issues it is important to study the past from multiple perspectives. When for example the students are studying the fundamental causes of a specific conflict, they should try to understand the rationale behind the actions and reactions of the people on both sides of this conflict. That means using primary and secondary sources that shed light on more than one side of the conflict.

In the third step the students again turn their focus on the present and on the controversial issue that they found themselves confronted with in the beginning. The teacher now must facilitate a process that lets them reflect on how their new or more profound and balanced interpretations and judgements of the past can help them understand and handle the controversial issue in the present - and in the future.

Use-of-history

Studying the past from multiple perspectives is not the only way that students can approach contested narratives and controversial issues. Another topic that can be studied in history classes is how narratives about the past have been and are being used in different contexts. This is also an inquiry-based approach. The difference is that this kind of inquiry has other types of research questions, other kinds of source materials (the narratives) and other analytical tools.

When faced with contested narratives and controversial issues, examining how these matters have been addressed throughout history offers a way to create analytical distance from the conflicting perceptions and strong emotions present today. Nordgren has developed a model to analyse *use-of-history* as a communicative act between an encoder, a message and a decoder (Nordgren 2016:495). This model is an analytical tool that offers a range of generic research questions such as: “Who encodes? What is the context? Who decodes? What is expressed? What is the direct and indirect meaning? How does the decoder react?” (see Nordgren 2016:495).

When working with contested narratives and controversial issues, analysing *use-of-history* is one of the ways students can learn to see past and present events from different perspectives, a way of enhancing their critical thinking and analytical skills and something that can promote mutual understanding. As mentioned earlier, *use-of-history* can be seen as an expression of historical consciousness. It means that the way people use history tells us something about the way they think about history, and an understanding of other people’s historical consciousness can help us understand why they act and react as they do.

An important point made by the Danish researcher Margit Eva Jensen regarding *use-of-history* in the teaching of history is that the students need to construct their own interpretations and judgements of a specific past before they can do a meaningful analysis of how this specific past is used in the present (Jensen 2019). In other words, the students need to complete their own *historical inquiry* of the past before they can analyse how the narratives about this past have been and are being used in various contexts.

Religious education (RE)

Religious education (RE) is a multifaceted subject encompassing various content, objectives and teaching methods. This complexity is revealed in the different educational traditions in the ConCitizen countries where religious education can span both confessional and non-confessional teachings.

Across the context-specific frameworks for the subject in different countries, there is an ongoing discussion of how we represent religions and how to include not only differences between religions, but also diversity within the various religious traditions. RE can manifest itself as an arena of both dialogue and conflict (Osbeck, Sporre & Skeie 2017), as different agendas and religious polarisation from the surrounding society may manifest in the classroom. RE often involves controversial issues related to identity or to colliding rights, as religion expresses core values and views on human nature. Moreover, RE contains contested narratives related to the

interpretation and retelling of shared stories from especially Judaism, Christianity and Islam, or related to the master narratives linking together religions and society in specific contexts. Therefore, RE can benefit from pedagogical approaches focusing on contextualization and multi-perspectivity.

An interpretive approach to RE

To include multiple perspectives and awareness of how context affects religious education, it is essential to acknowledge that we always engage with interpreted forms of religion (Jackson 1997). This makes it necessary to avoid an essentialist view that treats religions, such as Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and other religions, as uniform entities with an inherent agency. Instead, an interpretive approach focuses on diversity within religions by examining how individual practitioners and specific groups interpret and practice the same religion in various ways. In the following, we will explore how an interpretive approach can strengthen awareness of contested narratives and controversial issues in RE.

The concept of religion in RE

Traditionally, religion in RE teaching and textbooks has been disseminated and understood as the official religion regulated and interpreted by religious experts. However, this traditional position has been challenged in the last decades, as it is obvious that such a representation does not necessarily correlate with the religious practices people experience in everyday life. Meredith McGuire uses the term "lived religion" for the latter, underlining that religions are not monolithic but dynamic entities that are constantly reinterpreted and negotiated, and that RE needs to include both institutional and lived religion to reveal and address the complexity of religion (McGuire 2008). According to this broader understanding of religion, RE should also include knowledge about how religion is expressed through the lives and practices of individuals and how it is linked to society.

Representation of religions in RE

To fully comprehend the diversity and dynamics of religions, we need to be aware of how religions are represented and presented. Robert Jackson's *interpretive approach* (first introduced in 1997) is concerned with how religions are represented in society, and whether and how this is reflected in RE. Understanding religions in context includes dealing with diversity, being aware of the representation of religions and worldviews, including awareness of power relations between the majority and the various minority groups. Furthermore, the approach recognises that religious diversity exists not only between different religions but also within a broader religious

tradition. To examine this diversity, Jackson suggests a three-level model, based upon a hermeneutical framework. The model involves studying the connections between *individuals*, their ties to relevant religious *groups*, and the wider religious *tradition* (Jackson 1997). The model thus incorporates multi-perspectivity as an explicit pedagogical approach and emphasises awareness of power relations, including how religious traditions are spread through master- and counternarratives, which is a good point of departure for dealing with controversial issues and contested narratives in RE.

How can students benefit from an interpretive approach?

A focus on representation is crucial both for teachers' selection of content and for students' approach to the study of religions. In addition to representation, Jackson includes two other key concepts in his interpretive approach to RE: interpretation and reflexivity.

Interpretation describes the process of understanding religions, which includes attention to religious language, concepts, symbols, and the variety of practices. To interpret is also a dialectic hermeneutic process that requires awareness of one's own presuppositions and biases when studying other worldviews. This process involves comparing and contrasting one's own experiences and concepts with the conceptual schemes of other individuals, groups, and traditions (Jackson 2019).

Reflexivity describes reflection on multiple levels, including critically reflecting on the content itself and the methods used to study it. It also encompasses the idea that studying other religions and traditions can promote a comparative reflection on one's own outlook and values.

An interpretive approach challenges a consensus-seeking RE, where contested narratives and controversial issues are approached with the aim of promoting assimilation to a master narrative or a dominant culture. An interpretive approach also problematises a traditional multicultural approach where cultural or religious groups are perceived as monolithic entities without diversity.

Lars Laird Iversen introduces the concept of *communities of disagreement* as another related pedagogical framework for the classroom, not based on shared values but on shared challenges. According to Iversen, including disagreement and multi-perspectivity when teaching controversial issues and contested narratives is a way to address those challenges and to avoid a consensus-seeking classroom (Iversen 2019). His concept "communities of disagreement" can be considered an ideal type that is useful in RE to create consciousness about diversity, also in the representation of religions. This requires an awareness of the relationship between

religions and national identity, including how some religious communities may receive political support and legitimacy, while others do not. Therefore, part of the pedagogical task for the teacher can be to address underlying premises for RE's political legitimation, e.g. the relationship between the various religions and national identity. Examples are given in chapter 6.

A narrative approach to RE

A narrative approach has traditionally dominated European RE, highlighting stories from the Bible. Still today, whether the RE classroom is confessional, non-confessional, or multi-faith - involving various religious traditions, religious stories are generally an integral part of the various RE approaches. At the same time, narratives from sacred texts may be demanding to deal with, since they often originate in ancient cultures with values and attitudes different from those prevailing in modern democratic societies. As noted above, "dealing with the past" is one of the five key categories (along with identity, colliding rights, meeting the other, power) which may be used to analyse and investigate contested narratives and controversial issues in school. Analysed as historical sources, stories embedded in religious texts reveal interests and worldviews of those who created these narratives and thereby reflect the historical time of writing. However, the historical validity of the stories and the described events must be evaluated against external sources. A critical approach to religious narratives emphasises awareness about the difference between the *religious discourse* in the story and the *secular discourse*, which refers to the historical context of the written narrative. This approach reflects Moore's (2014) definition of "religious literacy", which we introduced above.

When situating the narratives into their historical context, the teacher prevents a one-sided reading of these old stories based on the conditions of our time (see Breidlid 2014). In this way, applying a meta-perspective based on historical inquiry, discussions related to issues such as gender, or the "Other", are facilitated. Applying a meta-perspective means "taking a step back" from the narratives to understand the respective discourses in play. We can think of reading as decoding, while comprehension requires interpretation. To become "literate", students must identify different contexts and conduct interpretations based on these. Only then, they can understand and "participate fully in the wider society", which is an important part of UNESCO's (2004) definition of "literacy" (Breidlid 2014:121-122). Scholes (1998) argues that the most important educational task is to stimulate critical literacy and textual competence, or, as he calls it, "textual power" in all students. He describes textual power as follows (1998:130):

“[...] being able to place or situate a text, to understand it from the inside, sympathetically, and be able to step away from it and see it from the outside, critically. It means being able to see a text for what it is and to ask also how it connects – or fails to connect – to life and times of the reader.”

This is in line with literacy, as we have defined it above, and includes a critical reading where the stories meet resistance from today's readers. Such a critical and deconstructive reading includes identifying power relations as well as awareness of what or who is under-communicated – or invisible - in the narrative.

As noted above concerning *representation*, religions in RE has normally been presented and understood as the official religions as they are interpreted by religious experts. The official religions put emphasis on sacred texts, rituals and dogmas, often at the expense of the religious practices of ordinary believers. Moreover, the official religious texts, including narratives, have been written down by men in patriarchal cultures, something that is visible both in the choice of and in the approach to the topics. It is particularly clear in the description of gender roles in the stories - and through what is seen as female or male ideals (Breidlid & Nicolaisen 2024). However, in most religious traditions there are both official and more popular narratives where the latter typically are characterised by women's life situation and way of thinking (Moltmann-Wendel & Moltmann 1983). Shortly, while the official religion is visible in sacred texts, in dogmas and in rituals, the popular religion is visible in oral traditions and in legends. Various religions have different tolerance thresholds for alternative traditions and alternative narratives, which may take the form of counternarratives. The stories rooted in the official sacred texts, and the alternative stories might therefore sometimes appear as contested narratives. To secure an adequate representation of a religious tradition in RE, both official and more popular religious stories which are important to many believers, can be included. Then both interpretive and reflective competences described above are promoted.

Conflicting stories in religious traditions

A special challenge arises from parallel and conflicting stories about the same character in different religious traditions. Jesus and Buddha are two examples. Besides Buddhism, the Buddha is also central to Hinduism as well as to other religious traditions. Even within the wider Buddhist tradition, we find a variety of stories about Buddha, who has different positions due to the various Buddhist schools (Breidlid & Nicolaisen 1999, 2024). Concerning Jesus, there are conflicting stories about him in the Bible and in the Qur'an. Jesus is also a figure in stories from other religions. Some of those have similarities with the Biblical stories about Jesus

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while others are quite different and provide fertile ground for reflecting on conflicting narratives.

In particular, the three religions originating in the Middle East (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), include many parallel stories related to the same characters, even if the stories sometimes represent conflicting perceptions of reality and values (Breidlid & Nicolaisen 1999, 2024). Stories about the patriarchs in the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) and stories about the same characters in the Qur'an, illustrate this fact. However, even though Jews and Christians share the stories in the Hebrew Bible, they often interpret and understand them in different ways, based on their respective Jewish or Christian discourse. While Christian theological traditions have perceived the Hebrew bible as "The Old Testament", preparing the ground for Jesus' coming to earth and have interpreted the stories here into a Christian discourse, Jewish rabbis have interpreted and read the same texts into a Jewish discourse and to the continuously changing historical situations as far as Jews are concerned. On the other hand, the Qur'an and Islamic traditions have incorporated stories of the same patriarchs – and matriarchs – into an Islamic discourse where all patriarchs are seen as prophets (Breidlid & Nicolaisen 1999, 2024). In the previous section, we discuss questions related to colliding truth claims, and how the teacher can handle these.

In a multi-faith classroom, we find students from various religious traditions and contexts. They come to school with a baggage filled with their respective primary discourses, which often include familiarity with stories from a certain religious tradition (Breidlid 2014). This familiarity will normally also include specific interpretations. James Paul Gee (1989) claims that a main task for the school is to give the students competence to deal with secondary discourses, meaning other ways of thinking than those they are already familiar with from home. If the intention is that the students should gain competence in mastering secondary discourses, it is obviously an advantage to allow them to be confronted with conflicting narratives, as this multi-perspective approach may prevent assimilation into a master-narrative, promote multi-perspectivity, and give students practice in exploring empathetically the perspective of others.

Power relations as controversial and contested

As introduced in chapter 1 and noted above, one of the five overarching categories that can be used as an analytic key when exploring controversial issues and contested narratives, is "dealing with the past". Two other categories are "meeting the Other" and "power". Various groups of people may share different conflicting interpretations of a certain narrative or may have different narratives about the same event. Sharing collective interpretations of a historical event means that people

share a *collective memory* of this event which is retold, remembered, and kept alive by the group through various forms of commemorations. Many stories from religious traditions can be used as examples of collective memory, such as the Exodus-narrative in the Hebrew Bible which is a foundational story for Jews. The story of what happened here is commemorated in Jewish rituals. At the same time, this Biblical narrative, like many other narratives from ancient religious traditions, has an “Othering” perspective, where (as in this case) the suffering of other ethnic groups is more or less neglected. Regarding other stories, the same might apply to women, as well as to people of other faiths.

Clearly, the categories “meeting the Other” and “power” are in play here and can be used as analytical categories when exploring how CI and CN are embedded in the stories. Whether the RE classroom is multi-faith, or the classroom is more homogeneous, situated in a dominant national educational culture, RE curricula in many countries encompass democratic values as critical reading, disagreement, and resistance to mainstream hegemonic narratives, providing opportunities for counternarratives and alternative readings. As we have seen, Kello (2015) and Ahonen (2020) emphasise that using critical approaches to demanding collective memories can disturb fixed historical narratives and make it easier to acknowledge the suffering of others. Bekerman and Zembylas (2012) align with this view when they claim that including dissonant heritage in teaching can be decisive in the breaking with 'us and them' dichotomies, since it is challenging to include the other's memory. In addition, in religious education, the meeting with alternative versions of a familiar religious narrative can encourage awareness of religious diversity, which is a prerequisite for mastering secondary discourses and religious literacy.

Such a critical and multi-perspective approach to controversial content will enable competence in dealing with challenging texts, in general. However, it is necessary to be particularly aware when narratives are promoting othering discourses that dehumanize groups of people, due to ethnicity, gender, or other identity markers, which requires deconstruction of power relations embedded in the narratives.

Citizenship education

Through citizenship education, young people become familiar with the values, attitudes, skills, knowledge and critical understanding that are needed for active participation in democratic societies. Central aims are to empower students “to exercise and defend their democratic rights and responsibilities in society, to value diversity and to play an active part in democratic life, with a view to the promotion and protection of democracy and the rule of law” (Council of Europe 2018:14).

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In the framework formulated by the Council of Europe it is highlighted that Citizenship education combines basic knowledge about democracy with the acquisition of values, attitudes and skills that are needed to become an active and competent participant in society. In terms of pedagogy, this is related to the educational concept of *Bildung* (formation), which implies “a lifelong process enabling people to make independent choices for their own lives, to recognise others as equals and to interact with them in meaningful ways.” The acquisition of knowledge about democracy should give learners opportunities to develop their full potential, in ways “suitable for and influenced by themselves and through learning processes which engage the learner’s whole person: intellect, emotions and experiences “(Council of Europe 2018:15).

As citizenship education focuses on democratic formation, the chosen methodologies should support students in developing critical thinking, independent judgment and dialogical skills. In this subject, students learn about societal structures and changes that evolve around international and national questions and conflicts, human interactions, culture, economies, law, and governance. Topics in citizenship education are always related to central themes and events in society. The section on RE above pointed out how this subject might be an arena that entails both dialogue and conflict. This is also the case in citizenship education as it may involve controversial issues related to attitudes, values, identity, and beliefs. The subject is, moreover, an arena that allows for testing different values and for establishing open, safe, and challenging classrooms. A central question is, how teachers can promote reflection, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills when she is teaching controversial issues in citizenship education. This section will outline how working with various kinds of *dialogue-based teaching* and *critical literacy* can serve as an entry point to CI and CN. A core concept is multi-perspectivity, which can be applied both in religious education and in history education with the exploration of various stories and interpretations of the past. However, multi-perspectivity applies especially to citizenship education within a contemporary perspective.

Dialogue-based teaching

Dialogic teaching is based on the idea that learning develops through interaction between different perspectives. Mikhail Bakhtin (1981), a key figure in dialogic pedagogy, emphasised that one of the strengths of dialogue is its ability to enable the exchange of diverse viewpoints and understandings. In educational settings, dialogue should go beyond simply transmitting information or opinions. It should create space for students to engage critically with ideas, challenge assumptions, and be open to others' perspectives. This dynamic encourages what Bakhtin called

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polyphony, a situation where multiple voices coexist and contribute to meaning making (Røthing et al. 2024).

Polyphony in the classroom is closely tied to the concept of multi-perspectivity. In dialogue-based teaching, multi-perspectivity plays an active role, as it encourages active participation and communication among students and between students and teachers. Through these conversations, learners are motivated to share their own experiences and ideas while also engaging with others'. The process broadens the learning environment by introducing a greater range of perspectives, thereby supporting multi-perspectivity in the classroom (Merzliakova 2023, in Røthing et al. 2024). Regarding citizenship education, this practice enhances the students' active participation in a democratic and pluralistic society.

Nevertheless, this pedagogical approach is not without challenges. When addressing complex or socially sensitive topics, dialogic teaching can become unpredictable and difficult to manage. For polyphonic dialogue to be productive, it requires deliberate planning and facilitation by the teacher (Dysthe 2012). Teachers must strike a balance between openness and structure, ensuring that discussions remain grounded in academic content. Students, in turn, must learn to critically examine their own viewpoints and support their arguments with evidence and knowledge. In this way, dialogue remains focused on disciplinary content—whether that involves exploring a topic, solving a problem, or engaging in a creative process.

In the following, we will explore how teachers can apply specific dialogue-based methods, such as philosophical conversation and Forum theatre, to address controversial and complex issues.

Philosophical conversation

Philosophy as a practice rooted in open-minded inquiry and collaborative discussion, can be traced back to the Greek philosopher Socrates and his approach, later known as the Socratic Method. Throughout his life (470-399 f.Kr.), according to Plato, Socrates sought to engage fellow Athenians in philosophical debates - a form of critical inquiry that did not employ the formal methods characteristic of fields like geometry or physics. In his practice, philosophy focused on argumentation and analysis, with an emphasis on dialogue. Through these conversations, Socrates showed that final answers to deep existential questions are not easily found. Those who talked with him often realised that their immediate responses to philosophical issues were either inadequate or flawed (Chesters 2012).

A philosophical conversation in a class can start in different ways; with a theme, a question, a concept, a narrative, or a statement, that students decide to explore. The

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goal is to become wiser or achieve a deeper understanding of the issues, not to find final answers or reach mutual agreement on right or wrong. Through history, the practice of philosophy has engaged in the twisting and turning of central concepts, questioning their definitions and meaning. Taking this as a point of departure, a basic exercise to use in the classroom is concept investigation. Initially students should suggest relevant concepts - such as conflict, justice, equality, peace, war, respect, tolerance, etc. Next the students can choose (by voting or random selection) one of the concepts for investigation. The philosophical dialogue can move between different types of questions about the concept: 1) do you know any similar concepts? 2) What is the opposite? 3) How can we use this concept in a sentence? 4) Can you give any examples of this - either from your own life or from fiction/ imagination? The idea is to expand the concept and create an awareness of different interpretations and find nuances of its possible meaning. As a first exercise this will introduce students to a way of thinking together and become wiser or positively confused in a community (see: <https://www.filosofipatroljen.dk/> *The Philosophy Patrol*).

While some approaches to philosophical dialogue are based on the idea that students should have the space and time to engage in the conversation without much interference from the teacher, others see the teacher as a facilitator of the dialogical process. A basic structure of a philosophical conversation can look like the following, according to Hagaman (1990, in Røthing et.al. 2024):

1. Students reflect on their standpoints and justify them.
2. Students listen to their fellow students' input and standpoints and are open to reassessing their own standpoints and opinions.
3. Students reflect on how context and experience may affect their positions and opinions, i.e., how they "think about the world."

A prerequisite for conducting philosophical conversations in the classroom is that each participant accepts the others as conversation partners and, not least, that nobody has the intention to persuade others.

However, there may be disagreements about whether there are final answers to right or wrong in demanding philosophical questions. In their work with *Philosophy for Children (P4C)*, Børresen and Malmhøster emphasise that a prerequisite in this approach is that conversations go beyond mere exchange of views, and that it is crucial to justify and argue for the claims made. They claim that an integral part of P4C is the "meta-conversation" where the pupils reflect on arguments and premises used in the conversation, and on whether any of the pupils have changed their minds along the way based on the conversation. Studies show that even academically weak students and pupils make significant progress by working in this way. A

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Scottish project found that students who practiced philosophical conversation for one hour a week developed a better understanding of language compared to the control group (Topping & Trickey 2007). The study also demonstrated that engaging with philosophy had an equalising effect in terms of gender and social background. Interestingly, it was the weakest students who showed the most progress (Trickey & Topping 2006). More recent studies have provided further data on cognitive as well as non-cognitive benefits of P4C (see: <https://www.sapere.org.uk/what-is-p4c/research-evidence/>).

Smaller studies conducted in Norway (Børresen & Malmhester 2007) confirm the findings from the Scottish project and indicate that there are teaching methods that can help those who may lack the necessary pre-understanding or learning opportunities at home. This is especially important regarding conspiracy theories that students face daily. Those who come from homes where they not only meet primary discourses, but also encounter secondary discourses are more prepared to critically analyse and engage with contested narratives in school. It is therefore crucial to adopt teaching approaches that provide secondary discourse experiences to everyone, to equip all students with the skills to deconstruct narratives, particularly in recognising othering discourses and power structures, and to navigate among multiple perspectives within the classroom.

Power relations and different student positions can make it challenging to establish classroom conditions that ensure all students respect each other as equals. If teachers take into account power relations in the classroom, philosophical conversations can have the potential to broaden students' perspectives, challenge their biases, and develop their skills related to problem-solving, creative thinking, and participating in constructive discussions and perspective-taking (Hagaman 1990, in Røthing et al. 2024).

Forum theatre

Forum theatre, also known as 'Theatre of the Oppressed', was established by the Brazilian playwright and activist Augusto Boal in the 1960s. Boal (2019) was inspired by Paulo Freire's *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970/2018) and his views on oppression, conscientisation, and education within the Brazilian context. In Forum theatre, participants should avoid promoting personal opinions as the aim is not to win an argument; instead, the focus is on exploring and addressing issues constructively. Forum theatre offers methods for analysing contradictions and conflicts through creative approaches, testing new solutions, and finding ways to break free from oppressive patterns and violations. In this process, participants must unite around a common goal and collaborate to solve a challenge. The play

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developed and performed in Forum theatre may tackle topics or issues that are perceived as sensitive and challenging for the participants (Byréus 2012).

To implement this as an approach to CI and CN, the class can be divided into groups that create scenes illustrating the chosen controversial issue or contested narratives. The overarching theme is selected through mutual agreement (to the extent possible), and a scene is developed and performed with attention to experiences of oppression or challenges that seem relevant to the participants.

The structure of this method requires that two successive performances are implemented. In the second performance, the audience is invited to intervene in the plot. When students think something could have been different and would have improved the situation of the protagonist (the oppressed), they can say: "STOP." Then, the actors freeze, and the student who stops the scene can suggest how change and resistance can be promoted, either by instructing the actor, or taking on the role himself/herself (Byréus 2012).

Forum theatre can promote other forms of learning and democratic participation than discussion often does. However, the themes staged in a Forum theatre must be relevant and meaningful to the participants. This combination of proximity to the investigated topic and the dramaturgical distance can lay the foundation for an investigative process that does not lead to conflict and high temperature, even when the topics are sensitive or highly contested (Hammer 2024) (see also discussion of sensitive issues in chapter 4).

Critical literacy in citizenship education

Another way to promote multiple perspectives among students is through the practice of *critical literacy*, which involves developing students' ability to read texts critically and reflectively. Today's students are exposed to an overwhelming amount of textual content, much of it produced anywhere, by anyone, and often without clear authorship or accountability. This reality calls for more than traditional source evaluation; it requires a deeper understanding of how texts are constructed and how they function within a digital and socially mediated society (Veum 2024).

Critical literacy closely relates to concepts such as critical thinking, critical reading, and critical writing. Although, these terms are used across various disciplines, their meanings and applications can differ significantly depending on the field. Further, according to Frønes et al. (2022):

"There is an important difference between critical assessment of whether sources and claims are sound and reliable (whether there is empirical evidence, or whether the argument is logical and coherent), and critical thinking as interpreting them as

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expressions of contradictions in a broader social and political context (how a text is written from a political or ideological position)”.

By developing the ability to critically evaluate claims and identify contradictions in social science, students are better prepared to navigate complex societal debates, understand multiple perspectives, and engage thoughtfully with issues that are politically sensitive or ideologically charged. Such controversial topics may include climate change and environmental policy, immigration and integration, gender equality, colonial history and its legacies, and the Israeli Palestinian and other conflicts. These debates often involve competing narratives and require learners to critically examine sources, question biases, and reflect on the power dynamics embedded in public discourse.

In secondary school, this approach may involve analysing multiple texts, combining information from various sources to develop a comprehensive understanding of a topic. This can help enhance students' awareness that texts are constructed and that different authors may present a phenomenon in different ways (Veum 2012). For younger students, an approach to critical literacy can be facilitated through shared picture book reading, where reading a picture book on a challenging social science topic aloud is followed by exploring the book's content through literary conversations (Ommundsen et al. 2023).

Another related concept is *critical media literacy*, particularly in relation to online texts and social media, which are integral to the lives of young people today. Research indicates that teachers struggle to incorporate critical perspectives on media texts into their lessons, particularly when addressing issues of power and ideology (Veum et al. 2024). Developing this literacy is important for resisting the growing influence of corporate media, understanding the evolving social media landscape, and gaining a deeper understanding of media use. It also enhances comprehension of the current complex world, much of which we experience through media—by increasing awareness of how content is created and presented, and by fostering a more nuanced view of media production processes (Butler 2020). A point of attention regarding critical literacy in social science is the spread of fake news and disinformation. Especially during elections or global crises, contested narratives spread rapidly online, requiring careful evaluation of sources and motives, and serving as a starting point for critical analysis and awareness among teachers and students.

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Pedagogical aims and didactic considerations

In this section, we turn to pedagogical aims and didactic considerations, when the teacher or student teacher is planning to include CI or CN in specific subjects. The didactic model below was developed through the ConCitizen project with inspiration from the *Bildung* theories common in the Nordic countries and the German speaking parts of Europe. For the Danish philosopher Peter Kemp, the concept *Bildung* implies that education is a combination of cultivation and instruction, aiming at the broad development of students. While cultivation makes people into cultural beings, instruction makes people into knowing beings. Cultivation has an ethical goal, while instruction aims at the acquisition of knowledge. The two are mutually dependent in the sense that instruction must rest on cultivation, and without knowledge, we cannot have cultivation in a modern society (Kemp 2013:165-166).

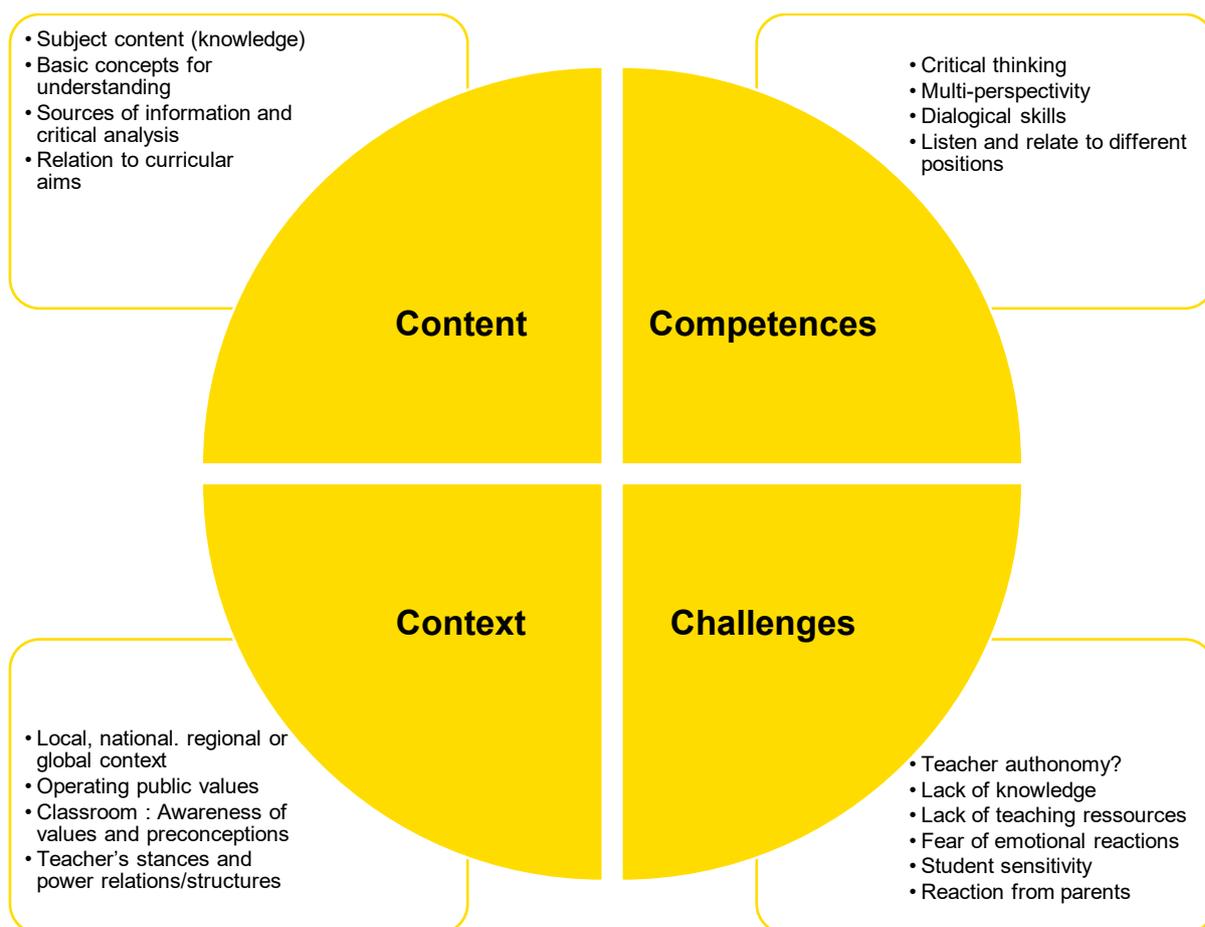
For the teacher, a central task is to explore, how knowledge, conceptualised as educational content, can contribute to the cultivation (*Bildung*) of students as autonomous human beings (Ryen & Jøsok 2023). Through didactic analysis, the teacher can uncover the educational potential of the subject content and consider how this may contribute to the cultivation of the student and the pedagogical aims of the school. The point here is to keep in mind how the teaching of CN and CI can contribute to the broader aims of education in democratic societies.

The concept 'didactics' comes from the Greek verb διδάσκειν (*didaskein*), which means to teach, instruct, impart knowledge, or cause to learn. In a broad sense, it refers to the art of teaching with attention to both practical and theoretical dimensions. Didactic reflection relates to the intentional aspect of teaching in the sense that content and methodologies are rooted in basic views of human nature, the good life and living together (Andersen & Sigurdsson 2020). To approach teaching as a form of virtuosity is to be aware of the unpredictability and uncontrollability it entails (Biesta 2013; Rosa 2020). Through didactic reflection, we

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investigate ideas and preconceptions of what teaching is, what it means to learn something, and what we hope to achieve. A well-known general model is the didactic triangle, which illustrates the interplay between content, teacher, and student. Teaching unfolds as an interaction between the three points of the triangle, as the teacher selects the content of teaching, the students engage with the content, and different roles and forms of interaction may evolve in the process. From the perspective of *Bildung*, didactic reflection includes consideration of long-term goals. As mentioned above, a central question is: How does the teaching of CN and CI contribute to the pedagogical aims of schools and the broad development of students?

The didactic model we have developed for the teaching of CN and CI combines four domains for reflection: **Context, content, competences and challenges**. In the following, we elaborate the four domains and explain how the teacher can use the model for planning, practicing and evaluating teaching. In the centre of the model, we place the specific issue that the teacher is planning to include in one of the school subjects.



Didactic model *ConCitizen* 2025

The first step in the teaching of CI and CN is to consider the following questions:

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- How is this a controversial issue or a contested narrative (or a combination)?
- What is the controversy or contestation about?
- Why is this relevant to teach?

The next step is to consider each of the four domains and the interplay between them. In the following we first introduce monuments as an example and illustrate, how any controversial issue or contested narrative can be elaborated through the four domains of the model. In chapter 6 we provide further examples from the three subjects (history education, citizenship education and religious education).

Context: Through the previous chapters of this book, we have emphasised that it is essential to consider the context of the issue at hand. First, because what is considered controversial is (to a large extent) dependent on context. In the ConCitizen project, we found this to be the case for issues such as civil marriage, abortion, flags and anthems, checkpoints, and monuments. In the following, we use monuments as an example for didactic reflection.

If we imagine a teacher that decides to use a controversial monument in a class of history, citizenship, or religious education, she will first need to clarify, why this monument is controversial. This implies a consideration of the national or local context regarding when, why and by whom the monument was erected. In some cases, it is also relevant to consider public debate about the monument. While this is a contextualisation of the issue as such, context also includes the classroom and the kind of preconceptions, attitudes, or emotions the students might have about the monument. While it is possible to find controversial monuments in many different contexts, the issues they symbolise, and the narratives related to them reflect the specific local, national or transnational context. To answer the question of why the monument is controversial, basic knowledge about the context is necessary. But the teacher also needs awareness of possible bias, preconceptions, and sensitivities of students. Therefore, the consideration of context should combine attention to the issue or narrative with attention to the classroom composition.

Content: As the students engage in analysing a monument (either a representation/picture or on-site investigation), it may be possible for them even without any previous knowledge, to 'read' a monument and understand some of the narratives involved in it just by looking at it and carefully describing it. This would work as an initial open approach using imagination and free interpretation in dialogue with others. But with more knowledge about the event or person(s), the monument depicts, students will understand more about the controversy or the narratives at play. Providing information about the different attitudes or positions in public debate about the monument can further qualify their analysis.

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For other controversial issues – in line with controversial monuments, the teacher may initially choose to engage students in a debate based on what the students know from their family and local community or have picked up in the news and social media. But to qualify their arguments, the teacher needs to consider, what kind of information and subject knowledge she should include, and how to provide this for the students. This belongs to the domain of subject content, where the teacher selects sources of information, relevant concepts for analysis and combine content with student activities. The planning of subject content should ideally bridge curricular goals with the interest of the students. A central concern here is, how the acquisition of knowledge can contribute to democratic formation by supporting students to become critical investigators with the ability to analyse different sources and contested narratives. The selection of subject content provides a shared framework for whole class or group debates and can strengthen the ability to weigh, judge and negotiate different arguments and positions.

Challenges: The teaching of CI and CN can involve several challenges, ranging from high tension among students, to the teacher's lack of sufficient knowledge to address the topic. With controversial monuments as well as other controversial issues, the teacher needs to consider her/his own possible bias and emotional engagement in the controversy and the narratives it involves. Other challenges are related to sensitivities that could cause distress or even trauma to some students, as monuments, narratives, and controversial issues generally can be directly related to family or local history. For some teachers this may also include fear of reactions from parents. A challenge often mentioned by teachers is time restriction. Limited room for teacher autonomy and lack of support from school leadership are further concerns. The teacher should be as extensive as possible in identifying challenges and considering these in relation to the benefits of teaching the issue (see chapter 2).

Competences: This domain refers to the broader aims of addressing the controversial issue or contested narrative. Here teachers should consider the desired comprehension, reflection, skills, and abilities that they wish or hope to achieve. This involves a consideration of methodologies that can enhance multi-perspectivity, critical thinking and dialogical skills and the ability to listen and relate to different positions. Such competences are related to the active participation in communities of disagreement. With the example of the monument, the teacher would need to decide, how students can investigate different interpretations of the monument, and how they can uncover different narratives. Developing of competences implies reflection about the general aims of teaching this controversial issue or contested narrative. Why is it important to address the topic? What does the teacher hope the students will achieve in terms of competences and reflection? How does the issue fit within the curriculum? And how does the interplay between content and

competences enhance the general aims of education in terms of critical thinking and democratic formation (*Bildung*)?

After this basic introduction to the didactic model, the next chapter will provide examples of issues from history education, religious education, and citizenship education. Each example is elaborated through the four domains of the model, with the aim of demonstrating how it can be used for planning and evaluation of specific controversial issues and contested narratives. Based on the experiences from virtual exchange in the ConCitizen project and from site specific monument analysis in other international programs, the section on history didactics also highlights didactics for monument exploration in connection to CI and CN.

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Chapter 6: Subject exemplifications

History education

A. Hans Egede - a contested missionary

One of the content areas within the subject of history that almost always contain contested narratives and controversial issues - especially in European countries – is the colonial past and/ or relation to indigenous people. In the case of Denmark this can be connected to the relations between Denmark and Greenland.

In this section we use Danish history and the controversies regarding the historical figure Hans Egede (1686-1758) – the Danish Norwegian priest and missionary who led the first mission to Greenland in 1721 – as a case for a further elaboration of how to deal with contested narratives and controversial issues within the subject of history.

As discussed in chapter 3, the evaluation of Hans Egede's role in history is highly contested. However, the case illustrates well the contestation between the traditional master narrative and newer counternarratives. While the master narrative describes Hans Egede as a good and benevolent missionary who brought Christianity to the people of Greenland, various counter narratives portrait him as a malevolent coloniser instrumental in the Danish colonial expansion (Fleischer 2021; Rygaard 2021).

When teaching about the historical figure Hans Egede and about his monument in Nuuk, we recommend the teacher to facilitate a process of historical inquiry (Nordgren 2016), as introduced in chapter 5. This includes focusing on the Danish mission to Greenland in the 18th century, followed by an analysis of how the historical role of Hans Egede has been perceived and employed in the past and how it is perceived and employed today.

When focusing on the mission to Greenland in the 18th century the students have to generate relevant research questions, work with primary and secondary sources and in the end construct their own evaluation of the role of Hans Egede in the history of Greenland. Here, it is important that the historical research questions include both questions related to the causes of Hans Egede's mission to Greenland and questions related to its consequences. Further, it is important that the source materials used by the students include both Danish and Greenlandic perspectives and that the students compare these in the process of constructing their own interpretations of the past.

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When later analysing the *use of history* in the case of Hans Egede, the focal point could be his statue in Nuuk. The students could first investigate the circumstances around the erection of the statue in 1922 and explore how the role of Hans Egede was perceived at that time. Then, based on this, the students could use the analytical model developed by Kenneth Nordgren (Nordgren 2016:495), applying this on the case from 2020 when a statue of Hans Egede was splashed with red paint and tagged with Inuit symbols and the word “decolonise”. This resulted in a public vote on whether to remove the statue or not (see chapter 3; Enge 2020 & Kleemann-Andersen 2021).

Content

The didactic model introduced in chapter 5, highlights four aspects: content, context, challenges, and competences. Applied on the Hans Egede case, the *content* that the students will be working with in class is various source material, that may shed light on the role of Hans Egede during the colonisation of Greenland in the 18th century. Some may be primary source material that can help students to understand *what* happened during the colonisation process in the 18th century, and *why* it happened. It can also be secondary source material, which can give the students an understanding of the consequences of Hans Egede’s mission, and of how his role in the colonisation project is perceived and evaluated by historians today. The most important thing the teacher must be aware of when selecting both primary and secondary source material is that both Greenlandic and Danish perspectives are included.

When students are analysing the uses of the history of Hans Egede the content will mainly be primary sources, like older and more recent photos of the statue in Nuuk, as well as discussions about the statue in the printed press, online fora, political debates etc. In this part, it is again important to include both Greenlandic and Danish perspectives in the past and present.

Context

An important contextual factor to consider when teaching about the colonial past is the students in the specific classroom. When working with the role in history of Hans Egede in a Danish school context, it is important to consider whether some students have a Danish, a Greenlandic or a mixed Greenlandic Danish background. A main question is therefore how the individual students may relate to the colonial past being explored. Further attention could concern how students perceive current political debates about the relationship between Greenland and Denmark, as well as the growing international interest in Greenland.

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Other basic questions are concerned with the students' preconceptions of the colonial past, and what knowledge they have (or need to have) about that historical past. It is important that the teacher at least has a good understanding regarding the first question and includes an initial process that sheds light on the students' preconceptions and levels of knowledge.

Challenges - and benefits

The main pedagogical challenge when working with the historical relations between Denmark and Greenland in Danish schools, was until recently that most students with an ethnic majority background had limited knowledge of this part of Danish history and were not really aware of the strong feelings that the figure of Hans Egede and his role in this part of Danish-Greenlandic history could evoke in students with a Greenlandic or mixed ethnic background. The teacher had to consider, how to manage a classroom where many of the students did not easily connect to this part of Danish history, and at the same time include minority student for whom this topic evokes very strong emotions. This calls for the teacher to facilitate classes that on one hand generate interest in the subject and on the other hand treat it delicately.

The main benefit in this case would be that focusing on the figure of Hans Egede can raise awareness of how the histories of Denmark and Greenland are intertwined, and of the controversies and the strong emotions embedded in this history. This is an awareness, which students with an ethnic majority background can use when confronted with other parts of the interrelated histories of Denmark and Greenland. With the current threats (at the time of editing the book) from the American president to make Greenland a part of USA, the interest in the Greenlandic Danish history has increased. In that perspective, this is an exemplary case to show how analysis of a controversial monument can reveal different contested narratives, but also to discuss how the focus of controversy can change with a new political situation.

Competences

Working with the role of Hans Egede in Danish Greenlandic history - using the method of historical inquiry - implies working with different historical perspectives, which will enhance students' multi-perspectival thinking and stimulate reflection and critical thinking. Inquiry based learning includes asking questions, designing investigations, interpreting and evaluating information, forming explanations and arguments, communicating findings and reflecting on these findings, all of which are skills needed in critical thinking.

Use of history can – as Kenneth Nordgren have phrased it – be seen as a link between historical culture and historical consciousness. In this approach, historical culture covers “all references to the past that are available in a given context, such

as artifacts, rituals, customs, and narratives” as well as the distribution of these references through schools, cultural institutions, and the media (Nordgren 2016). The use of history is then “the communicative process in which aspects of the historical culture are applied to communicate meaning and action-oriented messages” (Nordgren 2016).

Analyses of uses of history give the students insight into the interpretations of the past, the understanding of the present and the expectations of the future of the people who use history in a specific case. This competence is important when we want to enhance students’ abilities to understand the “Other” and see things from another perspective than our own.

In the case of the statue of Hans Egede in Nuuk analysing the *use of history* would for example shed light on the interpretations of the past, the understanding of the present and the expectations of the future of the people who decided to cover the statue in red paint and tag it with Inuit symbols and the word “decolonise” in 2020, and help the students to analyse their perspectives. A further analysis could include the local community referendum, which was held in July 2021, in which 62% of those who voted opted to keep the statue, while 38% wanted to remove it (see *The Contested Histories Initiative* 2021). This would also provide opportunities to look at the contested narratives involved in the debate and to reflect on these in relation to the current political situation in Greenland.

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B. Transnational site-specific learning

The following section highlights, how multi-perspectivity can be a fruitful approach to explore and understand "memorial sites" – or "places of remembrance" - across the disciplines of history education, religious education and citizenship education. It is followed by a discussion of the Inquiry approach as a cross-curricular approach, including the importance of collective memories.

Dialogue and analysis of memorials

The use of memorial sites in education is inspired by the pedagogical approach called "site-specific" (or location-based) teaching. In some cases, taking pupils and students to sites where special events have taken place can be emotionally challenging, depending on the event that the specific monument or location is related to. Some monuments and places of remembrance may impose "a moment of discomfort" (Bekerman & Zembylas 2011) for students either because they symbolise or represent atrocities that are difficult to comprehend, or because they introduce a historical event from a different angle and with other narratives than the students are familiar with. In the ConCitizen project we implemented a distancing practice in which student teachers from different contexts explored controversial monuments with one another in virtual exchanges. This approach made it possible for participants to discuss and ask questions about the narratives connected to these monuments without becoming too emotionally involved.

In an urban setting, we find monuments, statues and memorial sites which contain both controversial issues and contested narratives. For educational purposes, monument exercises can be structured in different ways. The following is just an example of how it may be done. In the virtual exchanges of the ConCitizen project, we invited the students to spot and introduce a place or a monument that was perceived as controversial in their local or national context. The students were given the following task:

Upload a picture in a Padlet (or bring to class) of a national or local place of importance and/or remembrance from your country. It could be a monument, a statue, or a place that has been given special meaning and

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evoke strong emotions, because of different narratives, views, and/or interpretations connected to it.

Write below the picture what it is and where it is erected or located. Prepare a very short oral presentation of the chosen place or monument. This should contain at least two different narratives or interpretations of the chosen site.

In the following, we share two examples of the monuments the students chose and the texts they formulated. These introductory texts address **content** and **context**.

(Students from Cyprus): Statue of Dimitris Chamatsos in Dali, Nicosia, Cyprus



This is a statue of Dimitris Chamatsos, a Greek Cypriot vocational school student from Dali. He died during a violent incident in 1964 during the intercommunal conflict between Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots who were residing in the nearby village of Agios Sozomenos.

On February 6, 1964, fighting broke out over the water pumping station near Agios Sozomenos that left 6 Greek Cypriots and 7 Turkish Cypriots dead, and led to the abandonment of the village by all its residents. Still the one community presses charges against the other as to who started the violence through the press and the accounts of witnesses. Apart from the two narratives, which are not discussed widely in the public sphere, this statue is an opportunity to open conversations about radicalization, and now glorification of teenagers at the time, and the normalization of violence.

(Students from Northern Ireland): The World War memorial in front of Queen's University in Belfast, Northern Ireland



This is an example of a controversial issue due to the divided communities of Northern Ireland. For some, this is a continual remembrance of British colonialism and the violence their communities faced during the period of violent conflict called “The Troubles”. The Troubles lasted from the 1960’s to the Good Friday Agreement in 1998. For the other community, this is a way of remembering their own relatives who served during the war, and possibly members who continue to serve today. There is still controversy surrounding whether the students’ union should send representatives to the annual remembrance service, as well as whether armed services and police should be allowed on campus or for recruitment, due to the contested narratives around the groups.

The virtual exchanges between the original 20 student teachers from the participating institutions later developed into virtual exchanges with entire classes. From these exchanges, many other examples of controversial issues and contested narratives emerged, making visible the existing multi-perspectivity among the students, and showing clearly that the context of the students had great significance for what examples they selected. Through the discussions in the virtual exchanges, the students experienced that what is acceptable to talk about in one context can be taboo in another, confirming the general importance of context. A possible outcome from this approach is that the students’ cultural sensitivity is developed. Engaging in this form of transnational exchange can activate reflection on each participant’s idiosyncrasies by talking to students from other contexts, students who do not share the same ideas and norms.

Challenges and benefits

Since dealing with places of remembrance and monuments - or with any controversial topic presented by the students - may evoke strong feelings, we suggest that teachers and students make an agreement on how to carry out the dialogue in class (see also chapter 4 and 5). Cross-cultural encounters may be difficult, so it is relevant to create an awareness of possible challenges before students engage in this form of dialogue. Some points of attention from the virtual exchange sessions we experienced, are the following:

- Participants can have different boundaries regarding what is appropriate to say in a dialogue.
- Teacher-student hierarchy varies from country to country. Power imbalance may affect the room for dialogue.
- The school systems and the schools' ethos are context dependent.
- The political and historical contexts are different.
- There are different perceptions of what kind of knowledge may be useful in an educational context, in addition to scientific knowledge.
- There may be some tensions between the values underpinning national school systems and the personal values of different participants.

In the transnational site-specific approach, we experienced that the social, political and educational context has a strong impact on which topics are likely to generate controversies. This reflects Ahonen's (2020) distinction between public history, academic history, and social memory (see model in chapter 5). Regarding monuments and places of remembrance, it can be relevant to introduce and apply Ahonen's distinctions. If the aim is to strengthen the analytical approach, one can draw from academic history through additional sources and by investigating the events behind the monuments. In the virtual exchanges, we experienced that the students showed both interest and openness to engage in dialogues about the chosen monuments, and that this enhanced their comprehension of controversial issues and contested narratives. Integrated in a longer teaching course, this form of virtual exchange can be a point of departure for comparative studies of controversial issues and contested narratives combined with in-depth study of their contexts.

During the virtual exchanges, the student teachers were asked what they saw as benefits and challenges in applying pedagogy of multi-perspectivity in their teaching. They agreed that multi-perspectivity is likely to encourage students to put themselves in others' shoes, thereby enhancing critical thinking regarding both controversial issues and contested narratives. However, they also pointed out some

challenges for the teacher. One of these would be to encompass all perspectives on the topic and present each perspective with an ideal of objectivity. Further, some of the student teachers emphasised that students (and the teacher) might find it difficult to accept the different perspectives if they themselves believe in or hold an opposing opinion or perspective. Additionally, especially in a homogeneous classroom, where perspectives may be uniform, it would be important to present a range of different perspectives on the topic at stake. However, it is important to stress that the domain of academic history also implies a critical analysis of narratives. Such an analysis may reveal that not all narratives are equally valid in terms of historical evidence and highlight the dynamics between the original event and the narratives about it. This will be explored in more detail in the next section, which will introduce an inquiry approach.

The Inquiry approach to cultures of remembrance (competences)

In the virtual exchanges with student teachers, multi-perspectivity was a key concept in the exploration of memorial sites. The next section will discuss in more detail the inquiry approach we applied in these virtual exchanges to foster multi-perspectivity. It will also reflect on why this approach is appropriate for dealing with collective memories through monuments, memorials, and museums, which are crucial and pedagogically relevant aspects of cultures of remembrance.

The inquiry approach is a dialectic approach, aiming to distinguish between the *event* that the memorial is based on, and the *narratives about this event*. The approach draws on the work of the German historian, Andreas Körber, who has explored how to foster a common European memorial culture through a narrative that includes both the Nazi aggression and the Resistance. This narrative understands the causes and remembers the consequences of that conflict while also seeking peaceful coexistence in Europe. Körber claims that history teaching through such historical memorials can provide students with historical literacy which involves knowing about a variety of historical narratives, becoming familiar with some of them, accepting and assessing their functions, and recognising the value of this multitude of narratives in a pluralistic society (Körber, A. 2011:159).

A memorial as such has its origin based on a historical event or process: something has happened, someone was involved, and this has had an impact on someone somewhere. However, we can talk about a specific event in different ways, creating different, sometimes competing narratives. The narrative we stick to depends on our point of view and the perspective we choose. An event, and a narrative about this event, is not the same. The challenge is when a historical monument, or a memorial, is based on the idea that the memorial represents “the Truth” about this event. This

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may happen, since the memorial site often explicitly states who were the victims, and who were the heroes, thereby encouraging coming generations to remember the event like this. (Kørber (2013) in Bjerg et al 2013).

Accordingly, Kørber's approach emphasises that narratives involved in a memorial site consist of two different stages. The first stage is the historical event itself (what happened, where, who were involved?), which can be inquired through an analysis of historical sources. The second stage involves a narrative and requires a narrative investigation:

1. Which positions do we find in the memorial: heroes, perpetrators, victims?
2. What is the scene?
3. Which symbolic elements are there in the representation?
4. Who is the narrator, the speaker?
5. What societal position does the speaker have?
6. Who is the intended receiver of the message?
7. Where is this memorial placed? Why?

We could add another question (8): When was the monument created, and in which historical context?

According to Kørber, these two stages lead to a deeper understanding of the past and the norms of memorial culture:

1. acquiring knowledge about historical events and actions
2. analysing the narratives and representations surrounding these events

Analysing narratives embedded in a memorial and the reason for creating this memorial opens for questions like: Why has someone decided that future generations should remember a particular individual or a particular event in this particular way? Do any other voices or narratives exist which present and reveal a different perspective?

As discussed in chapter 5, different social or political groups may have conflicting collective memories, meaning that the collective memory is always selective. This is obviously the case with the ongoing conflicts related to national narratives or monuments, as exemplified above. In general, monuments and memorials often reflect one specific narrative, highlighting one specific perspective of the past, encouraging new generations to remember certain historical events or powerful people in a specific way and to keep the perceived ideas, values, and achievements of certain persons or groups alive and present for generations. However, as will be

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discussed below, monuments are obviously also aesthetic representations open to multiple interpretations.

In the virtual exchanges, the students came up with good examples through monuments from their own national contexts. The monument in front of Queen's University in Belfast has become a powerful symbol for the divided communities of Northern Ireland, still evoking strong emotions related to conflicting narratives both about the Second World War and about the Troubles. Similarly, students from Cyprus presented a case from their national context, focusing on the statue of a young student who was killed during a violent conflict between Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots in 1964. In Cyprus today the two groups have contested narratives and competing collective memories related to the violence. These examples from divided societies with recent conflicts illustrate how the past and present are closely linked through a *culture of remembrance*.

Moreover, while societies are dynamic, and political systems are under continuous change due to the demography of the population, the memorial culture serves as a cohesive force for the current society. It needs, however, to be continually renegotiated by the citizens since the perspective is not an "objective" one but depends on the narrator. For one thing, it requires both political and financial power to create places of remembrance or statues, and the narratives presented to the public are not necessarily the only possible ones. Less privileged narrators may claim different truths about the same event or about a person's achievement. When a society narrows its memorial culture and the related narratives, it leaves little room for critical inquiry into the past, and silences crucial narratives (Körber 2011). Citizens without long-standing family ties to a nation or community may find monuments irrelevant to their lives, as they lack a sense of belonging to the official or master narratives (Kvande 2013).

Multi-perspectivity, on the other hand, opens a range of views about the past, and makes it urgent to ask how students and pupils can get access to the multi-perspectivity embedded in the actual culture of remembrance, and how teachers may approach memorial sites in a way that foster democratic citizenship, peaceful coexistence and agency. An important point of departure is to acknowledge that monuments and memorial sites are *aesthetic* representations and therefore, ambiguous and open to various interpretations, thereby fostering multi-perspectivity. Using an inquiry approach, monuments and memorial sites are not given a fixed and closed meaning, instead, students are invited to an open and critical exploration of the aesthetic form, symbolism and expression at hand.

In some contexts, the representations and narratives embedded in the memory culture, whether local or national, may evoke strong emotions and lead to clear

positioning. According to Körber, it is important to acknowledge such emotions when dealing with contested narratives and memory culture. The teacher should be aware that some narratives give some groups and individuals a feeling of weakness, linked to their social positions. As a countermove, strong emotions should be seen as resources and as a possibility for empowerment through dialogue facilitated by the history teacher. For instance, an analysis of memorials based on historical traumas, such as armed conflicts, colonialism or genocide, can lead to a more fruitful dialogue if the teacher focuses on emotions like “guilt” and “responsibility”. In this way, students can view their responses from an outside perspective. Instead of shame and despair, the emotional aspects may lead to a sense of agency and a willingness to avoid similar traumas from happening again.

Conclusively, monuments and memorials in local communities can serve as valuable tools for critical inquiry. By examining these sites, communities can build awareness and the ability to understand and accept different—and sometimes contested—historical narratives, which is crucial for democratic and pluralistic societies. On the one hand, these are objects created to mirror specific historical events, processes or people, with potential impact on societal changes in the long term. On the other hand, these same objects contain narratives crafted by people of that time, who used them to express their subjective opinions about the past’s actors, structures, causes and consequences. New generations will need to deconstruct and renegotiate these narratives, not only to be aware of the hidden values and norms they build on, but also to evaluate these norms and values and discuss if they are still relevant and significant to foster peaceful coexistence in diverse and democratic societies today. This is an important task for educational institutions.

Further, as mentioned in the Introduction, in recent times, the inclusion of memories that have been forgotten or repressed has raised questions about representation and marginalisation in the public sphere. Using site-specific learning in connection with contested narratives and controversial issues can help students analyse power and representation in public spaces and introduce them to new and ambiguous places of remembrance (Rønberg 2015).

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Religious education: Religion and identity

Identity is a complicated concept as it can refer to both individual and collective aspects, meaning that a person's identity is composed of not only individual but also collective elements; the latter including shared memories related to family, school, friendship, or community. Identity can also be related to specific *nations*, by some described as "imagined communities" (Anderson 1983; Gullestad 2002), where people perceive themselves as linked together through shared history, language, symbols, flags, sports, commemorations – and religion. Such collective elements and the narratives related to these have an important identity-forming function. In this section we explore and discuss how national identity or community identity may be related to religion.

In chapter 5 we discussed Robert Jackson's interpretive approach to RE. His three-levels model involves studying the connections between *individuals*, their ties to relevant religious *groups*, and the wider religious *tradition* (Jackson 1997). Jackson is particularly concerned about the representations of religions and worldviews in RE and emphasises the importance of awareness of power relations between the

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majority and various minority groups. This includes awareness of how religious traditions and ideas are spread through master- and counternarratives. And when a dominant religious tradition is closely linked to the state, forming a national identity, this may be a challenge to multi-perspectivity and to a multi-cultural society, as is elaborated below.

The relationship between national or community identity and religion is often a complex and controversial issue in religious education (Iversen 2020; Kjeldsen 2019) and may involve a 'package' of characteristics, including politics, a sense of history, traditions and language. Use of religion as a collective identity marker in society has both the potential to foster social integration and to lead to segregation and exclusion.

For divided societies – such as Lebanon, Cyprus, and Northern Ireland - community divisions have led to separate schooling systems. The possibility of engaging with any learning about and from members of 'the other' community or communities is limited and perceived as a sensitive area. Separate schools for different communities can in practice lead to a lack of interest in knowing about "the Other". In situations like these, RE teachers, as well as the students, must develop skills in disagreeing in a respectful way, which will help build reconciliation and healing. It is also important that the students have chances to have open and thoughtful conversations about cultural and identity differences (Richardson & Gallagher 2011). For other societies, characterised by a strong connection between the dominant religion and the state, the challenges are different. Historically, in Norway and Denmark there has been a close relationship between the Lutheran Church and the state. The process of secularisation, however, along with increasingly diverse, multi-religious societies, has raised questions about and posed challenges to the representation of the national Church and the Christian tradition in religious education in these countries (Kjeldsen 2019; Lindhardt 2022). In consensus-seeking classrooms where a secular or cultural Christian viewpoint is seen as the 'neutral' position, students who have different religions or worldviews might feel it is hard to participate equally.

RE teachers face challenges when trying to teach in a way that is objective, inclusive, pluralistic, and critical. They need to adapt their teaching to accommodate students from many different religious and non-religious backgrounds. In the following cases from Lebanon, Northern Ireland, and Denmark, we address how controversies regarding the relationship between religion and national or community identity can be approached in RE, and how the challenges differ considerably depending on context.

Lebanon: Martyrs and memories

A *martyr* is normally understood as someone who dies for his or her own faith and beliefs. Martyr can also describe someone who is suffering unjustly. The concept of 'martyr' has been used in all religions that have been subjected to persecution. The idea of martyr – and the collective memories related to a particular martyr - has a central place, not only in Christianity and Islam, as will be discussed below, but also in other religions, such as Sikhism, where the ideal of martyrdom has become a prominent feature and a key to understanding the history, traditions, and values of Sikhs. A widely used and poetically phrased quote, which can just as well be applied in other traditions that honour a martyr's sacrifice, goes as follows: "Sikh martyrs constitute some of the brightest jewels in the necklace of religious martyrdom that graces the neck of God" (Breidlid 2020:101).

In a Lebanese context, martyrdom is a central issue, both within a Christian and a Muslim context. In the concept mapping conducted in the initial phase of the ConCitizen project, two topics were highlighted by the Lebanese scholars describing which contested historical narratives were the most relevant to deal with in Lebanese schools:

- 1) The Civil War in Lebanon
- 2) Heroes/martyrs/traitors, with explicit mentioning of Fakhreddine and Emir Bachir, in addition to Bachir Gemayel, Hariri, and Kassem Suleimani, as examples of more recent figures

Both these topics are highly controversial in a Lebanese context. In the following we explore and discuss contested narratives related to the second one, "heroes, martyrs and traitors", with a special focus on martyrs.

Content

In Lebanon both Christian and Muslim martyrs are highlighted and contested; honoured by some and despised by others. Martyrdom has a special place in both religions, and we will account for the most basic principles in both, starting with Christian martyrs.

In a Lebanese context, the Christian concept of martyrdom establishes a profound connection between the martyrs' sacrifice, the community, and the land in which they died. Their intention was to cultivate an enduring love for both the land and its inhabitants. The early Christian writer Tertullian's (155-220) famous words "the blood of Christians is a seed" acknowledged the missionary impact of the martyrdom of early Christians. Reflecting on the tragic events at Our Lady of Deliverance Church in Baghdad on October 31, 2010, where 58 Catholic Assyrians were massacred,

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Lebanese Orthodox Metropolitan Georges Khodr remarked that the martyrdom of those individuals sanctified the land and its people. He expressed, "Their blood sanctified Iraq and raised its righteous people to the bosom of God. Iraq is exalted through their blood... God, may He be blessed and exalted, bestows His grace upon innocent blood, and it speaks the truth."

However, Christian martyrdom represents more than just loyalty to the land and its people; it also symbolises the sacramental Christian presence, seen as a manifestation of God's love in Christ. This presence is not merely symbolic but active, evident in the words and deeds of the martyrs and those who honour them. Furthermore, the lives and deaths of these martyrs transcend their own faith communities, serving as inspiration for peaceful relations with followers of other faiths. In instances where these martyrs were targeted explicitly or implicitly in the name of Islam, the response to such violence has been a resolute call for justice and the peaceful coexistence of Muslims and Christians in Lebanon.

However, we find martyrs not only within the Christian tradition, but also within the Islamic tradition. The Arabic word *shahid* ("witness of faith"), first acquired the meaning of martyr in early Qur'anic commentaries, primarily in connection with Surah 3:163: "Do not consider those who were killed in the cause of God as dead. No, they are alive with their Lord, receiving His bounty," and Surah 47:5–7: "Those who fight and die in the cause of God, He will never let their deeds go to waste. He will guide them, set their minds on the right path, and admit them to Paradise which He has made known to them."

The Hadith literature and the tradition point out all the privileges of the martyr in the afterlife. Some legal literature explicitly links *shahid* to the doctrine of *jihad*: He who sacrifices his life in the struggle for the cause of Islam attains salvation and will be taken directly to Paradise. This may be seen as the starting point for the martyr ideology that is used in a political-religious context in the Muslim world today (Elstad 2025). This is also evident within the Lebanese context. While traditionally a martyr was someone who promoted a clear religious message, the concept of martyrdom in Lebanon today has evolved to include anyone killed in war, car bombings, or by an opposing group. This broader application has led to a clear case of contested narratives and controversial issues, as not all martyrs are revered in the same way across cultural or religious communities. Each party and militia claim to have martyrs of a particular cause, opposing the vision of others (Bronte 2023). Our primary interest lies in understanding how the martyrdoms of these individuals are portrayed in the various sources that document their lives, and how these depictions have inspired others to engage in contested narratives, leading to conflict and objections. An important question then is how teachers can deal with such cases within a classroom context.

Context: dealing with history

Lebanon has been marked by a complex tapestry of conflicts and wars resulting in deep divisions within the Lebanese society. This has led to a plethora of tragedies and contested narratives, with each community interpreting historical events according to its own perspective. One particularly striking example of this is the perception of martyrs – and other heroes - within the Lebanese context.

It is noteworthy that individuals who are hailed as heroes and martyrs within one cultural or religious community can be viewed as traitors by another community. This duality of perception is evident for several notable figures, such as Rafic Hariri, Emir Fakhreddine II, and Qassem Soleimani, among others.

Emir Fakhreddine II, for instance, is celebrated as a hero by many Druzes and Maronites for his efforts to establish an autonomous Lebanese state in the 17th century. However, he is seen in a different light by some Sunni Muslims today and in earlier times by Ottoman authorities, who viewed his actions as a threat to their power.

Rafic Hariri, the former Prime Minister of Lebanon, who was assassinated in 2005, is revered by many for his efforts to rebuild Beirut after the civil war and his contributions to the country's economy. Yet, he is also criticised by some who accuse him of corruption and of serving the interests of foreign powers.

Qassem Soleimani, the Iranian general who was killed in a U.S. drone strike, is hailed as a martyr by many Shias in Lebanon and beyond for his role in combating ISIS. However, he is viewed with suspicion by some Sunni Muslims and Western countries, who see him as a destabilising force in the region.

These examples highlight the complexity of perceptions surrounding heroes and martyrs in Lebanon, where the same individual can be revered as a hero or martyr by some and condemned as a traitor by others, depending on their religious or cultural background and perspective.

Challenges and benefits addressing martyrdom in a Lebanese classroom context

1. Sensitive nature: Martyrdom is a deeply sensitive topic in Lebanon due to its historical and religious significance. The concept can evoke strong emotions and deeply held beliefs, leading to potential conflicts or discomfort in the classroom.
2. Contested narratives: Martyrdom in Lebanon is often accompanied by contested narratives, since the same individual may be viewed differently by

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different cultural or religious groups. This can create confusion and tension in the classroom. Many instructors, when confronted with such issues, may avoid these topics, impose their own opinions, or align with the majority opinion in the classroom.

3. **Cultural and religious diversity:** Lebanon is a culturally and religiously diverse country, with various sects and communities holding different views of martyrs. In a classroom context, teachers must navigate this diversity carefully to avoid inadvertently offending or alienating students. However, this can be challenging, as students may have deeply ingrained beliefs and cultural backgrounds that influence their views on martyrs.
4. **Historical baggage:** Lebanon's history of conflict and civil war adds complexity to discussions about martyrdom. Students may have personal, or family experiences related to these events, which may affect their perceptions and reactions. The difficulty arises when students confront each other with different opinions, potentially leading to offense or misunderstanding.
5. **Political sensitivities:** Martyrdom is often intertwined with political ideologies and movements in Lebanon. Discussing these topics in a classroom setting can be challenging, as students may have strong political affiliations or convictions. This can prevent a genuine listening to different opinions and impede proper interaction among students with differing political views.

Competences and strategies for addressing martyrdom in a Lebanese classroom context

1. **Create a safe space and provide context:** Establish a classroom environment where students feel comfortable expressing their views and asking questions, in addition to offering historical and cultural context. Emphasise respect for differing opinions and encourage open dialogue.
2. **Encourage critical thinking:** foster critical thinking skills by encouraging students to question and analyse different viewpoints. Teach them to evaluate sources and consider biases. Providing different angles and different viewpoints helps students see the same person or situation in multiple ways, leading to a deeper and more nuanced understanding.

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3. Promote empathy and provide support: Encourage empathy by prompting students to consider the perspectives of others, particularly those with differing views on martyrdom, while also offering support to students who may be emotionally affected by such a sensitive topic. This can help foster understanding and respect in the classroom.
4. Respect cultural and religious sensitivities: Be mindful of cultural and religious sensitivities when discussing martyrdom. Avoid generalising or making assumptions that could be offensive.
5. Use case studies: Use real-life examples or case studies to illustrate the complexities of martyrdom in Lebanon. This can help students relate theoretical concepts to practical situations.

By addressing the challenges previously noted and implementing the strategies mentioned above, teachers can more effectively navigate the topic of martyrdom in a Lebanese classroom context, fostering competences such as understanding, respect, and critical thinking among students.

Conclusion

In conclusion, understanding the concept of martyrdom in Lebanon as well as in other contexts requires a multifaceted approach that considers historical, cultural, and religious factors. By providing students with knowledge about the historical and cultural context surrounding martyrdom, educators can help them appreciate the complexities of this concept and its significance in society. Moreover, highlighting the diverse perspectives and narratives that exist can encourage students to engage critically with the topic and develop a more nuanced understanding of martyrdom.

Religion and identity in Northern Ireland's schools

Context

For teachers of religious education in Northern Ireland, many of the potentially controversial issues are distinctive to the context of a divided society with a history of violent conflict that has often been perceived in cultural-religious terms, as we also saw in the case of Lebanon, above.

Some – even many – RE teachers in Northern Ireland are extremely wary of discussing issues around religious difference and diversity, particularly in relation to the differences between Catholics and Protestants. While at one level this may appear to relate to issues around the differing theological beliefs and practices between Christian traditions, teachers' concerns may well centre more on the close

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identification of each tradition with conflicting national identities – Irishness or Britishness. In some areas these tensions may be highlighted by the presence of symbols, flags, wall paintings or even tattoos, often reflecting strong identification with one or other cultural, political and religious identity.

This means that the use of the terminology of ‘Catholic’ and ‘Protestant’ in Northern Ireland extends much further than an indication of certain kinds of religious observance and may well be used by those who have no current religious involvement to indicate their cultural or political community. It is increasingly common for people to use terms such as ‘cultural Protestant’ or ‘cultural Catholic’, and there remains a strong public awareness of close links between national identity and religious background.

Content and challenges

This sense of difference is significantly sharpened by the substantial level of separation between school types along perceived religious lines. State controlled schools have traditionally served the culturally Protestant community, and although they are not faith schools as such, the Protestant denominations have exerted influence especially over the teaching of RE. Catholic schools (which are also fully state funded) are overtly confessional faith schools and strongly emphasise their Catholic ethos and their commitment to ‘faith formation’ in their approach to teaching religion. About 90% of school-age children still attend such schools where most or all the students are from the same cultural community. In this way, the school system reinforces already strong group identities, including conflicting national identities, as Irishness or Britishness.

Most teachers in the region are also products of this same separated system, and so when they are required to teach a subject like RE, including contentious topics that relate to Catholic and Protestant differences, they may well feel disadvantaged, having themselves attended separate schools. This may be reinforced by a tendency towards conservative religious views within both communities, and it can involve strong disagreement among teachers and others concerned with education. The teaching of world religions other than Christianity has also been significantly disadvantaged over many years in Northern Ireland’s schools due to the dominant influence of the Christian churches on the RE Syllabus. Lack of public awareness about the purpose of RE also contributes to these concerns, reflecting a need for a process towards establishing agreed professional principles (Richardson 2016). Discussion centres around certain controversies, particularly the question regarding the role of Christianity in school. The three main positions are these:

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- Some teachers and many in the Churches argue that Northern Ireland is “a Christian country” and that RE should reflect this by being “essentially Christian”.
- Others counter this by arguing for an inclusive, objective, plural and open-ended exploration of religions and beliefs.
- Some secular groups argue for the complete removal of religious teaching from all kinds of schools.

Many teachers clearly fear the negative reaction of parents to the way religion is taught, and often adopt a ‘low profile’ approach, which students may well find uninspiring.

Competences

To teach RE more inclusively in a Northern Ireland context, it is essential for all concerned to develop skills in managing controversial issues and contested narratives in relation to the competing national or communal identities. Teachers need these key life-skills themselves if they are to encourage them in their students, progressively from an early age, to be able to talk openly and comfortably about religious and cultural differences and to disagree well.

Regarding issues related to religion and identity and when it comes to CI and CN in general, it is possible to be prepared for contentious issues within the regular lesson-planning process, but at other times they can arise unexpectedly from discussion, so teachers need to have appropriate strategies in hand for such occasions (see chapter 4). If the teacher has gradually built an atmosphere of trust and openness within the class, this will be to the benefit of any such discussion; even more so if that atmosphere is a feature of the whole school ethos. This process can be aided by using ground rules, such as the poster illustrated below. Good communication with parents and the local community will also be helpful in this.

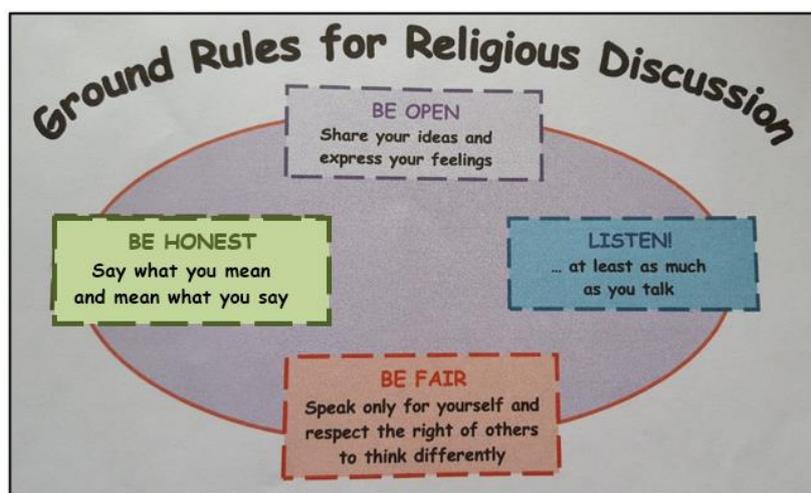


Diagram from "Sharing Religious Education: a brief introduction to the possibility of an inclusive approach to RE in Northern Ireland" (Richardson, 2014).

In the preparation of Northern Ireland's student teachers to deal with such issues as they arise in RE, an active learning 'kinaesthetic' approach has often been promoted. The use of strategies such as 'line-ups', 'walking debates', 'concentric circles', and similar activities can be applied also among

school children, since it helps to engage all students, not just the vocal members of the class, and permits non-verbal contributions as well as articulated discussion.

This also applies when the topic is religion and national identity. In an ethically focused subject area like RE, students are encouraged to listen, to think and to recognise that they may change their mind or modify a position they have held. Such strategies may be supported by other approaches: the introduction of several different historical narratives; group research; role-play; role-reversal etc. The teacher's role in all this is crucial, both as a role-model of fairness and objectivity and as a mediator of the values that enable good discussions.

Church, state and national identity in religious education in Denmark

We emphasised in the introduction to this chapter that the relationship between national or community identity and religion can be a complex and controversial issue in religious education. In this section we explore this further with specific attention to the dynamics between religion and citizenship. Taking the Danish passport as our point of departure, the aim is to illustrate how religion can be used as a collective identity marker, which can potentially foster social integration, but also lead to segregation and exclusion.

In line with the exploration of contested monuments and memorial sites, a passport is not just a formal document, but also a symbol of citizenship and nationality. Like monuments, passports can be studied and analysed with attention to the symbols they contain and the possible contested narratives the symbols reflect. Which images are chosen to represent the history and values of the nation? How is the relationship between nation, geography, history, and religion expressed? Inside the Danish passport, we find an image of the Jelling stone, which is a national icon for Denmark and part of a UNESCO World Heritage site in Jelling. The site and its

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symbols reflect, how pagan Nordic culture was transformed through Christianisation of the Danish people towards the middle of the 10th century (see: UNESCO World Heritage). The Danish passport further contains imprints of the 31 largest islands in the Kingdom of Denmark, including Greenland and the Faroe Islands, as well as ornamentation that represent the Viking Age. This combination of motives from the late Viking Age with Christian symbolism and the geographic composition of Danish realm, makes the passport an interesting object for analysis and discussion of national identity.

Context

On the first page of the Danish passport, we find the depiction of a Christ figure on the Jelling Stone. The Jelling Stone is thought to have been erected by the Danish king, Harald Bluetooth around the year 965 and contains the first mentioning of Denmark in a runic text:

"King Harald ... won for himself all of Denmark and Norway and made the Danes Christian".

In recent times, the quote can be interpreted as a contested narrative, since the religious conversion of a people or a nation is a complex matter. Although Christianity became the official religion in Denmark at that time, we know there were Christians in Denmark before this and that some Danes continued worshipping the old Nordic gods even after 965. The rune stone can be perceived as a manifestation of the close link between power and official representation. It reveals how the elites have the opportunity and power to narrate and to shape and spread a master-narrative. Today, the Jelling Stone is often called the baptismal certificate of Denmark.

The depiction of the monument in the passport became a topic for debate when a Danish citizen in 2010 filed a complaint to the Danish Ministry of Justice, arguing that passports should be free of religious symbols, as Danish citizenship should not be associated with any specific religion. The case was dismissed in the Danish courts, and the plaintiff decided to withdraw legal action at the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR), as this court in 2011 ruled that crucifixes in Italian classrooms did not violate freedom of religion (*Lautsi and others vs. Italy*). The ruling of ECHR in cases concerning freedom of religion can enlighten different arguments in the discussion of national identity, culture, religion, and citizenship.



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The relationship between Christianity and Danish identity can be perceived as a contested narrative already in the time of Harald Bluetooth, and it is still the case today. While the Danish Constitution safeguards the freedom of religion and belief for all citizens, including the right to have no religious conviction at all, this does not mean that all religions are treated equally in the society and in school.

The Church of Denmark, literally The Danish People's Church, holds a privileged position as the Danish Constitution proclaims that the Church of Denmark must be supported by the state. Approximately 70% of the population are members of this church, and it includes a diverse group of people, of which only a minor part attends church service frequently (Andersen & Gundelach 2019). While the church is known for including diverse interpretations of Lutheran Christianity from conservative to liberal, the term "belonging without believing" might describe many members' relationship with the Church of Denmark, as they define themselves as non-religious but cultural Christians. Although the constitution does not uphold a strict separation between state and church, Denmark is frequently depicted as one of the most secularised countries in the world due to a lack of religious practice and the widespread attitude that religion is a private matter (Zuckerman 2008). This paradox reveals how secularisation reflects complex cultural, legal, and political processes and conditions. It is therefore helpful to distinguish between secularisation of society (the political-legal level), individual secularisation (in the lifeworld), and organisational secularisation (adaptation of religious bodies to secularisation) (Dobbelare 2004).

The second most prevalent religion in Denmark is Islam, with approximately 5% of the population being affiliated with it in various ways. In recent years, there have been debates and a political focus on defining certain Muslim practices as not aligning with Danish values. In 2018, a ban was implemented to prohibit full face cover (burka and niqab) in public space (see chapter 1). Further, in 2021, a mandatory skin-to-skin handshaking, regardless of gender, was made a part of the formal ceremony for obtaining Danish citizenship.

RE in Danish schools is not confessional. However, RE is still named "Kristendomskundskab" (literally: Knowledge of Christianity), reflecting that the main content is Lutheran Christianity. Other religions are only mandatory to teach from 7th to 9th grade, but teachers are encouraged to include other religions in all grades. There is also a possibility of exemption from the subject, in which case the parents will be responsible for the religious education of the child.

Content

One way to address controversies about the relationship between church, state, and national identity in an RE classroom could be to explore different arguments for or

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against a stricter separation of church and state in a Danish setting. In terms of content, this would need to include basic knowledge about the history of church and state in Denmark, which is also part of the formal curriculum. Students could also be encouraged to study the Danish Constitution and find the sections that refer to religion and the status of the Evangelical Lutheran church (as explained under context). As an introductory exercise, students can investigate and discuss the symbols in the Danish passport and compare these to passports from other national contexts. After the analysis of symbols and a dialogue about the narratives they might represent, it would be relevant to look at different positions in the debate about the state-church relationship in Denmark. Below some of the key positions in the debate are listed.

- **Pro** argues for further separation of church and state than in the current constitution.
- **Con** argues against and wants to keep the current arrangement.

Pro: The Danish state should be inclusive to all its citizens, regardless of their religious or non-religious beliefs. Therefore, the state must not favour or be associated with any religious denomination. The state must uphold a strict interpretation of secularism.

Con: The Church of Denmark is an integral part of Danish culture, identity, and history, and its position is based on the Danish Constitution. Preserving its privileged position in the constitution is essential to safeguarding Danish cultural heritage, which is important not only for members of the Church of Denmark but also for the entire population.

Pro: One important feature of a secular state is that its institutions are free of religious influence. Therefore, the relationship between public schools and the Church of Denmark, such as Christmas services for schools and marking Christian holidays should be discontinued.

Con: Marking Christian holidays has become more of a cultural tradition than a religious practice, and most students, regardless of their religious beliefs, participate.

Pro: The Church of Denmark's privileged status and economic conditions discriminate against other religious communities, denominations, and those without religious convictions, as they do not have the same possibilities and political influence.

Con: While the Danish constitution does not guarantee equality of religions, it does provide freedom of religion and belief, allowing everyone the opportunity to practice their faith and participate in public debates. The Church of Denmark's status is considered legitimate as most of the population (currently: 70%) claim membership.

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As the topic is complex and might be quite difficult for students to grasp, the passport can serve as a familiar starting point for dialogues on how religion and national and cultural identity have been linked in the past and present. As noted above, the students would need basic information about religion in the Constitution and more recent legislation about religious communities (2018). Furthermore, the students can, based on pro and con positions, discuss the advantages and disadvantages of the current system and reflect on whether and how the Christian cultural heritage is considered a common heritage, and whether and how a nation's cultural heritage is changing. Finally, the link between freedom of religion and belief and equality of religion and belief is a key discussion to be addressed.

Challenges and competences

The teacher needs to consider how the link between national identity and the Evangelical-Lutheran church can be explored with attention to different positions and critical questions. This entails training in classroom dialogues based on respect, where no one is silenced, and master narratives can be questioned and explored.

Another issue is that religion as such can appear to be controversial. One of the Danish teacher informants said in the focus group interview: *“In fact, I think that simply teaching belief—basic faith in something—can itself be a controversial issue.”* The teacher explained that there is often a tendency in Danish schools to regard religious people as irrational. Examining the right to freedom of religion and belief may challenge a strong consensus on the secular as “normal” and “the rational choice”.

To improve their understanding of different religious traditions and practices, the students need to meet representations of various religions and explore the diversity within each religious tradition. Introducing an interpretive approach (see chapter 5 and Jackson 1997) could enhance students' comprehension of alternative concepts and religious practices, as well as raise awareness of their own presuppositions about other outlooks.

If the teaching of Christianity as a cultural heritage and part of national identity includes not only the preservation but also a critical examination of culture, it may enhance students' capacity to comprehend the development of present concepts, values, and traditions, as well as how these are continually redefined. It may also provide a multi-perspective approach that encourages critical thinking on inclusion and exclusion mechanisms linked to disseminating Christianity as a Danish cultural heritage.

Final Remarks

The three cases illustrate the diverse challenges faced by RE teachers in relation to the complex and controversial issue of religion and national - or community - identity. Exploring similar topics in different national settings can provide valuable insights and not least foster the students' awareness of and reflection on the characteristics and impact of their own context.

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Citizenship education: Teaching about the 22 July terrorist attack in Oslo 2011

The violent events and the background to the terrorist attack in Oslo on July 22, 2011, are outlined in chapter 3. After the smoke cleared from the bombed government headquarters and the shooting stopped on the small island of Utøya, where the Labour Party's youth organisation was holding their annual camp, 77 people were dead, most of them young people. How can teachers plan classes on 22 July in the context of contested narratives and controversial issues? In this section we present some possible approaches when teaching about terrorist attacks such as 22 July, and in particular highlight the use of different *explanatory models*. In other words, we reflect on how different explanations or narratives can help the students understand the complex interplay of causes behind such tragic events.

We start by exploring the key distinction between *conflict-* and *harmony-oriented* approaches. A conflict-oriented approach implies looking closer at the underlying conflicts and tensions that led to the attack in question. Regarding the attack on 22 July, one could examine questions about Norway's national identity and what it means to be Norwegian, and perceptions of who the legitimate Norwegian 'we' should be, as expressed, for instance, in political debates on immigration at the time. On the other hand, a harmony-oriented approach focuses on what united the Norwegian public in condemning both the gruesome terrorist attacks and the ideology that fuelled the violence. This approach emphasises the public commemoration events that united the Norwegian public, and the general rhetoric that Norway and Norwegians came together as a diverse people to answer the violence with love.

There are several ways to teach about this and similar terrorist attacks. Visiting the sites of the attacks and places for commemoration and remembrance (such as memorials and museums) is one possibility. For the 22 July attack one can visit the

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22 July Centre near the government building that was bombed, and Utøya where the shooting took place. The Utøya site, while continuing its role as a location for the Labour Party's youth organisation and for political activism, has also been transformed into a site of commemoration and learning that receives thousands of students every year. There has been a long process behind this transformation, where dialogue with parents of the victims has played a key role. Inviting students to take the perspective of those directly affected by the attack, those who survived, or the family and friends of the victims can be useful in developing empathy. The stories of survivors are powerful ways to make the events feel real and (relatively) near in time, highlighting the emotional dimension of learning, and giving insights into trauma and psychological crises.

Teaching that seeks to strengthen students' participation in democracy and support for democratic values through dialogue is another approach. Teachers can play a role in preventing extremist ideas and ideologies among students. In the context of contested narratives, however, one promising approach would be to focus on explanatory models: How could this happen? How can we understand, and thus tell about the events that took place on this day?

Two different *explanatory models* to understand such an attack can highlight 1) psycho-social causes; or 2) ideological causes. In this way the explanatory models may function as contested or competing narratives. When highlighting psycho-social causes as explanation, teachers and students can discuss research material on the attacker's background in relation to mental health, upbringing, family, school, labor market, relation to the local community, and search for alternative social networks. This was a major question during the trial against the 22 July terrorist: did he act as he did because of his background or due to psychosis and mental illness, or were his actions pre-meditated and planned? The latter highlights the ideological dimension of terrorism. What was the stated motivation and reasoning behind the attack? Was the attacker influenced by ideas, values and conspiracy theories found in alternative media outlets and communities online? And how can we understand terrorism and terrorist acts as such, based on research? In the trial following the 22 July terrorist attack, the initial psychological evaluation that deemed the attacker mentally unfit to stand trial, was countered by expert witnesses who could prove that the attacker did in fact have a clearly expressed ideology that legitimised the attack, and that it was shared with other extremists online.

Content

To choose suitable content that explores different narratives, a good option is therefore to focus on explanatory models, which represent different – and sometimes competing – narratives. Here it is important that students have access to source

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material that sheds light on both psycho-social and ideological causes. Exploring the different narratives and different factors that may contribute to such attacks also implies looking at different ways to prevent terrorist acts in the future. Efforts to confront and denounce extremist ideology can go together with efforts to make sure young people do not fall outside mainstream society. In this way contested narratives surrounding what caused the attack on 22 July enable classroom discussions that generate a nuanced understanding.

To understand the significance of the attack beyond the personal tragedies involved it is important to learn which institutions were under attack and what they represented. An official government building and the Labour Party's youth organisation represent and symbolise something more than themselves: democracy, rule of law, diversity and pluralism to mention some. Not just people and buildings but also values and democracy as such were under attack. Understanding terror and terrorism as distinct concepts is also essential. What is this phenomenon we call terrorism, and what are terrorists trying to achieve with this particular method? This includes looking at the impact such attacks have on a people in terms of collective trauma, as well as how a society responds through both spontaneous rituals and official events of grieving, commemoration, and remembrance. 24 July, two days after the terrorist attack, the royal family and the entire political leadership, including the prime minister, participated in a memorial service in Oslo Cathedral that also brought together survivors and the victims' families in a packed church. Nordahl Grieg's poem *Til ungdommen* [To the Youth] was sung in this service. This and *Mitt lille land* [My Little Country], a song by the popular singer Ole Paus, performed at a memorial concert a week after the attack, were the two songs that in a special way united the Norwegian people during this collective trauma. There were also spontaneous rituals, as when individuals came to the Cathedral Square to lay down roses and condolence cards in front of the cathedral, many of the cards written by children (Lied & Bakke 2013). Rituals like these could also be included in the content of teaching.

Challenges and benefits

A potential advantage of working with recent terrorist attacks is that they may be perceived as relevant because in this case the formal curriculum is obviously in touch with the "real world". Many students might have direct or indirect connections with such traumatic events through family ties or otherwise. 22 July is a national trauma in Norway, it is a compulsory part of the curricula, and it is officially commemorated every year since 2011, so the topic is something students can discuss with their parents and even interview them about as part of an assignment. On the other hand, the strong emotional dimension of such a trauma may also be a challenge for teachers. Highly emotional material is available, including private

messages sent between parents and their children during the attack. At Utøya, the one building where people were killed has been preserved exactly as it was after the attack, with bullet holes still visible. There are also images and flowers at the specific sites where named individuals died. The violence and brutality are shocking, and for some, overwhelming, especially since the attack occurred so recently. Moreover, exploring different explanatory models and the ideological reasoning underlying the attack will also raise political questions about contentious issues such as immigration and diversity, different values and ideas of "the good society". This can start fruitful discussions but also lead teachers into difficult terrain.

Context

Classroom research shows that context is crucial when dealing with controversial issues and contested narratives (Flensner 2020; Lippe 2019). Regarding terrorist events, as the 22 July attack, it is helpful for teachers to try to uncover what students already know and feel about the events, and whether they are directly affected by these. Based on this, the teachers should reflect on how they best can frame the lessons before and after going into the content. The teacher can check in with their students by asking how they are doing and how they feel during a lesson about specific terrorist attacks. Teachers should strive to create a safe classroom environment which includes being aware that also their own emotional reactions can influence the students. Speaking with a clear and direct language about facts and reflecting on how many details are needed (for instance in terms of who died, what their age was etc.) can be helpful. The potential discomfort and challenge are also what researchers have pointed to as a potential benefit when it comes to teaching and learning about terrorist attacks (see also chapter 4). The combination of real emotional responses and cognitive learning can be meaningful for both students and teachers and may contribute to formation and development of the values that public education strives to realise.

It may be difficult for teachers to anticipate which questions will evoke strong emotions among students. Generally, what is seen as controversial, or even *sensitive*, in the classroom depends on several factors. When teaching about terrorism and violence, age is obviously one crucial factor. Some of the students may even have experiences with other terrorist attacks or traumatic events in the past. Other factors may be religious or political affiliations and identity, and specific controversial issues may be related to the local area, the school, and the students. The 22 of July attacker framed his violence as an attack on a multicultural Norway, not at least Muslims. The teachers must be aware that the classroom reflects political polarising and different attitudes towards the multicultural society. Teachers then need to consider how the 22 July event might impact a multicultural classroom including students who belong to different religions and who have various ethnical

family backgrounds. The fact that the terrorist initially – and wrongly – was suspected to be an Islamist terrorist, makes the discussions in multicultural classrooms even more sensitive and emotional.

Competences

Teaching about and discussions of the 22 July attack and other terrorist attacks may lead to the development of various competences in the students. As mentioned above, listening to or reading the stories of survivors reinforces the emotional dimension of learning and provides insight into traumatic events. And, when the class through dialogue moves to discuss democratic values and how societies can work to prevent such attacks, students are trained in democratic participation as they are invited to see themselves as active co-creators of the society they are growing into.

Further, by exploring different narratives and different ways of understanding the factors that might lead to terrorism, students must shift between different perspectives. This stimulates reflection and critical thinking by realising that the reasons behind such attacks are complex, as are the motivations of the individual terrorist. The two explanatory models introduced above can each individually explain aspects of why the terrorist does what he/she does, but it does not necessarily give the whole picture. For instance, may ideological motivation sometimes emerge from psycho-social factors. Research has revealed that quite a few violent extremists have psychological or social challenges which make them susceptible to seeking out ideologically extreme communities (Daher et al. 2025; Breidlid 2021). Crucially, although these explanatory models may seem to compete, both can help us make sense of terrorist attacks and should be combined for a multi-perspective understanding. Additionally, the quick rumour that spread in the first hours after the 22 July terrorist attack - that it was an Islamist terrorist attack, when in fact it was the crime of a Right-wing extremist, should be used pedagogically as an example of, and a warning against, conspiracy theories and fake news.



Memorial for the victims at Utøya (photo by Lakshmi Sigurdsson)

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Closing

In this last chapter we have presented subject didactics for history education, citizenship education, and religious education; accentuating methodologies that can be applied in the teaching of contested narratives and controversial issues. Common

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features of the didactic methodologies for the three subjects are the use of multi-perspectivity, critical literacy and activities that promote investigation and dialogue. By the examples given above, from different contexts and elaborated through the didactic model, we hope to inspire and give teachers the confidence to include controversial issues and contested narratives in their teaching.

Throughout the book our aim has been to combine theories with practical experiences gained in the ConCitizen project. The project has convinced us that the inclusion of controversial issues and contested narratives in schools can be an important contribution to the formation of students as autonomous human beings with courage to engage in communities of disagreement and contribute actively to democratic development by taking a critical stance towards diverse sources of information, opinions and outlooks.

As we now conclude this book, we will highlight today's growing challenges, as the digitalisation of society sparks a polarised debate culture on social media, marked by echo chambers and filter bubbles, and sometimes taking the form of conspiracy theories, thereby hindering critical thinking. Echo chambers and filter bubbles are also involved when it comes to conflicts, attacks and wars, such as (at the time of writing) the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the Israel-Gaza conflict and tragedy (see chapter 1). Since news channels and social media influence opinions and fuel conflicting positions, these conflicts - and the narratives embedded in these - have led to global – and local - polarisation, challenging teachers in history education, religious education, and citizenship education to navigate wisely. The same applies also for other, non-violent, controversies, such as issues related to politics, gender, refugees, or military security questions. Students may find it difficult to discern facts from normative positions. It is therefore essential for the teacher to demonstrate how controversial issues are related to contested narratives, teaching students to approach the narratives critically, analyse the discourses and power relationships, and assess the validity of the narratives.

Confronted with the current threats to international law and a rule-based world order, we hope that this book can ignite further international cooperation and strengthen our common commitment to human rights and democratic formation through education.

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ConCitizen team (first team at international meeting in Copenhagen 2022; photo missing Knut Aukland and Tonje Myrebøe, who joined at a later stage)

Appendices

Appendix 1: Concept mapping

The initial phase of Project ConCitizen included a mapping of the concepts “Contested narratives” and “Controversial issues”. A concept mapping is a structured conceptualization, which is used to develop a conceptual framework (Trochim, 1989). In ConCitizen we did not make a concept mapping among the targeted groups of the project – teachers and teacher students – but among ourselves – the main participants in the project from the different partner institutions.

The aim of this internal concept mapping was to develop a mutual understanding of these complex concepts through a process that included the voices of all participants. Some of the more concrete results of this process can be found in chapter one – e.g. our definition of “Contested narratives” and “Controversial issues” – but the main result was the development of a common way of understanding the different aspects of contested narratives and controversial issues and a common way to articulate our thoughts regarding these different aspects.

This appendix about concept mapping is included, as we imagine that the method we used could also be a fruitful method both with students in a classroom and among a group of teachers when initiating classes on contested narratives and controversial issues.

The method is to a large degree inspired by work done on concept mapping in the 1980’s (e.g. Trochim, 1989).

The process is divided in six steps

1. Preparation
2. Generation of statements
3. Structuring of statements
4. Representation of statements in the form of a concept map
5. Interpretation of maps
6. Utilization of Maps

Step 1: Preparation

In this phase the facilitator(s) and the participants of the concept mapping is selected. The facilitator's role is only to manage the process. The content, interpretations and utilization involve the whole group of participants.

If you work along the line of this book the focus of the conceptualization is “Contested narratives” and “Controversial issues”. The method could of course be used with other types of foci.

Step 2: Generation of statements

In the second phase each participant individually generates short phrases or sentences describing respectively “Contested narratives” and “Controversial issues”. I.e. each participant produces two inductive mind maps, one on “Contested narratives” and one on “Controversial issues”. We recommend that the focus is on contested narratives and on controversial issues in the national context of the group of participants. The participants are very welcome to repeat statements and examples on the two mind maps.

Contested narratives

The participants could be given the following questions for the generation of statements and examples on contested narratives:

1. What are contested narratives? Why and how do they pose a problem or generate conflicts?
2. Which contested narratives do you encounter in your national context and in the subjects, you teach?
3. What do you see as aims of addressing contested narratives in your national school contexts?

Controversial issues

The participants could be given the following questions for the generation of statements and examples on controversial issues:

1. What are controversial issues? Why and how do issues become controversial?
2. Which controversial issues do you encounter in your national context and in the subjects you teach?
3. What do you see as aims of addressing controversial issues in your national school contexts?

Step 3: Structuring of statements

In phase three the participants individually produce information about how the different statements and examples from the whole national group are related to each

other. First on “Contested narratives” and “Controversial issues” separately. Later combined.

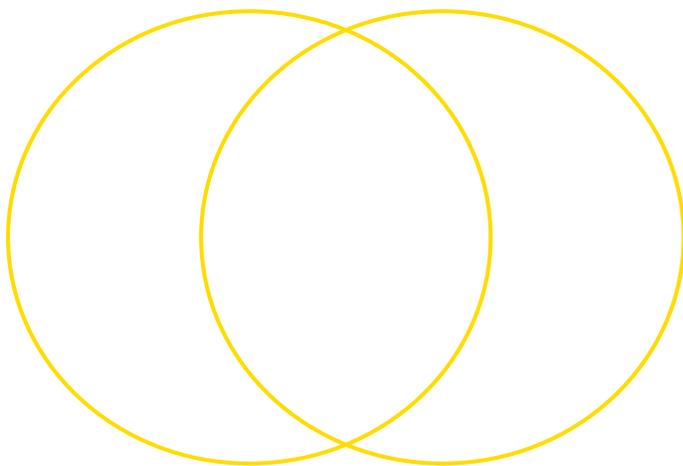
First all the brainstormed statements and examples regarding contested narratives (i.e. all statements and examples from all participants) are given to each participant. Each person is then instructed to sort the statements and examples into piles in a way that makes sense to them. Each statement and example can only be placed in one pile (i.e., an item can't be placed in two piles simultaneously); all statements and examples cannot be put into a single pile; and all statements and examples cannot be put into their own pile (although some items may be sorted by themselves). Except for these conditions, people may pile the statements and examples in any way that makes sense to them.

Then this process is repeated with all the statements regarding controversial issues.

In the end the piles regarding the two concepts are to be combined.

Each person is instructed to place the piles either within “Contested narratives”, “Controversial issues” or in an intersection of the two circles.

Contested narratives/Controversial issues



Step 4: Representation of statements in the form of a concept map

At this stage each participant has completed the sorting task – and the task of combining the results from “Contested narratives” and “Controversial issues”. The individual results are then shared with the rest of the group, and the results must now be combined across people and organized into the form of a united concept map.

The facilitator(s) organize the statements and examples into clusters and place each cluster within “Contested narratives”, “Controversial issues” or an intersection of the two concepts.

The basic principle for this organization could be the principle of majority, which means that if two out of three participants for example have placed the same two statements together, they stay together and if two out of three participants have placed these two statements in the intersection of the two concepts “Contested narratives”, “Controversial issues” they stay there.

Step 5: Interpretation of maps

In the 5th phase all participants will work together. The statements as they were grouped by the facilitator in step 4 are presented. Each participant is asked to read through the set of statements and examples for each cluster and come up with a short phrase or word, which seems to describe or name the set of statements as a cluster. When each person has a tentative name for each cluster, the group works cluster-by-cluster in an attempt to achieve group agreement on an acceptable name for each cluster.

Step 6: Utilization of Maps

The group discusses how the final concept map might be used to enhance and structure further work with contested narratives and controversial issues.

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Appendix 2: Curriculum mapping

In connection to the mapping of the concepts, the participants of the ConCitizen project also conducted a preliminary curriculum mapping. The aim was to clarify the possibilities and challenges regarding the inclusion of contested narratives and controversial issues in the teaching of the three school subjects: History, citizenship, and religious education. The curriculum mapping was conducted by the main participants in the project from the different partner institutions.

This appendix for curriculum mapping is included in the book, as this method could also be a fruitful to use with students in a classroom or among a group of teachers when planning classes on contested narratives and controversial issues.

Curriculum terminology is complex with definitions ranging from thick to more narrow descriptions. In the Nordic countries curriculum studies often refer to Goodlad (1979) and his specification of curricular domains. Curriculum has traditionally been defined as educational content (the educational *what*), whereas instruction and pedagogy concerned the questions of method (the educational *how*). Goodlad (1979) introduced a *thick description* of curriculum including both content and methods, both product and process. The thick description is based on a consideration of the relationship between the curriculum as official documents and the actual teaching in schools by combining process and substantial domains (Afdal, 2006).

In the following we refer to the division between five substantial domains (the educational *what*): Ideological, formal, perceived, operational and experienced. To these we add a 6th: The hidden curriculum.

1. The ideological curriculum reflects the ideals of what education should be, the purpose and meaning of education. For Goodlad this is not included in the socio-political process but often developed in an academic context (as a pre-formal source). The ideological curriculum may be found in textbooks, teacher's guides and the like. This will vary according to context, as the ideological curriculum is an interpretation and operationalization of the formal curricula.

2, The formal curriculum is the officially approved curricula (by state, local government and/or local school board), which is sanctioned by a (democratic) political institution. The formal documents are not the educational reality, but idealized and politicized images of what the school should be like. They are documents of intentions with formal (mandatory) aims and objectives. They may reflect two forms of idealization: First, in prescribing a school ideal that is difficult to reach (goals set too high), and secondly, by omitting the problems, conflicts and limitations schools have (Afdal, 2006: 60). In different national contexts we find a variety of formal documents (education law; national curricula, competence

frameworks, syllabi, state endorsed teaching materials, online materials etc.). In international cooperation it is therefore important to clarify similarities and differences, and as part of teacher planning or research, studying the formal curriculum can help clarify the room for teacher autonomy.

3. The perceived curriculum is found in the minds of parents, school administrators and teachers. This is related to the conceptions that parents, teachers, and others have of the curriculum. These are formed not only by the formal curriculum, but also by personal and cultural factors such as the person's educational philosophy, values, classroom practice, colleagues, and local culture (Afdal 2006: 61). This is also expressed in textbooks (as these are important interpreters of official curricula).

4. The operational curriculum describes, what is actually taught in the classroom. It can be difficult to get a clear and comprehensive picture of this, as there may be differences between the perspective of the teacher and classroom observations of researchers. For the teacher this implies reflection after class on, what was actually taught and achieved with consideration of possible challenges or adjustments.

5. The experienced curriculum describes the ways that students experience curricula (their interpreted experience). This may be difficult to distinguish from other agencies of socialization: family, civic society, religious organizations, the media etc. This can be an area for investigation by student teachers in connection to practicum or possibly in cooperation between teacher and researchers.

6. The hidden (implicit) curriculum is related to the aims of socialization and value-formation that is not expressed directly, but more implicit/internalised through didactic practice, classroom management, methodology, moral education etc. Getting a picture of this would demand classroom observation and interviews with teachers, and as such this is area for research in connection to final projects in teacher education (BA or Ma).

References

- Afdal, G. (2006). *Tolerance and the Curriculum*. (Religious Diversity and Education in Europe) Münster: Waxmann
- Goodlad et al. (1979). *Curriculum Inquiry*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Whereas all six are relevant to consider, the chart below focuses on the formal, the perceived and the operational curriculum, as these three are accessible without empirical research. The mapping concerns, how or to what extent controversial issues (CI) and/ or contested narratives (CN) are included in the curriculum. This doesn't necessarily imply that the exact concepts are used, but rather that the curriculum contains elements that could make room for the teaching of CI and CN.

Chart for curriculum mapping of contested narratives & controversial issues

School subject:				
Level:				
School:				
Documents	Formal curriculum	Perceived curriculum	Operational	Status (mandatory / optional)
School law (General aims)				
Subject content				
Learning objectives frameworks (specification of school subjects)				
Syllabus and guidance-notes for teachers				
State (or regional/ local government) endorsed materials or guidelines				
Dark sports/ not included				
Further points of attendance				

