

# THE CLASSROOM IN TURMOIL: TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVE ON UNPLANNED CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES IN THE CLASSROOM\*

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## ABSTRACT

*Controversial issues characterize life in democratic societies, and they often arise unexpectedly in the classroom, without being planned for by the teacher. However, controversial issues are rarely addressed beyond a mandatory curriculum and are often avoided. The aim of this exploratory study is to investigate what teachers identify and address as unplanned controversial issues in the classroom and the content of such issues. Unplanned controversial issues identified fell into three categories (1) mainstream controversy, (2) teacher-initiated controversy, and (3) controversial pedagogy. The findings suggest that more attention needs to be paid, among other things, to the political dimension of education, teacher vulnerability, and who the person in teaching is.*


**Keywords:** Unplanned controversial issues; mainstream controversy; teacher-initiated controversy; controversial pedagogy; political dimension of education; teacher vulnerability

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As a result of increased hate crimes, terrorism, and extreme radicalization in recent times, attention is refocusing on the role of schools in the moral and civic development of learners so that they can become active democratic citizens who can live together peacefully (European Commission, 2015). Within this context, the teaching of controversial issues in the classroom is considered as crucial to the development of democratic cultures (Carr, 2007).

For the most part, existing empirical research focuses on strategies and challenges of teaching controversial issues that are part of syllabi within subjects that are traditionally associated with controversial issues. However, even when controversial issues are part of the syllabus, teachers will avoid teaching them for a variety of reasons. Hahn (2012) identifies the backlash from stakeholders that may ensue as a result of teachers discussing controversial issues in the classroom. Teachers will also avoid teaching controversial issues because these are complex and they feel they lack knowledge or expertise in the area (Oulton et al., 2004). However, as Britzman (2003) argues, avoidance reproduces the dominant ideology as the desirable ideology, as against a truly active form of citizenship as advocated by Biesta (2009).

Within the classroom and beyond the curriculum, controversial issues also arise unexpectedly, without being planned for by the teacher. In a recent publication, Van Alstein (2019) identifies such moments as a “classroom in turmoil” or instances in which teachers “are confronted with confrontational remarks made by students, or with fiercely contested discussions or instances of polarisation” (Van Alstein, 2019, p. 7). This chapter is part of a study that focuses on teachers who actively engage with controversial issues as they arise unexpectedly, sporadically, and authentically in the classroom. Specifically, the study aims to find out what these teachers identify as unplanned controversial issues in the classroom and what the issues are about. By adding the teachers’ perspective to the debate, this chapter aims to promote a deeper understanding of the “classroom in turmoil.”

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### *Controversial Issues*

Defining controversy is in itself controversial and, to date, there is no agreed definition. According to Badri (2015), controversy supports the ability to function within a framework that can sustain different conflictual views about the same issue as being right or can at least be reasoned as being right.

Claire and Holden (2007) provide a working definition of a controversial issue in the classroom as one in which:

- the subject area is of topical interest
- there are conflicting values and opinions
- there are conflicting priorities and material interests
- emotions may become strongly aroused
- and the subject area is complex. (Claire & Holden, 2007, p. 6)

Within a context in which antidemocratic movements are a constant threat, the above definition immediately raises questions. The definition does not identify who the “appreciable number of people” are. Nor does the definition identify whose “value judgments” and “priorities and material interests” refer to. Answers to these questions have implications on the way in which teachers and schools reproduce notions of what it means to live in a democracy (Carr, 2007; Verma, 2012) as teachers decide what to address as controversial and what to ignore.

### *Unplanned Episodes in the Classroom, Neutrality, and Vulnerability*

Classrooms are not immune to controversial issues, and these may arise unexpectedly, sporadically, and authentically, without being planned for by the teacher. Kelchtermans (2009) identifies a passive yet potentially fertile dimension to unplanned episodes in the classroom which can yield authentic interactions of a deeply meaningful educational value. Addressing an unplanned controversial issue is not a “neutral endeavor” (Kelchtermans, 2009, p. 262). Moreover, the action evolves in a context that is open to scrutiny, rendering the teacher vulnerable. Kelchtermans (2009) talks about vulnerability as a structural characteristic of the teaching profession. An element of this vulnerability relates to the formal, political context in which teachers operate and could explain the avoidance or readiness to address controversial issues in the classroom. Another characteristic of vulnerability relates to teacher effectiveness and their inability to claim that “students’ results directly follow from their actions” (Kelchtermans, 2009, p. 266). In acknowledging and addressing unplanned controversial issues, teachers can only assume that their actions serve a purpose.

### *Research Questions*

Addressing a controversial issue that arises sporadically in the classroom is a risky endeavor (Pace, 2019) and teachers “must come up with an adequate reaction within seconds” (Van Alstein, 2019, p. 7). Before such decisions can be challenged or questioned, the nature of such episodes needs to be thoroughly investigated. This study aims to uncover what teachers identify and address as unplanned controversial issues in the classroom and what such issues are about.

## **METHOD**

### *Participants, Data Collection, and Procedure*

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a purposive sample of 12 teachers from nine democratic countries in Europe, on the basis of their perceived propensity to engage with controversial issues in their respective contexts. Known and recruited by the first author, five participants are part of the network of the Pestalozzi Program of the Council of Europe. A further four participants were

recruited based on recommendations from the same network. The remaining three participants were recruited directly by the first author based on the same criteria. The state of democracy in the participants' countries of origin was deemed of particular importance to ensure participants' safety.

Participants came from public and state-funded schools, catholic schools, and in one instance from a college catering for an international audience. As indicated in [Table 1](#), they differed in terms of gender, subject/s and level taught, years of experience, and highest qualification held.

Each interview started with questions that were meant to ease participants into the conversation. They were then asked for examples of unplanned controversial issues that arose spontaneously in their classroom.

## FINDINGS

In the following paragraphs we first present an overview of the findings. We then describe each category and attempt to describe the content of the unplanned controversial issues per category. Finally, we present some additional findings which were deemed interesting.

The 23 examples of unplanned controversial issues identified by teachers fell into three categories summarized in [Fig. 1](#):

- (1) Mainstream controversy
- (2) Teacher-initiated controversy
- (3) Controversial pedagogy

**Table 1.** Participants.

Pseudonym/ Name	Gender	Democratic Index 2019	Subject Taught	School Level	Teaching Experience	Highest Qualification
Amina	Female	7.43	ICT	Secondary	16 years	Masters
Carol	Female	7.52	French	Upper	20 years	PhD
Dvalinn	Male			Secondary		
Bart	Male	6.49	History	Secondary	16 years	Masters
Emma	Female	7.95	History	Secondary	20 years	Masters
		9.58	Social	Upper	12 years	PhD
Jamal	Female	8.68	Studies	Secondary	1 year	Masters
			English,	Upper		
Ana	Female	8.12	French	Secondary	10 years	Masters
			French	Upper		
Ian	Male	6.57	History	Secondary	19 years	PhD
Alex	Male	7.95	Religion	Secondary	8 years	Masters
Nina	Female	6.57	Primary	Secondary	20 years	Masters
Stela	Female	8.52	Global	Primary	6 years	Masters
Jose	Male		Politics	Upper		
				Secondary		
		7.9	Primary	Primary	18 years	Postgraduate Diploma

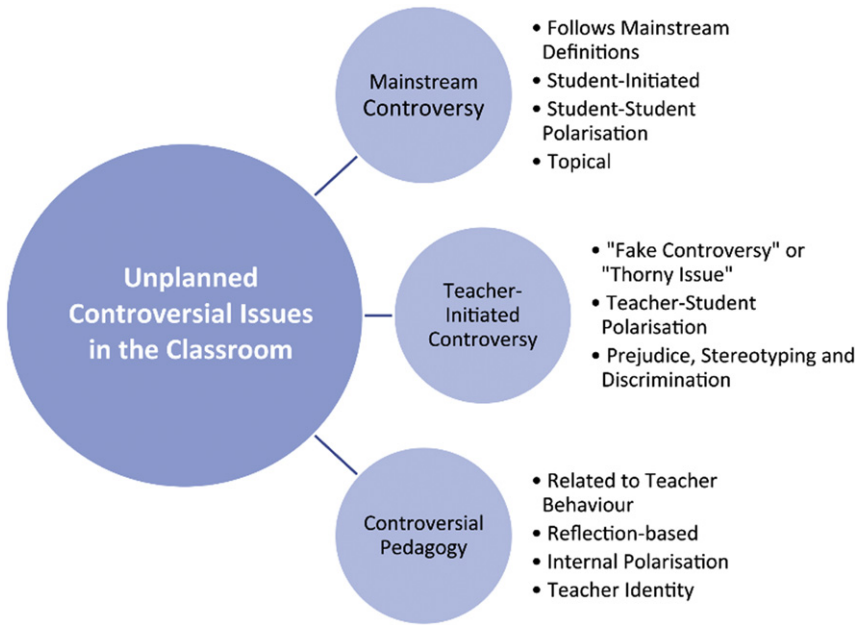


Fig. 1. Three Categories of Unplanned Controversial Issues in the Classroom Identified by Teachers.

*Mainstream Controversy*

Almost half the examples analyzed were typical controversial issues that follow mainstream definitions. They were almost always initiated by a student or group of students as a result of topical issues and often effectively divided the class into factions for and against.

*Teacher-Initiated Controversy*

Examples of unplanned controversial issues labeled as teacher-initiated controversy were instances in which the perceived controversy became manifest as a direct result of a teacher’s intervention in response to a student’s statement. Examples were further categorized as instances of prejudice, stereotyping, or discrimination by students.

*Controversial Pedagogy*

Unplanned controversial issues classified as controversial pedagogy are episodes in which the perceived controversy was directly related to the teacher’s own behavior rather than content.

### *Additional Observations*

Participants' gender, school level, and qualifications did not seem to have any significant influence on participants' responses, neither did the country of origin. All participants were enthusiastic to share examples of controversial issues and most offered additional information to embed their examples in a context. Participants coming from relatively newer democracies with a troubled recent past mentioned the historical and cultural context which they described as fertile for controversial issues and therefore unavoidable. Half the participants claimed that controversial issues were simply an integral part of their lessons, while two participants specifically commented on the idea that the subject/s they taught facilitated the discussion of controversial issues.

## **CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION**

This exploratory study aimed to understand what teachers identify and address as unplanned controversial issues and what these issues are about. It is important to reiterate that the data reflect the perceptions of a purposive sample of teachers selected because of their predisposition to engage with controversial issues. The small-scale study does not allow for generalizations, but the findings extend the discussion on controversial issues in the classroom, with a specific focus on unplanned classroom episodes identified as controversial by teachers. Apart from adding the teachers' perspective to the debate on what is considered controversial, the categorization of these unplanned episodes provides for a deeper understanding of the political dimension of education, teacher vulnerability, and who the person in teaching is.

Three distinct categories of unplanned controversial issues addressed by teachers were discerned in the data. Examples in the first category, mainstream controversies, follow established definitions of what constitutes a controversial issue. Examples in the second category, teacher-initiated controversies, are defined as "thorny issues" (Alexakos et al., 2016) which are not necessarily topical but embedded in a cultural and historical context and dominated by prejudice, stereotyping, and discrimination. In these instances, the teachers acted as a catalyst, reacting to the students' statements or behavior, positioning themselves "against" the students, and representing one end of the perceived controversy. This raises the question why teachers identify these instances as controversial rather than as prejudice, stereotyping, and discrimination. Examples in the third category, controversial pedagogy, even though under-represented in the data, are particularly significant because they expose teachers' inner dilemmas relating to their own professional teacher identity and who they are as persons in teaching.

Examples across the three categories highlight the teachers' political edge (Mockler, 2011), dispersing any possible claim to neutrality in the classroom. Teacher neutrality was hesitantly described as a desirable norm only by the novice teacher. It would be pertinent to question why the novice teacher regards neutrality as a desirable norm and feels that not being neutral constitutes some form of transgression. When the unplanned controversy is mainstream the

teacher may facilitate a debate or discussion without committing to a particular position, but this becomes impossible when the controversy is teacher-initiated. In any case, in choosing to address the controversy, teachers take both a stand and a risk that includes possible backlash from stakeholders (Hahn, 2012; Pace, 2019; Van Alstein, 2019), while highlighting the vulnerability inherent in the act of teaching (Kelchtermans, 1993). This vulnerability is present across the three categories. When teachers address mainstream controversies and refrain from taking sides, the vulnerability may be contained, but the moment teachers choose to take a stand and confront a student or group of students over an issue, “creating” a controversy, they expose their professional self to criticism. In identifying their own behavior as controversial as described in the examples in the third category, controversial pedagogy, teachers open themselves to judgment and potential growth.

The content of the unplanned controversial issues is multifaceted and draws upon personal, current, cultural and historical dimensions, and the interplay of influences between the different systems in the Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). The content of the examples relates to age-old issues discussed time and again, suggesting an alienation from current issues and a preoccupation with student identity formation tasks, as students grapple with multiple changes characterized “by increased self-consciousness, introspection, inner conflict, stress, uncertainty, and disorientation” (Lipka & Brinthaupt, 2002, p. 7). Engaging in controversial issues is an identity task, the accomplishment of which “plays an important role in the successful transition (of adolescents) into adulthood” (Finkenauer et al., 2002, p. 26) and an extremely important part of growing up.

Collard and Looney (2014) argue that teachers should have pedagogical expertise along with a deep domain knowledge of content. The latter assumes preestablished and previously agreed-upon content which does not encompass the totality of the experience in the classroom. Nor does it consider the specific content that may emerge through classroom interactions. On the other hand, teachers’ pedagogical expertise should, in theory, support the teachers’ ability to transfer across different classroom scenarios, bypassing the issue of domain specificity (Baer, 2012), synthesizing skills and knowledge to bear on the specific issue by structuring, adapting, and scaffolding (Collard & Looney, 2014). Such pedagogical expertise involves moral, social, and emotional dilemmas, and the norms and values involved in teachers’ interactions and relationships with students (Beijaard et al., 2000). This was particularly evident in controversial pedagogy.

This research is not without its limitations, including the fact that participants were selected on the basis of their reputation without any empirical evidence to support this, the small sample size, the range of subjects taught, and the language barrier that was evident in some instances.

The study provides a more nuanced perspective on the complexity of controversial issues in the classroom. It rests on the premise that the classroom is characterized by an “endemic unpredictability” (Brookfield, 2006, p. 8). Aho et al. (2010) argue that “a teacher cannot escape the world outside when closing

the classroom door” (p. 400), and controversial issues are bound to crop up authentically, spontaneously, and unexpectedly. Even when a controversial issue is planned for, the “endemic unpredictability” could lead to classroom turmoil (Van Alstein, 2019), heightening teachers’ vulnerability as they simultaneously contend with the turmoil and their own potential insecurities. This further supports avoidance as a strategy in dealing with controversial issues, highlighting the need to deconstruct these complex episodes to tentatively understand what is going on. Following Kelchtermans (2009), we argue that these ruptures may yield authentic interactions of a deeply meaningful educational value only if recognized and addressed by the teacher, who is the ultimate gatekeeper in the classroom. Knowing what to look for is a first step in harvesting these affordances.

We believe that the categorization of the data may provide a platform for more focused research into unplanned episodes, particularly in terms of how the context and classroom climate may support or inhibit which type of controversy, as perceived by teachers. Further research is also warranted to fully understand the complexity of unplanned controversial issues in the classroom. Future research could also consider the actual reasons why teachers choose to take a stand and address the identified unplanned controversial issues in the classroom as against politically correct discourse for doing so. It is also worth looking at the experiences that prompt and support teachers to actively choose to address such issues.

The research raises questions on practice, on teacher education, and the need to engage in a debate about controversial issues in the classroom, prescribed and unplanned content, the transferability of pedagogical expertise across different classroom contexts, on teacher neutrality, vulnerability, and the political dimension of education. The insights are particularly useful to start a debate on instances of prejudice, stereotyping, and discrimination identified as controversial by teachers and their ability to properly identify such instances, to include the use of precise terminology. It also calls for a deeper understanding of the interplay between a teacher’s personal and professional identity, the teacher’s value base, and what the teacher stands for because “it matters who the teacher is” (Kelchtermans, 2009, p. 258).

## AUTHOR’S NOTES

The phrase, “the classroom in turmoil,” was first used by Maarten van Alstein. It is used with permission.

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