



Democratic education and the teaching of controversial issues in polarising times: Students' views and experiences

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ABSTRACT

Recent legislations in some US states and other democratic nations that move towards banning or limiting the teaching of controversial issues in schools calls to question the educative function often associated with controversy in the classroom. Drawing on student views in group discussions undertaken in English secondary schools, this study assesses the relevance of, and the pedagogical issues associated with the teaching of controversial issues within a wider pedagogical context of democratic education. As end-users of education, students ascribed both intrinsic and instrumental values to the teaching of controversial issues: Intrinsically, learning about controversial topics facilitates students' intellectual and personal development for counteracting the growing phenomena of 'fake news' and social media mis-disinformation. Instrumentally, discussing controversial issues contributes to students' acquisition of political and civic competencies for future engagement with politics. The study finds that while the instrumental value of teaching controversial issues has long been recognised as significant, the evolving techno-global context of contemporary society marked by information saturation and distortion gives the intrinsic justification a renewed importance. For the UK context, the study also reveals there are implementation gaps between government policies that expressly encourage the teaching of controversial issues and actual practice in schools. Based on this, the study recommends that democratic education be given a more critical focus both in curricular and extra-curricular spaces by addressing issues pertaining to social iniquities and global injustice.

1. Introduction

In most Western societies and much of the democratising world, democratic citizenship education constitutes an important tool for developing active and democratically engaged citizens (Krüger et al., 2023; Westheimer, 2017, 2024). To this end, schools have historically and continue to play a crucial role in the political socialisation of young people in enabling them to participate in functioning democracies (Banks & Coker, 1994; Kiess, 2022; Zembylas, 2022). Democratic education facilitates students' cultivation of dispositions essential for informed participation in democratic processes, and empowers them to engage in reasoned discussions, while developing their ability to defend views on matters of public policy (Kauppi & Drerup, 2021).

In today's global information age in which there is proliferation of digital and social media, the phenomena of fake news, misinformation and disinformation require that digital citizenship and civic online reasoning should be integral to democratic

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citizenship education (Choi, 2016; Choi & Cristol, 2021; McGrew & Breakstone, 2023). Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) note that fake news, misinformation and disinformation are symptomatic of information disorder in society, with a distinguishing factor being that misinformation entails the sharing of false information with no intent to cause harm, while dis-information occurs with an intent of harm. They further conceptualise mal-information as the sharing of authentic information to cause harm, involving the movement of private information to the public domain. Each of these categorisations raises the question of the role of schools in addressing information disorder in the post-truth era with implications for the significance schools attribute to the teaching of controversial issues.

According to Sant (2019), schools provide opportunities for democratic education through three distinct approaches: 'education within democracy', 'education through democracy', and 'education for democracy'. Through these approaches, schools serve as agents of social change by teaching students to be critical democratic citizens as well as by creating democratic social order both in the classroom and in the broader school environments where students experience and experiment with democratic ideals (Boone, 2008). Opportunities for democratic education therefore exist in the taught curriculum as well as within the democratic ethos and cultures schools create. As part of the taught curriculum, schools engage students with content that address diverse socio-political and cultural topics, including controversial issues in society. However, recent legislative measures in some states in the US and elsewhere that aim to limit or ban the teaching controversial issues in schools raises questions about the conceptual relationship between the teaching of controversial issues and democratic education.

The educative function of democratic education is associated with deliberative democracy, from which it derives its *raison d'être*. Beyond electoral and representative democracy, theoretical discussions of democracy in recent decades pitch deliberative democracy as instrumental for strengthening democratic practice (Elstub, 2010). Cooke (2000) underscores deliberation as significant in democratic practice in his definition of deliberative democracy: "democratic government that secures a central place for reasoned discussion in political life" (P. 947). Such understanding of deliberative democracy places the essence of democratic life in the reason-giving political interactions between citizens and the justification of laws and policy through public deliberation (Chappell, 2012; Gutmann & Thompson, 2004; Thompson, 2008). Furthermore, beyond theoretical significance, there is evidence that suggest public deliberations are becoming a key part of democracies around the world, which show the practical possibilities in deliberative democracy (Giessel et al., 2023; OECD, 2020). Applied to the schooling context, the discussion of controversial issues within the framework of deliberative democracy represents a microcosm of democracy in practice in wider society.

Central to the aims of democratic education is the inculcation in students, skills and values for participation in deliberative democracy, in which exchange of reason and debate are valued (Nishiyama, 2021; Samuelsson, 2016). In this respect, deliberation in democratic engagements often require that citizens can engage with political difference as well as contested social and political issues (Maxwell, 2023; McAvoy & Hess, 2013; Veugelers & Schuitema, 2022). This makes the teaching of controversial issues an important dimension of democratic education and explains why much of the conceptual discussions and empirical studies on the subject are undertaken within the framework of democratic education (Hess, 2004; Hess & Avery, 2008, 2008; Hess & McAvoy, 2015; Drerup, 2022; Smith & Stitzlein, 2023).

'Teaching the controversy' in schools is an age-old question and has been addressed in historical educational theory and practice (Bagley, 1938; Dearden, 1981; Stradling, 1984; Thorndike, 1937). Contemporary studies have continued to address conceptualisation of the teaching of controversial issues (Franck, 2023; Oulton et al., 2004b), as well as the views of teachers and teacher education on teaching controversial issues in different contexts (Cassar, 2021; Chikoko et al., 2018; Nganga et al., 2020; Ozturk & Kus, 2019). Other studies examine classroom teaching dynamics in teaching controversial issues (Al Badri, 2015; Sætra, 2021), including the dynamics that pertain to specific subject disciplines (Avery et al., 2013; Flensner, 2020a,b; Macalalag et al., 2020; Oulton et al., 2004a; Von der Lippe, 2021).

While these studies serve a useful purpose in investigating curriculum issues and identifying appropriate pedagogical approaches for teaching controversial issues in schools, much of these predominantly reflect a top-down perspective on the subject, with few studies that specifically address student voice. This notwithstanding the widespread recognition that young people have unique perspectives on schooling, for which reason they should be given the opportunity to shape their educational experience, both in recognition of their agency and for the democratisation of schooling (Cook-Sather, 2006, 2020; Vaughn, 2020). Among the extant studies that investigate the teaching of controversial issues with recourse to student voice, Jerome et al. (2021) engage students in deliberative discussions of controversial issues within the framework of human rights education to assess the teaching of Fundamental British Values in English schools. Wansink et al. (2023) also investigate the teaching of controversial issues in relation to students' safety perceptions and its impact on participation dynamics in Dutch schools. In the Norwegian school context, Sætra (2021) explores the role of emotions in the teaching of controversial issues. In the US, Hess and McAvoy (2015) draw on longitudinal action research data from students to study political discussions in the classroom and its impact on students' future political attitudes and engagement.

The present study contributes to these studies on student voice on the teaching of controversial issues, focusing on students' rationalisations and their perceptions of the pedagogical issues that such discussions entail. The study also situates the teaching of controversial issues within the framework of democratic education in schools and investigates the extent to which schools provide democratic education as a pedagogical context for teaching controversial issues. Within the right legal and regulatory frameworks, debates on the teaching of controversial issues also raise questions on students' agency and their right to know (Dee, 2022), hence the need to foreground students' perspectives and experiences in the debates on controversial issues in schools. The perspectives of students are particularly salient at a time when there are heightened politicised debates over the teaching of controversial issues in schools and provides a much-needed end-user perspective. The approach to this study is therefore agentic, valuing the experiences of students as "social actors and experts on their own lives" (Cowie & Khoo, 2017, p. 234). The goal of the study then is to assess students' perceptive and experiential accounts on the teaching of controversial issues in the pedagogical context of democratic education. In undertaking this, the following research questions will guide the study:

1. What are the views of students on the relevance and the pedagogical issues associated with the teaching of controversial issues in schools?
2. What are students' experiences on provision of democratic education in schools as pedagogical context for addressing controversial and political topics?

While discourses on democratic education and the teaching of controversial issues are often undertaken with a focus on local political issues in specific national contexts, this study pays attention to both local and global issues as part of democratic global citizenship formation in students. As such, the discussion and analysis of the teaching of controversial issues will have a bearing on students learning of global issues as part of a transnational democratic conscientization geared towards making them knowledgeable about globalisation and its impacts on societies across the world (Culp, 2019).

2. Controversy and its ideological underpinnings

Whether local or global, controversial issues are associated with contestations about national and international policy responses to given social and political questions that generate public debates and disagreements. Along these lines, scholars have set out different definitions of controversial issues, often highlighting behavioural, epistemic and policy dimensions of the construct. The behavioural basis for determining a controversial issue points to the disagreements, contestations, and emotive responses such issues often evoke in people and across communities. This dimension is evident, for example, in a definition advanced in a Council of Europe Training document, in which controversial issues are defined as “issues which arouse strong feelings and divide opinion in communities and society” (Kerr & Huddleston, 2015, p. 8). Dearden (1981), also points to an epistemic criterion for determining a controversial issue by noting that “a matter is controversial if contrary views can be held on it without those views being contrary to reason” (P. 38). The epistemic criterion positions controversial issues as rooted in conflicting knowledge foundations pertaining to specific local, national or global issues. Beyond the behavioural and epistemic criteria, there is also the question of why controversial issues should be of public interest and merit space in school curricula. Hess (2004) addresses this by pointing to the policy ramifications of controversial issues, noting that such issues often reflect disagreements over matters of public interest that require policy response to address, hence the need for such issues to feature in school curricula.

The behavioural, epistemic and policy criteria all raise a key fundamental question: What is the basis for determining a controversial issue? In answering this question, it is worthwhile considering the broader context in which controversial issues are often embedded. Determination of controversial issues is contextually driven, and debates about whether such issues should feature in school curricula are influenced by ideological contestations relating to the purpose and value of education. Knowles and Camicia (2025) reiterate this by noting that discussions of controversial issues within school curricula are significantly influenced by power and positionality, for which reason dominant framings of controversial issues often exclude marginalised voices. Therefore, the definition of controversial issues, to a significant degree, is determined by the ideological context in which school curricula and controversial issues are themselves situated, reflecting political struggles over what is taught in schools (Apple, 1993; Camicia, 2008; Zimmerman, 2022).

The ideological determinants of controversial issues may also change over time driven by ideological shifts in society and prevailing hegemonic forces associated with the zeitgeist (Evans, 2004, 2015; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017; Krause, 2019). For example, Camicia (2008) draws attention to how textbooks in US schools treat Capitalism and US national exceptionalism as non-controversial topics against the backdrop of other considerations in sections of US society that view these developments as controversial. This suggests that global and national issues that represent powerful interest are rarely presented as controversial issues in school curricula. Rather than viewing the teaching of controversy as a neutral pedagogical practice, Knowles and Camicia (2025) call for the reframing of controversial issues as a power-laden category.

3. Restrictive school policy environment and the teaching of controversial issues

There is widespread recognition that, if well conducted, disagreements over social and political issues can be a healthy feature of democratic societies (Gutmann & Thompson, 1996; O'Flynn & Setälä, 2022; Rosenberg, 2023). Despite this recognition, education systems around the world still grapple with the question of teaching controversial issues in schools. Controversial issues can differ from society to society, with some being global in character and addressed at social, political or science topics. While global issues such as climate change and different manifestations of international conflict have generated varied controversies in different national contexts across the world, issues such as the legalisation of Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs) and the legalisation of abortion have been historically prominent in Global North contexts such as the UK and the US. More recently, bans on the teaching of aspects of race, LGBTQ+, gender in educational curricula in some US states have reignited debates on the teaching of controversial issues in schools.

Associated with the contested nature of controversial issues, much of the political resistance to its teaching in schools stem from concerns about indoctrination and the emotional impact such discussions might have on students as well as questions about teacher neutrality (Hess, 2004, 2005; Sætra, 2021). The Council of Europe, for example, acknowledge these pedagogical challenges associated with the teaching of controversial issues and has developed a training package to support and guide teachers, often addressing these challenges as part of dynamics in democratic education in schools (Kerr & Huddleston, 2015; Kerr & Huddleston, 2020; McCully, 2007).

In a broad assessment, many European countries and US states acknowledge the significance of democratic education and legally mandate the teaching of subjects such as civic education and social studies in schools (Sandra Day O'Connor Civics Education Act,

2010; Veugelers et al., 2017; Lo & Kiza, 2021). However, recent legislations in some states in the US that ban the teaching of “divisive concepts” in schools point to potential value conflict between democratic education and the teaching of controversial issues. For instance, while the state of Florida in the US passed the Sandra Day O’Connor Civics Education Act in 2010 to make the teaching of civics mandatory in schools, it again passed a House Bill 7 (known as the Stop WOKE, Act) in 2022 to ban the teaching of what is deemed as “divisive concepts” (Dee, 2022; Sandra Day O’Connor Civics Education Act, 2010). More widely across the US, 12 state legislatures have passed laws that ban the teaching of critical race theory in schools, with such bans extending to the teaching of aspects of gender, sexuality and equity (Dee, 2022; Stitzlein, 2022).

The UK has a long policy history pertaining to the teaching of controversial issues in schools, with a 2008 Citizenship and Democratic Education report (popularly referred to as the Crick Report), addressing the subject. The report notes that, “Controversial issues are important in themselves and to omit informing about them and discussing them is to leave a wide and significant gap in the educational experience of young people and is to fail to prepare them for adult life” (QCA, 1998: 57). Recently, the UK government’s guidance document on Prevent Duty, implores schools to provide “a safe environment for debating controversial issues and helping them (students) to understand how they can influence and participate in decision-making” (Home Office, 2023, p 41).

At the same time, in its statutory guidance on the teaching of political issues in schools, the UK government is implementing what appears to be a cautious approach to regulating schools on the teaching of political topics, with a statutory guidance on political impartiality in schools. In spelling out the legal requirements of political impartiality in schools, the guidance document notes that “we are clear that this guidance does not seek to limit the range of political issues and viewpoints schools can and do teach about” (Department of Education, 2025). While this appears to constitute a hands-off approach to instilling political impartiality in schools, it raises some questions about impact on teachers’ ability to address controversial issues in the classroom. The existence of a state-crafted statutory guidance suggests teachers’ pedagogical decisions in the classroom are under constant scrutiny, which could create a sense of professional risks to teachers, potentially making them nervous about addressing controversial issues in the classroom (Kaka et al., 2024; Maxwell, 2023). In addition, there are studies that suggest that impartiality in the classroom is neither possible nor desirable, also raising questions about the practicality of the guidance for schools (Apple, 2004; Appelbaum, 2009; Moglen, 1996; Noddings, 1993).

Legislative and policy restrictions on the teaching of controversial issues in schools pose broader questions about the practice of democracy in schools and the larger political contexts in which schools operate, potentially detracting from the notion of democratic education as ‘education within democracy’ and ‘education through democracy’. The adverse implications of bans on the teaching of controversial issues on democracy is well captured by Todd (1951, p.1) who notes that “the quickest way for a democracy to commit suicide is for adult citizens to ban discussions on controversial issues”. In the US in particular, legislative curbs on schools’ ability to ‘teach the controversy’ is symptomatic of a broader trend where the teaching of activist knowledge within school curricula is increasingly being challenged, even though such education is said to be important in re-affirming schools as sites for the ethico-political development of students (Bernard, 2024).

Teaching controversial issues in schools constitutes a part of ‘education for democracy’, which Sant (2019), describes as “a commitment to curriculum and pedagogical approaches that promote ‘democratic character’” (p. 681). Engaging students in discussions of controversial issues contributes to developing their democratic citizenship skills, and can also lead to several other desirable outcomes, if mediated through a positive and open learning environment where students feel comfortable expressing their views, and where several sides of the issues are addressed (Wansink et al., 2023). Much justification for the teaching of controversial issues derives from deliberative democratic theory, which position political discussions in schools as essential to the development of students’ socio-cognitive skills including perspective taking, tolerance, complex reasoning, and political autonomy (Kauppi & Drerup, 2021). Additionally, it has been shown that students who take part in classroom discussions on a regular basis are more likely to feel confident about influencing public policy, participating in political discussions and voting, as well as following political news in the media and showing interest in the democratic process (Barton & McCully, 2007; Hess & McAvoy, 2015; McAvoy & McAvoy, 2021).

4. Conceptual framework

For data interpretation, two theoretical perspectives on the teaching of controversial issues and democratic education are employed to: (1) shed light on students’ rationalization on the relevance of teaching controversial issues in schools (2) to assess schools’ provision on democratic education as a pedagogical context for teaching controversial issues.

4.1. Product-based and process-based justifications for the teaching of controversial issues

The first theoretical perspective derives from Stradling et al. (1984) who propose two justifications for the teaching of controversial issues: the product-based justification and the process-based justification. In the product-based justification, the teaching of controversial issues is conceived of as an end in itself, based on the need for students to be knowledgeable about certain topical issues in society because such issues constitute “major social, political, economic or moral problems of our time”, or they are “directly relevant to students’ lives” (ibid.: 3). On the other hand, process-based justifications prioritize the values and competencies that students stand to gain from the teaching of controversial issues. This specifically alludes to competencies that fall under three categories; subject-related competencies that lead students to appreciate controversial issues as part of democratic life and develop their capacities to participate in discussions of contested social and political issues, as well as the knowledge that their views matter in public discourse on democracy. There are also cross-curricular competencies that students can potentially learn from the teaching of controversial issues. These come in the form of general skills including critical thinking, the ability to form opinion on social issues and distinguish

fact from opinion as well as recognize beliefs and values in one's opinions and actions, including those of others (Meijer et al., 2001). The third level of competencies students may acquire from participation in discussion of controversial issues are civic and political knowledge, increased political interest and participation and the development of a favorable disposition towards democratic values (Hess & Avery, 2008).

Both product-based and process-based justifications for teaching controversial issues are aligned with general educational perspectives on the intrinsic and instrumental values of schooling (Fraser, 1977; Gatley, 2021; Liu et al., 2023). As such, the justifications provide a framework for assessing the intrinsic and instrumental values students associate with the teaching of controversial issues. It also allows for situating students' rationalizations in support of the teaching of controversial issues in the context their individual agentic development relative to acquisition of democratic citizenship skills that benefit wider democratic societies.

4.2. The democratic education school experience framework

The study also draws on Democratic School Experience (DSE) framework to assess the broader democratic school context where the teaching of controversial issues transpires. Developed by de Groot and Lo (2021), the framework provides a set of indicators for assessing the extent to which schools provide educational opportunities for students to learn and practice democratic citizenship skills. The DSE framework has eight dimensions including: (1) Critical Community participation (2) Critical Community Education (3) Critical Personal Participation (4) Critical Personal Education (5) Basic Community Participation (6) Basic Community Education (7) Basic Personal Participation (8) Basic Personal Education. In their construction of the framework, de Groot and Lo (2021) posit three key assumptions as underpinning the eight dimensions of the framework.

The first assumption makes a distinction between individual-focused democratic education and a community-oriented education. The key difference in the two is whether educational activities aim for the development of individual agency or the collective agency of groups as opposed to community-oriented education that aims to provide political and dialogical space in schools to strengthen democratic communities. The authors of the framework note, for example, that educational activities that aim to develop the debating skills of students are more attuned to developing students' agency and nurturing them to become, say, lobbyists or politicians, whereas creating dialogical and political spaces in schools for students to engage with their peers on topical societal issues are more appropriate for strengthening democratic communities.

The second assumption underpinning the DSE framework focuses on Education and Practice, and points to the complementary relationship between democratic learning and democratic practice in providing students with a meaningful democratic educational experience. This assumption requires that students' learning of the principles and concepts of democracy go hand in hand with experiential learning opportunities that enable them to practice and test democratic principles.

Focusing on the goals of democratic education, the third assumption of the DSE framework notes that democratic education and participation should be driven by two types of aims: the basic and the critical. The basic aims are described as the "procedural and functional aims of democratic education and participation", an example of which is an understanding of the electoral processes and a knowledge of how to participate in voting (p. 216). On the other hand, the critical aims of democratic education entail "higher order thinking and participation skills" which are more political in character, addressing existential and moral questions (p. 216). The authors of the framework note that, an individual motivated by critical aims of democratic education might ask questions such as "What initiatives have been successful in balancing the influence of multinationals on tax and environmental policies?" (p. 216). The same distinction is made between basic and critical democratic participation, with the latter for example, moving beyond engaging students in superficial acts of toleration of difference and diversity to undertaking respectful engagements and challenging one's own viewpoints and prejudices (de Groot & Lo, 2021).

Table 1
Conceptual framework for assessing the teaching of controversial issues in schools.

Strand	Dimensions in each strand	Descriptive questions
Justification for the teaching of controversial issues	The Product-based justification	Is the teaching of controversial issues considered an end in itself? Is 'teaching the controversy' aimed at facilitating students' acquisition of knowledge on major social, political, economic or moral issues of the day?
	The process-based Justification	Is the teaching of controversial issues directed at developing students' skills and competencies for civic and political participation and wider involvement in society?
The Democratic School Experience	Individual-Oriented Education Versus Community-Oriented education	Are democratic educational activities aimed at developing individual/collective agency of groups? Are educational activities in schools community-oriented and aim to provide political and dialogical space for strengthening democratic communities in schools?
	Education versus Practice	Are democratic learning activities complemented by opportunities for practising democratic ideals? Does democratic education in schools aim to bridge the divide between democratic learning and democratic practice?
	Basic versus Critical aims of education	Are the aims of democratic education in schools procedural and functional? Is democratic education aimed at developing the critical and "higher order thinking and participation skills" of students? Are the aims of democratic education political in character and address existential and moral questions?

Adapted from Straddle et al. (1984) and de Groot and Lo (2021).

In applying the framework, I focus on the three underpinning assumptions of the DSE framework in respect of: the Individual versus Community; Education versus Practice and the Basic versus Critical. For each of the assumptions, I craft a corresponding question that dovetails into the overarching goal of the study in respect of assessing students' views and experiences on the teaching of controversial issues in the pedagogical context of democratic education. For the Individual versus Community assumption, I assess whether the democratic educational activities schools provide for students have sufficient orientation towards individual agency development and strengthening democratic communities. In respect of the assumption on Education versus Practice, I assess if there is sufficient balance in the provision of democracy learning on the one hand, and the provision of democratic experiential learning on the other. The assumption on Basic versus Critical is used in assessing if the democratic educational activities offered by schools are focused on the basic or critical aims of democratic education. These enquiries are undertaken in the context of schools' provision on democratic education both in taught curriculum and extra-curricular activities. Table 1 features key components of the conceptual framework for the study and associated descriptive questions.

5. Methodological approach

Data for the study is derived from group discussions undertaken in secondary schools in England based on the qualitative discussions among students. This section outlines the procedures undertaken in selecting schools, facilitating group discussions and analysing data, along with limitations that characterised the research process.

5.1. School sampling

Twenty (20) discussions groups were held in 14 schools across England. Table 2 outlines the schools and their defining characteristics along with the number of discussion groups held in each. Given that population across London and England are somewhat characterised by ethnic and socio-economic segregation (Manley, 2021), purposive sampling was employed in the selection of schools to ensure student composition in discussion groups reflected a diverse spectrum of ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds. While the study did not aim to undertake analysis of the implications of the ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds of students on perceptions of controversial issues, ensuring a diversity in the school selection was considered important for enriched discussions in group discussions. As such in the selection of schools, we focused on schools in different boroughs within the city of London and in towns/suburbs within some 20 miles distance from the capital. We ensured schools consisted of both comprehensive and grammar schools, as these two categories of schools are known to serve students from different socio-economic backgrounds with implications for educational attainment and socio-emotional development (Jerrim & Sims, 2020). Some of the the grammar schools that participated in the study offer the International Baccalaureate (IB) as part of their curriculum. The practical significance in the purposive approach in diversifying school selection was corroborated during a group discussion in a fee-paying IB grammar school, where a student cautioned that, the research needed to be wary of the implications of 'coming to an IB school to take data', as the school served mostly students from high socio-economic background, which had the potential of impacting the quality of the data.

5.2. Deliberative discussion groups

School visits for group discussions occurred between January 2023 and October 2024 and discussions were held within school

Table 2
Sampled schools and number of discussion groups.

School	Type of school (By admission requirements)	Location in/from London	Number of group discussions	No. of Students in discussion group
School 1	Comprehensive School	East London	1	6
School 2	Grammar School	South East London	1	7
School 3	Voluntary Sixth Form College	South London	1	7
School 4	Comprehensive School	South East London	2	18
School 5	Comprehensive School	South West London	1	7
School 6	Comprehensive School	North West London	1	8
School 7	Comprehensive School	South London	2	7
School 8	Comprehensive School	North London	1	9
School 9	Comprehensive School	West London	1	9
School 10	Comprehensive school	East London	2	14
School 11	Grammar School	South East London	4	36
School 12	Comprehensive School	South East of London	1	8
School 13	Voluntary sixth form college	North West of London	1	10
School 14	Comprehensive School	South West Hertfordshire and (49 km from London)	1	8
Total			20	154

premises in school libraries. As part of safeguarding measures in schools, a designated teacher was present in each group discussion across all schools to ensure safeguarding measures were upheld. However, the presence of teachers during initial discussion groups appears to have impacted the willingness of students to fully express their views. These occurrences prompted the researcher in subsequent group discussions to assure students that teachers' presence in discussions was to give support to the researcher and not censor their views, encouraging them to freely share their views without the feeling of being censored. These few instances demonstrate that teacher presence in externally facilitated student group discussions in schools can impact the willingness of students to speak up and goes to affirm the significance of research confidentiality, and participant anonymisation in research processes and engagements (Bos, 2020).

Student participants were in sixth form of their schooling, comprising of students between the ages of 16 and 20. This age group was considered matured enough to have gone through different stages of the secondary education cycle to be able to reflect on their prior and current educational experiences on school provision on democratic education and the teaching of controversial issues. Each focus group was composed of an average number of 9 students.

The approach to group discussions in schools was guided by a deliberative discussion framework developed by Fishkin and Luskin (2005) for ensuring that, the processes in discussion groups reflect the principles and values of deliberative democracy and that data gathered from discussion groups are of high quality. The framework outlines five elements as essential to preparing towards and undertaking a deliberative discussion group. These include:

- (a) Participant should be given enough information about the topic of discussion.
- (b) The information shared about the topic of discussion should be balanced and indicate the pros and cons of the topic
- (c) The information shared should be comprehensive
- (d) Participants should volunteer to participate in the discussion groups
- (e) The views participants share during discussion should be assessed on their merit and not based on the identity of the sharer

In preparing for and undertaking discussion groups in schools, all elements of the deliberative discussion framework were adhered to. Prior to visiting schools, information sheet on the research project was sent to schools. This captured details about the overall research project as well as the topic of discussion, including contextual information on the applicability and relevance of the topic to schools in England. To ensure participation in the discussion groups was voluntary, students consented to participation by reading and signing a consent form that outlined the ethical issues in participating in the group discussions. Additionally, discussions were preceded by the setting of ground rules which called for and emphasised free expression of opinions, the validity of all views irrespective of what was said, as well as the need for turn-taking in the sharing of views.

These processes were part of the ethical requirements for undertaking group discussions in schools, based on the ethical approval the research project received from the Ethics Review Committee of the UCL Institute of Education.

In a broad sense, the protocol used in facilitating discussions addressed the following:

- Students' understanding and experiences of (global) activism
- Students' views and experiences on the teaching of global and controversial issues in schools
- Students understanding and experiences on global citizenship
- Students' understanding and views on human rights, climate change and gender issues

5.3. Thematic coding

Proceedings in discussion groups were recorded with Microsoft Teams which allowed for concurrent verbatim transcriptions of discussions. Data were cleaned to ensure consistency in presentation and to rid transcripts of punctuation errors that might alter the meaning of statements.

Thematic analysis of data was undertaken using MAXQDA software. Both deductive and inductive coding were conducted, and this enriched the data analysis process (Mayring, 2014). The first step involved a deductive process with the use of pre-designed codebook. The group discussions in schools in England were part of a larger research project involving researchers in 5 other country contexts who undertook similar group discussion in schools on the same research topics. To facilitates analysis of data from all these country contexts, a global codebook was designed for thematic coding in MAXQDA based on the research questions and topics that underpinned the overall research project. This codebook was employed to identify and capture relevant themes and sub-themes in the data that addressed generic aspects of the research topic, including transnational activist groups, global issues such as human rights and climate change and global citizenship.

The analysis also involved an inductive process, where emergent themes and sub-themes from the data were identified. This led to the development of new codes and sub-codes to update the global codebook but reflected peculiar themes that emerged in discussions groups in the UK context. Some of the localised themes that emerged from the inductive analysis relate to activism topics and groups that are rife in the UK, and issues that pertain to the schooling system in England.

5.4. Study limitations

The data for this study was sourced from a total of 154 students who participated in 20 discussion groups in 14 schools. While

discussions in schools were rich and informative and the study's qualitative nature aimed for analytical generalisability, it is worthwhile noting the potential limitation of the study in terms of its statistical generalisability for schools in the whole of England (Carminati, 2018; Prabhu, 2020). Additionally, the study was undertaken at the time geopolitical tensions were rife in the Middle East pertaining to the Israel-Palestine conflict, resulting in protests activities in London and other parts of the world. While this provided a case study of a contemporary controversial issue for students to grapple with in discussion groups, this also presented a limitation as students' predominant focus was on this topic in discussions groups.

6. Findings

Based on qualitative accounts from participants in the study, findings are presented at two levels. The first addresses key issues in the teaching of controversial issues in terms of students' rationalisations as well as perceptions on the conundrums and dilemmas that the teaching of controversial issues in schools often raises. The second level of presentation addresses students' experiences on the broader pedagogical context of democratic education, detailing if these often align with dimensions of the DSE framework in terms of Individual versus Community, Theoretical versus Practice and Basic versus Critical.

6.1. Rationalisation for the teaching of controversial issues

While there exists significant consensus in academic scholarship on the educational benefits of teaching controversial issues to students, current political efforts to ban or limit the teaching of such issues in schools suggests disagreements linger in society about these educational benefits. In group discussions, students provided various rationalisations for the teaching of controversial issues.

Students attributed significance to teaching controversial issues because it prepares young people to deal with such issues in their adult lives in familial, social, and career circles where controversial issues often surface. The view that exposure to controversial issues in school curricular serves to prepare young people for their adult lives has long been recognised and supported in the British education system. In highlighting the significance of the teaching of controversial issues, the Crick report, for example, notes that:

Education should not attempt to shelter our nation's children from even the harsher controversies of adult life, but should prepare them to deal with such controversies knowledgeably, sensibly, tolerantly and morally. (QCA, 1998, p. 56)

The relevance of discussing controversial issues in schools was extended to the domain of civic and political participation. Students acknowledged that discussing controversial political topics in the classroom can increase their civic and political knowledge and awareness and likely influence their future engagement with politics. The correlation between participation in discussions of controversial issues in the classroom and increased political curiosity, awareness and engagement is widely acknowledged in research (Barton & McCully, 2007; Hess & McAvoy, 2015; McAvoy & McAvoy, 2021). Student 13, for example, was able to situate the political significance of discussing controversial issues in the context of secondary education vis-à-vis the voting age for young people in England:

Also, like by the time you leave school, you would be able to vote. So voting, you need to know about these issues, like globally, not just for the UK. So being taught at school is very important, making the right decisions for you. Student 13

It is worth noting how, in the preceding quote, student 13 sees the benefits of learning about controversial issues in terms of being able to make the right decisions for themselves, as this highlights the role classroom discussions of contested social and political issues can play in developing students' agency. In that light, students also saw the teaching of controversial issues as an essential antidote to the spread of ignorance and significant for their intellectual development:

I think they should address the issue instead of saying that there should be no political views, because it kind of comes off as ignorance. And I think if they explain the problems, people can, and will be willing to learn. Student 25

In addressing the question of how they gain knowledge on pertinent global issues, students mentioned social media but were also quick to identify the limitations that are inherent in these sources, including the phenomena of 'fake news', social media misinformation and the echo-chamber effects that often characterises social media. In light of these limitations, students pointed to schools as providing appropriate pedagogical space and approaches for discussing controversial issues, providing a much-needed corrective to the increasing fallibility of knowledge in contemporary society:

There's a lot of news topics that come from social media and whether they're reliable, whether they're made up by Trump, we don't know. But I also feel like a lot of the other topics that aren't necessarily covered in media but are important that we all know about...I feel I wouldn't know a lot about global activism if it wasn't thanks to this school. Student 8

On the echo-chamber effects from social media, student 23 shared that:

There's been increasing people gaining knowledge from social media... But the issue with that is the spread of fake news. So on platforms like that, if you like one post with one opinion, you will be constantly fed posts with that opinion, which leads to people going down certain pipelines and exacerbating existing extremes of views. Student 23

In line with the views shared by students, schools have long been recognised as providing appropriate forums for students' discussion of controversies in democratic politics because they (schools) are marked by ideological diversity, making the classroom the most powerful place to promote "rational deliberations of competing conceptions of the good life and the good society" (Gutman,

1999, p. 44).

6.2. Conundrums in the teaching of controversial issues

While students were generally favourably disposed towards the teaching of controversial issues in schools, they were also wary of the pedagogical challenges this entails. There was a general consensus among students that a key challenge in addressing controversial issues in the school curriculum is teachers' ability to maintain neutrality when facilitating discussions with students in the classroom. Students further thought that maintaining neutrality was important because of the age-group schools typically deal with, and considering the impressionable impacts teachers can have on young people:

It's really difficult to be able to push forward those issues without taking a certain stance, especially if it's an issue like human rights, things have to be divided. How do you impartially do that with a bunch of, you know, very impressionable young people? I think it's really difficult to do that. But it should be done. Student 15

Calls for teacher neutrality notwithstanding, there were students who felt that beyond neutrality, the teacher's role in facilitating discussions of controversial issues should be that of the 'devil's advocate' to challenge students to be reflective and critical of their own views. In employing this approach, teachers are expected to challenge students with alternative views, and in the process sometimes contradict students' widely held views on the topic of discussion. This approach is noted as ideal for developing students' capacity on perspective-taking (Clabough et al., 2011; Oulton et al., 2004a; Zaidi et al., 2021). Some students went further to suggest, in some cases, it was pedagogically appropriate for teachers to share their political views in the classroom:

We have a particularly politically active and politically vocal teacher. And everyone knows what her views are. She doesn't try to hide them or anything. But the fact that she presents those views so clearly gives us the opportunity to counter those views and to debate with her in a manner that is healthy and polite. Student 50

Furthermore, a related challenge students brought to fore relating to the discussions of controversial issues in schools is the sensitivity around certain issues and the conflict they might generate within school communities. In a discussion group, an exchange between two students is revealing in what it says about one of the underlying reasons for opposition to the teaching controversial issues in schools but also shows the countervailing view on why sensitivity should not be the main criterion in determining what should be taught in schools. Student 7 shared that:

I believe that certain topics like the Palestine and Israel conflict shouldn't be talked about in the first place, and I believe this because, like we said, the school is very diverse. You have a lot of Israelis in the school, and you have a lot of Palestinians, and if that was to be talked about, there'll be a lot of conflict within the school. Student 7

In responding to the above view, another student thought that:

When will we come to a point in the world where sensitivity stops being an issue on the reason why people can't share their opinions? if we continue as a society to use sensitivity as an excuse to why people can't say what they want to say, or why certain things can't be mentioned, we're just going to basically dilly and dally around every single political issue that happens. Student 9

Linked to the issue of sensitivity, students also spoke about the potential emotional impact that addressing controversial issues in the classroom might have on students. For example, students acknowledged that the sensitive nature of topics such as abortion and slavery come with the possibility of causing discomfort and anger among a section of the students:

I feel like you have to be really careful when it comes to the school curriculum because if you talk about something like abortion, if you get straight into it, some people might get uncomfortable and you have some people that were really worried by it. And if you think about things like slavery, if you think about all the things that black people might do. Student 11

Emotions play a role in sustaining young people's engagement with controversial issues in the classroom, for which reason emotion management is considered important during such discussions (Sætra, 2021). To address some of the potential emotional discomfort that discussions of controversial issues might generate in the classroom, students suggested some controversial issues should only be featured in the curriculum for Key stage 4 and 5, where students are mature enough to understand and absorb complex controversial issues. Others also felt that, in teaching such topics, the content on some controversial topics should be 'filtered' to exclude aspects that could potentially cause emotional distress to students.

6.3. The democratic educational experience of students in schools

The extent to which schools are willing and able to address controversial issues in the taught curriculum depends on the existence of a democratic education curriculum, as well as democratic school ethos and culture. In the following section, I assess both curriculum and extra-curricular provisions on democratic education in schools, using dimensions of the DSE framework in terms of the Individual versus Community; Education versus Practice; the Basic versus Critical.

6.3.1. Individual versus the community

The distinguishing element between the Individual versus Community dimensions of the DSE framework is whether democratic education in schools is aimed at developing the individual agency of students/collective agency of groups or focused on creating ample

dialogical and political spaces for strengthening democratic communities in schools.

Students shared that schools provide ample opportunities for democratic engagements across various school club activities, some of which are supported by external organisations that promote student engagement on human rights, climate change, gender issues, etc. School clubs provide safe spaces where students experiment and promote different ideas on local and global issues:

We've got like plenty of different communities and groups where we can talk like really freely. But like some natural society or religion society, you can actually promote different ideas. You are free to speak there, you can like look at the different things that happen not only like here in the UK and London, but also around the world. So we're kind of having like those free space, even if you're not taking politics. Student 17

In some instances, students felt schools restricted the range of global issues that could be talked about in clubs, and did not provide the political space for students to contribute to discussions of some pertinent global issues:

In this school, there's been a big hesitancy to talk about Palestine...there's so many students who want to do something about Palestine. I don't know, maybe do an assembly on or do fundraisers. They've just been neglected by the school. Even if they are fundraisers, they've barely been promoted. Student 10

In terms of democratic educational activities oriented toward developing students' agency, debating activities in school clubs provide avenues for students to address certain controversial issues in society. This facilitates personal development and is well attuned to developing students' agency. Subjects in school curriculum such as politics, geography, history, and sociology were also cited by students as providing opportunities for learning about global issues. These also contribute to developing students' agency, given that knowledge and understanding of how the world works, and an ability to situate oneself in local and global development processes is a significant pre-condition to identifying one's potential to make a change in the world. There is therefore a mix of taught curriculum and extra-curricular learning opportunities for developing students' agency and strengthening dialogical democratic spaces in schools. However, these opportunities are said to be limited in the extent to which they address wider global issues.

6.3.2. Education versus practice

The underlying question in the Education versus Practice dimension of the DSE framework is whether there is a good balance between theoretical knowledge acquisition on global issues and experiential opportunities for students to participate in democratic practices. This dimension of democratic education reflects John Dewey's perspectives on democratic education as experiential education (Dewey, 1916;1938). Studies have underscored the need for schools to engage students in both curricular and extra-curricular activities towards facilitating the development of skills and values that cut across multiple competency dimensions, including cognitive, affective, and action dimensions, etc. (Hicks & Bord, 2001; UNESCO, 2015).

In discussion groups, students reported there were ample opportunities within school clubs where they engage in democratic practices that relate to local and global issues. Examples of activities students cited are debates on local/global issues and undertaking fundraising for causes they believe in. However, students felt there was a lopsided balance between extra-curricular activities and learning in the classroom, as opportunities for learning about global issues in the taught curriculum were limited:

One of the reasons why we know so much about global issues is due to the extracurricular activities that we've been doing. A lot of it has been facilitated by the school, which is great. And I don't believe that the school is really to blame. I believe that the national curriculum is to blame, because without those extracurricular activities, I wouldn't know half of what I know today. Student 44

While studies show a strong link between students' participation in extra-curricular activities and their development of social and emotional competencies (Christison, 2013; Cortellazzo et al., 2021), knowledge acquisition within the taught curriculum in schools has also been linked with the development of cognitive skills (Cherukunnath & Singh, 2022).

Within the taught curriculum, in addition to core subjects such as the citizenship education and Personal, Social, Health and Economic Education (PSHE), students cited subjects such as politics, sociology, geography, and history as providing opportunities for learning about citizenship-related topics and global issues. However, these learning opportunities were mostly confined to students that study the Humanities and Social Sciences in schools.

6.3.3. Basic versus critical

In conceptualising the DSE framework, de Groot and Lo (2021) note that the aims of democratic education are basic if they address procedural and functional questions in democratic participation, as for example in, enhancing students' knowledge on electoral and civic participation processes. On the other hand, critical democratic education broaches political, existential and moral questions, as for example, in being critical of the impacts of government policies on certain groups and communities in society. In applying this distinction, I assess the extent to which students' democratic education in taught curriculum and democratic practice in extra-curricular activities meet the basic and the critical criteria.

Based on students' experiences in the classroom, they identified a limitation in the extent to which schools address the critical aims of democratic education. For example, on climate change, students shared the view that schools tend to focus on the scientific and factual aspects of the incidence of climate change rather than on political and policy questions:

But the thing with how climate change is taught in schools is it's mostly taught in subjects that are quite scientific. And so you're getting the actual impact on the earth, instead of the political side of it. Student 18

Students further elaborated that, a sole focus on the scientific aspects of climate change limits their exposure to the depth of the

underlying social, political and economic questions in the debates on climate change, often making them feel detached from the conversations on climate change in the real world. In this respect, an important dimension that students thought was often missing in the scientific discussions of climate change in the classroom is the extent to which public policy should be deployed in addressing it:

With human rights and climate change, the tendency is to just put out a general kind of positive message that X is important. Now most would hopefully agree that X is important, but I think the real nuances of this issue are more controversial points of, okay, should we do this as in, to what extent should it be prioritised in policy, how much money should we devote to it, what measures are worth taking, what's worth sacrificing to achieve it. Student 1

Considering the limited critical dimensions within the taught curriculum, students appraised Grammar schools, especially the ones that teach the IB as offering a more critically focused curriculum as opposed to the curriculum in comprehensive schools. These assessments were made based on students' previous pedagogical experiences attending comprehensive schools and current experiences in Grammar schools. They characterized the GCSE and A-Levels curriculum in comprehensive schools as restrictive with a predominant focus on preparing them (students) for examinations. On the other hand, students attested that, the IB curriculum has a stronger global and international focus that teach diverse regions of the world and equips students with independent and critical thinking skills that enable them to question their sources of information, weigh up information and be critical of the Eurocentrism that might characterize their school curriculum and experience.

Additionally, a key limitation in schools' engagement with the critical aims of democratic education is in enabling dialogical spaces for students to discuss pertinent global issues. Frierien interpretations of critical democratic education posit that schools need to create pedagogical spaces where teachers and students can deliberate and dialogue over important matters of the day (Sant, 2019). At the time of undertaking discussion groups in schools, debates and protests on the Isreal/Palestine conflict were rife across the world. There were indications that, schools prohibited discussions of the Israel/Palestine conflict because of how controversial the subject is:

I don't think that the school really talks about global situations. For example, I heard from some staff that they weren't allowed to discuss about the Palestine and Israel situation because of how controversial it is. Student 25

This suggests that education policies that aim to instill democratic practice in schools do not always fully translate into practice. While some narratives shared by students point to opportunities within schools for engaging with the critical aims of democratic education, especially in school club activities, the preceding student quote, among others, suggest in some instances there is a lack of criticality in the opportunities schools provide for students' democratic engagement on specific global issues. The assertions made by students were corroborated in a sideline discussion between the researcher and a teacher in one of the school visits, in which the teacher further noted that political engineering plays an important role in determining whether activist knowledge and controversial issues are taught in schools.

7. Discussion and conclusion

This study set out to investigate the teaching of controversial issues in the broader pedagogical context of democratic education in schools, with recourse to the views of students as agentic participants in education. The findings show that students attribute intrinsic and instrumental values to the teaching of controversial issues and offered rationalisations that straddle between the product-based and the process-based justifications.

The instrumental value associated with the teaching of controversial issues has long been recognised in educational scholarship in terms of students' acquisition of three-levels of competencies: subject-based competencies, cross-curricular competencies as well as civic and political knowledge (Stradling et al., 1984). These competencies have been associated with increased political efficacy that enhance the participation of young people in democratic societies. (Barton & McCully, 2007; Hess & McAvoy, 2015; McAvoy & McAvoy, 2021).

The less explored of the two justifications for the teaching of controversial issues is the product-based justification. This justification constructs the knowledge students acquire from discussing contentious political and social issues in the classroom as an end in itself and ideal for their intellectual, personal and agentic development. The findings of this study show that the product-based justification for the teaching of controversial issues has become even more relevant in the fast-evolving techno-global context of contemporary society, which is marked by the emergence of new media and information technologies (social media and Artificial Intelligence technologies) and their associated impacts on information access and quality.

Information eco-systems around the world have become saturated leading to information overload and confusion as well as belief polarisation. A report by the Observatory on Information and Democracy indicates that, to prevent information overload and to protect their mental health, young people are resorting to news avoidance (Mansel et al., 2025). This study corroborates that view and further shows that the features associated with the modern information environments makes it increasingly difficult for young people to form opinions on pertinent local and global issues. The ease with which young people have access to information exposes them to sensitive issues in confusing ways, which require discussion, untangling and demystification in the classroom (Scarratt & Davison, 2012). School subjects such as Citizenship Education and Social Studies that often feature controversial topics need to be adapted to the information disorder that now characterises society towards developing students' civic online reasoning competencies.

Schools are best suited for teaching controversial issues because they offer structured curricular and extra-curricular spaces for students to engage with their peers under the instruction of adult experts (teachers). Schools are also characterised by ideological diversity that can potentially enrich discussions on contentious local and global politics (Gutmann, 1999; Hess, 2004). Additionally, unlike social media, familial and social interactions, schools drive teaching and learning with a pedagogical intent geared towards

democratic citizenship formation in students. Overall, teaching controversial issues aligns with the purpose of schools in facilitating students' acquisition of powerful knowledge (Young & Muller, 2016).

The study further reveal there is a lack of criticality in the taught curriculum, evident in the ways certain controversial topics are presented and discussed, with a predominant approach being addressing these topics as empirical questions with a lack of policy nuance. For example, in their book on *The Political Classroom*, Dina Hess and her colleague make a distinction between addressing climate change as an empirical question and discussing it as a policy question. They note that the question of whether climate change is occurring is an empirical and a settled question, for which reason it would be problematic for teachers to address it as an open question by engaging students in discussion on whether climate change is occurring (Hess & McAvoy, 2015; Richardson & Hess, 2017). They also note that, discussions on what should be done about climate change is an open question and constitutes a political and policy question, which merit discussions in democratic education classrooms. This observed lack of criticality calls for a re-orientation in both the pedagogical approaches recommended in school syllabi for teaching controversial topics and teacher education programmes, especially for subjects that feature controversial issues.

The findings further indicate there exists gaps between policy prescriptions on the teaching of controversial issues and actual practice in schools. Considering the opportunities within school clubs for students to dialogue and engage on diverse social and political issues, democratic-community oriented education appears to be a strong feature in schools. Gordon (2022) in a book on *Developing Successful Schools* notes that for schools to reflect the democratic societies in which they are embedded, they must adhere to democratic principles by giving all students a voice and engage students in open enquiry and promote democratic activities for students. Hooks (2010) and Golden (2025) affirm this by noting that commitments to democracy and equality are sometimes marked by discrepancies between professed values in policy statements on the one hand and differential actions on the ground on the other.

Historical policy documents such as the Crick report on citizenship and democratic education as well as recent government crafted Prevent Duty guidance and statutory guidance on political impartiality in schools all highlight the need for schools to provide safe spaces where students can discuss controversial political issues. However, narratives from students in discussion groups suggests political spaces in schools for addressing certain global issues are shrinking and the teaching of topics such as climate change and human rights are limited in the extent to which they engage with critical aims of democratic education as conceptualised in the DSE framework (de Groot & Lo, 2021).

Beyond policy prescriptions, the approach schools adopt in addressing raging controversial global issues appears to be driven by political expediency, possibly informed by the complex nature of these global issues. An example being students' assertion that schools prohibited discussions on the Israel/Palestine conflict in both classroom and extra-curricular spaces because it is deemed very controversial. In discussing how socio-political context, power and positionality shape discussions of controversial issues in schools, Knowles and Camicia (2025) note that political pressures and weaponised ambiguities often constrain the teaching of controversial issues in schools. There is therefore a question of the intervening factors that prevent government-stated policies that affirm the teaching of controversial issues from fully actualising in school practice. Further research is required to understand the specific hurdles and lapses in policy frameworks that expressly support the teaching of controversial issues in schools but fail to materialise in practice.

It is apparent that, hesitancy to address controversial political and social issues in schools are also linked to the conundrums students shared in discussion groups, in respect of the challenge of teacher neutrality, potential emotional impacts on students as well as the likely conflict and divisions such topics might cause in school communities. These challenges have long been recognised and well investigated in educational research, the insights of which have informed the development of teacher training guidebooks by third sector actors such as the Council of Europe and Oxfam (Kerr & Huddleston, 2015; Kerr & Huddleston, 2020; Oxfam, 2018).

Much of the regulatory efforts on the teaching of controversial issues in schools are partly aimed at addressing the challenge of teacher neutrality (Kaka et al., 2024; Stitzlein, 2022, 2024). For example, the UK government's statutory guidance on political impartiality in schools is mainly driven by the requirement for schools and teachers to exercise neutrality when addressing political issues in the classroom. The concern of neutrality also underpins teaching methodologies recommended in teacher training guides developed by bodies such as the Council of Europe and Oxfam to equip teachers with the pedagogical skills on navigating neutrality when addressing controversial issues in the classroom (Kerr & Huddleston, 2015; Kerr & Huddleston, 2020; Oxfam, 2018). The issue of teacher neutrality is a contested concept in academic scholarship on teaching controversial issues. Advocates of teacher neutrality see it as essential to the teachers' role in steering and encouraging diverse viewpoints in the classroom (Furlong & Carroll, 1990). However, some scholars suggest that, for certain social and political contexts, the pedagogical aim of addressing ethical and controversial questions in the classroom should be truth, rather than balance (Bigelow & Peterson, 2002). It is therefore important for government policy prescriptions on teacher neutrality in schools to reflect the nuances that uphold truth along with requirements for balance.

Beyond school regulatory policy environments, teacher competence in handling controversial political issues is a key enabling pedagogical factor for schools to advance democratic citizenship education in the classroom. Studies have shown that teachers avoid addressing controversial topics in the classroom because of lack of confidence and a feeling of being ill-prepared to handle such topics (Lynagh et al., 2010; Nganga et al., 2020; Oulton et al., 2004a). This calls for systematic integration of teacher pedagogical skills on the teaching of controversial issues in initial teacher education and continuous professional development for teachers.

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