



Panel Session Note 2: Addressing Controversial Issues

Time: November 15, 13:30-15:00

Room: Main Hall, 2nd floor

Moderator:

Ted HUDDLESTON, teacher trainer, CoE and EWC expert, United Kingdom

Speakers:

Anna SHELIIA, Teacher, No 37 Yaroslavl School, Russia

Gudrun Ebba ÓLAFSDÓTTIR, Teacher, Laugalækjarskóla, Iceland

Claire PODETTI, Teacher, Collège Charles Péguy, France

Input & reflections on topic & school practices by Jennie SIVENBRING, Segerstedt Institute, University of Gothenburg, Campaign Steering Group member, Sweden

Rapporteur:

Khrystyna CHUSHAK, Senior Research Fellow Coordinator, I. Krypnyakevych Institute of Ukrainian Studies, Schools for Democracy Head Programme Coordinator, EWC, EPAN member, Ukraine

Language: English

Background:

Managing Controversial Issues is one of the six themes of the CoE Campaign “Free to Speak, Safe to Learn - Democratic Schools for All”: *“Teaching controversial issues raises challenges for both teachers and school directors. However, being able to discuss sensitive and controversial issues in a respectful way is a vital skill in a democratic culture. Schools must be places where students feel safe to engage in debates with people who have different opinions. Through the careful management of discussions on controversial issues, schools can promote freedom of expression, as well as inclusion, tolerance and human rights and prevent, or counter, the use of hate speech by students. To achieve this, a school action plan on managing controversial issues – which provides staff training – should be adopted as a priority.”* (CoE Campaign leaflet)

Good practices and initiatives by school representatives, as submitted, please find below.

No 37 Yaroslavl School, Russia

“Teacher vs Student: from the crisis of trust towards new relationships” by Anna Sheliia, teacher

<p>Why did you/ your school choose to work on the issue of “Addressing Controversial Issues”?</p>	<p>There is no doubt that modern society is full of contradictions and controversial issues and for some reason we expect our graduates to feel comfortable and confident once they step in to an adult life. However, at school we very often do not provide them with an opportunity to discuss what they feel insecure about or confused with. Many Russian schools remain extremely conservative and authoritarian, what leads to a lack of trust between teachers and students. I am a graduate of such a school myself and I recall that painful experience when your voice is not heard, and your opinion is devaluated just because you are a child. Our project aims to provide students an opportunity to openly speak about controversial issues in Russian schools with adult experts and express their point of view during a radio show.</p>
<p>What did you do and what went well? Who took part? Please describe some important steps of the process.</p>	<p>We made an agreement with the local independent radio station “Echo of Moscow – Yaroslavl” to start a series of radio shows about most controversial issues of school life. We also made a point that in each show a school student should participate together with an adult expert. Since January 2018 we are doing monthly radio shows discussing such problems as relationships and disputes between teachers and students, the limits of freedom at school, students’ self-administration and others.</p>
<p>What were main challenges you have experienced?</p>	<p>Some students feel concerned to express their ideas publicly; many of them do not have enough experience of public speaking. Some students would express so called shared thinking.</p>
<p>Did your project/ practice/ initiative bring some changes? What were the benefits?</p>	<p>The videos of the shows are being posted in students’ social media, they would discuss it eagerly. In the beginning we struggled to find a student who would be ready to talk on the radio, now we have more than we can accommodate. However we believe that the project has a long-term effect which we will see when our students grow older.</p>
<p>What would you say to a colleague who is about to start the same kind of project/ practice/ initiative to help them repeat your success?</p>	<p>Communication and discussion with children is the most exciting and unpredictable thing ever! Moreover, the difference that could be made just by providing children an opportunity to express themselves is enormous.</p>

Laugalækjarskóla, Island

“Life skills and #metoo” by Gudrun Ebba Ólafsdóttir, teacher

Four of us from Iceland were invited to Utøya, Norway, in May 2017, to attend the workshop *Teaching Controversial Issues and Managing Controversy in the Nordic countries* organized by the European Wergleand Center. We were all impressed and wanted “to spread the word” to other schools in Iceland. In consultation with The Icelandic Ministry of Education we began implementing the project in Iceland. We quickly realized that we needed the manuals in Icelandic, and in May 2018 we finished the translation. They were published electronically by The Directorate of Education. The people at The

European Wergeland Centre have been very helpful and we have been in close contact with them the entire time. We have presented the project to various organizations and organized various workshops for teachers and principals at every level of education, from preschool to university, and even first and 5th year student teachers. At the end of each workshop, participants plan how they intend to use the manuals and introduce the project to their schools. We have also been interviewed by the media.

Laugalækjarskóli is a UNICEF rights respecting school and works according to the policy of positive discipline. I teach life skills to 7th and 8th graders. One of the goals of this class is for students to become competent in forming and developing relations with others. I have used many activities from *Teaching Controversial Issues*. Last year I focused on sexual abuse, #metoo and pornography, mainly in groups divided by gender but also with the entire class. The #metoo movement was an obvious choice but I also chose to work with this subject because studies have shown that Icelandic boys tend to watch more porn than their peers and start as early as eleven years old. In my presentation I will show some of the work I've done with my students. My students closely followed news on the school shooting in Parkland, Florida and the activism from surviving students that followed. This gave us an opportunity to talk about that students can and should have a voice. Another project was on stereotypes of gender, race, handicap, sexuality, appearance etc. A very popular topic is the US president. My challenge is to avoid their discussion leading the students having a negative opinion of American citizens just because they voted for Mr. Trump.

The program has helped my students to not see the world as "black and white". They have also become more willing to express their opinions without the fear of being criticized. I have learnt a lot from the program, particularly by translating *Teaching Controversial Issues* and *Managing Controversial Issues*. It has had a great impact on me, both personally and professionally. I am more aware of my own beliefs and values and how they can affect my teaching. I try to balance teaching controversial issues and the vulnerability of my students, which can be quite a challenge when talking about sexual abuse and the porn industry. Schools must organize their work to promote a sense of security for students, according to The Compulsory School Act. Students have the right to enjoy the benefit of their childhood in all school work.

Teaching Controversial Issues can help with the challenges Icelandic schools are confronted with. It is important that teachers are given time and opportunity to discuss and share their experience on how to deal with controversial issues and how to respond to unexpected and unsettling comments from students. As well as how to address potential criticism from parents and the school community. Everybody has shown great enthusiasm and the feedback has been fantastic. Teachers have been very willing and say that now they now have the knowledge and tools to address controversial issues in their classroom.

Collège Charles Péguy, France
Claire Podetti, teacher

The project I led was an artistic and interdisciplinary project. This project was carried out with a class of 25 students aged 14 to 16. We wrote the biography of Jankiel Fensterszab who was deported with the last big convoy from the transit camp of Drancy (France) to Auschwitz-Birkenau on July 31st, 1944.

We made a real historical inquiry with the students: interviewing Ida Grinspan (Jankiel Fensterszab's daughter), looking for archives in different places, asking a history specialist of the Second World War and the Jews. Students worked with the tools used by historians. They learned how to write history.

With this inquiry, our students realized that the Holocaust was more than a genocide. The Nazis *actually attempted* to cover up their crime and destroy *all* evidence of the very *existence of Jewish people*.

Two professional artists also participated in this project. This was very important for us because we are convinced that that art enables people to gather and share their experience. In the class there was a child who had recently migrated from Syria, another one from the Democratic Republic of Congo, and another teenager had autistic disorders. The artistic workshops were moments of shared learning and mutual help. Teachers and students were placed at the same level. The whole group took part in a common work.

As a matter of fact, artistic workshops help to establish links between the present and the past. They make it possible to go beyond simple historical knowledge, to build the beginning of historical consciousness. We worked on racism and antisemitism. Through the study of the past, it is today's society and universal values that our students question. They reflected on how to defend these values and make them real. In other words, how can everybody act and fight racism nowadays?

By working on the biography of Jankiel Fensterszab, we followed Jankiel's family story, through Europe from Poland to Berlin and Paris. It is not the Jewish history, it is a European story that we have written, a part of our shared history that we have built with the students.