

# The school's handling of controversial issues in teaching

## A focus on social studies and biology in grades 8 and 9

### Summary

The school's task is to provide pupils with the knowledge and values they need for active and democratic citizenship. The Swedish Education Act states that education must convey and promote respect for human rights and fundamental democratic values.<sup>1</sup> In 2010, the Council of Europe adopted a charter intended to strengthen how schools address pupils' knowledge and awareness of democracy, and thus their resilience to extremism and behaviour that involves risk. This review has largely been based on the Council of Europe's recommendations, which show how the commitment to democracy can be shaped in schools through controversial issues, included in teaching.<sup>2</sup>

What becomes controversial in teaching varies with the circumstances and the experiences that pupils have. Studies and the Swedish Schools Inspectorate's earlier reviews show several potential challenges in working with issues that can be sensitive and controversial. There is a risk that teachers will avoid controversial issues in the classroom, among other things, for fear of conflict and that they lack the tools to teach such subjects.<sup>3</sup> This might imply that different issues that come into question in teaching are given biased coverage and that pupils, therefore, do not encounter different perceptions and perspectives.<sup>4</sup> The inadequate work carried out by schools in instilling fundamental values along with insufficient support for teachers regarding the handling of controversial issues can be exacerbating factors.<sup>5</sup>

In the report, we show areas of development in the work with issues that may be controversial in teaching, we also highlight the success factors identified in the review.

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<sup>1</sup> Chapter 1, Section 4, of the Swedish Education Act (2010:800), Ordinance (SKOLF5 2010:37) on the curriculum for compulsory school, preschool class and after-school recreation centres, Part 1 The school's fundamental values and tasks, the section about Fundamental values.

<sup>2</sup> Dealing with controversial issues, a tool for school management and senior leaders, Council of Europe (2017), Teaching controversial issues, Council of Europe (2016)

<sup>3</sup> Flensner K, K (2019), p. 83, 95. Swedish Schools Inspectorate (2018). Katzin (2021).

<sup>4</sup> See for example Ljunggren, Unemar Öst & Englund (2015). Sandahl (2011). p. 161. Kramming (2017). Arneback & Jämte (2020), Arneback & Jämte (2017).

<sup>5</sup> Council of Europe (2017). p. 11. The Swedish Schools Inspectorate (2012:a).

# What the Swedish Schools Inspectorate has reviewed

The Swedish Schools Inspectorate has reviewed how 30 schools work with subject-relevant issues that concern the school's fundamental values in the subjects social studies and biology, in grades 8 and 9. We have focused on issues that are or may become controversial in teaching. Teachers can never compromise on the school's fundamental values or the content of the curriculum. They must convey the content of the school's fundamental values to all pupils. In this work, several issues can be perceived as controversial. The review includes how these issues are handled in the classroom and how the schools conduct the overall work with fundamental values, what support the teachers have access to and how the teachers collaborate.

To find out what issues have been relevant at the schools, we have asked what has been difficult to talk about, sensitive or controversial in social studies and biology. All schools have responded with different examples. Recurring areas include LGBTQI issues, gender equality and feminism, politics and racism.

## The most important observations

The teachers in the review state that they convey the school's fundamental values and quash offensive comments or other events that contradict the school's fundamental values. Most of the teachers interviewed also state that they are keen to ensure that meetings with pupils are characterized by trust and confidence. However, in many cases, the review shows a lack of awareness of how issues that may be controversial are included and dealt with in the schools, and how pupils' understanding and awareness of democracy can be developed. Based on the Swedish Schools Inspectorate's quality criteria, 21 of the 30 schools evaluated require improvement in the area that was reviewed.

### **Many pupils rarely get to participate in teacher-led discussions about issues that may be controversial**

Although it is common for subject-relevant issues to be highly charged for pupils, in the majority of the schools reviewed, the pupils rarely get to discuss such issues under the guidance of teachers. Conversations and discussions usually take place when the entire class are together where few pupils speak, or in pairs or small groups without teacher support. Pupils state that their conversational tasks often solely concern facts that have to be reported, and that teachers sometimes opt out of controversial issues to avoid disagreements between pupils. The teaching then provides few possibilities for teachers to relate to what the pupils see as important in discussions where teachers guide, evaluate experiences and enhance pupils' knowledge with the help of pertinent data. As a consequence, pupils rarely have the opportunity to practice participating in discussions where they, with the help of the teacher's supervision, get to discuss and test out various perspectives and approaches to important issues.

### **The development of norms influences why some pupils choose not to engage in conversation**

It is very common for pupils in the schools reviewed to describe that they shy away from saying what they think in front of their classmates. The development of norms, consensus culture and perceived insecurity in teaching is evident in all of the various schools that were reviewed. At the same time, it is generally unusual for such problems to be addressed in teachers' choice of exercises and teaching strategies. The perceived insecurity leads to the pupils having limited opportunities to explore together which values colour different points of view and to reach a decision themselves.

### **Very worrying that gender differences inhibit conversations between pupils**

In the vast majority of the schools reviewed, the review shows gender-related challenges in conversations about controversial issues, which are not addressed by teachers. This applies to both gender differences when they are given time to talk and how girls and boys approach the issues at the group level. Both pupils and teachers describe that the boys' conversational style is characterized by flippancy while the girls take the conversations more seriously. Girls are provoked by the boys' actions in discussions and conversations, while boys are generally relatively unconcerned. The interviews conducted by the Swedish Schools Inspectorate do not provide any examples of work in the teaching of different subjects with the intention of breaking down gender differences. Gender divisions, therefore, are often established and deepened when issues become controversial, and the situation in the classroom becomes less trusting. The Swedish Schools Inspectorate considers it serious that the methods employed in gender equality work have not developed further.

### **Work on controversial issues is rarely included in the schools' day-to-day work on fundamental values**

In two-thirds of the schools that were reviewed, controversial issues are not dealt with within the school's work with fundamental values so that they can be included in the teaching. Instead, the work on fundamental values often focuses primarily on overall security issues and the fight against abusive behaviour, in addition to occasional theme days. A common picture of what is or may become controversial among the pupils at the school is often lacking as well as how the issues should be given priority in the day-to-day work. For many teachers, it is unclear what expectations there are of them when working on issues that can be controversial. Therefore, it can also be difficult for teachers to determine which issues may be relevant to work with during their lessons.

In some schools, controversial issues are to a greater extent included both in the school's overall work on values and in the teaching. This applies primarily to schools that have clearly prioritized the work on fundamental values, and schools with particularly challenging socio-economic conditions. Here, teachers are more prepared to deal with issues that may become controversial, and talk about these issues during teaching. In these schools, many teachers describe that pupils' knowledge of the subject matter deepens as their awareness and understanding of democratic issues develop.

### **Support and competence development in the work on values is rarely a priority**

The review shows that it is often up to teachers to take the initiative to provide support and competence development. Support in the work with controversial issues may not be provided if the headmaster of the school has not highlighted and prioritized the work on fundamental values. Teachers at the schools that were reviewed are usually supported by school management/the school health service whenever a situation arises, with efforts aimed at individuals who are affected. Support is rarely provided during the teaching. A majority of teachers state that they have support from each other on teaching-related issues, but few teachers have talked to their colleagues about how they can work with issues that may be controversial in teaching. Overall, it is common that the school's collective resources rarely contribute with support for teaching aimed at strengthening pupils' awareness and understanding of democracy.

### **In high-quality schools, activities are characterized by common approaches, cooperation and democratic working methods**

In one-third of the schools, the Swedish Schools Inspectorate found that the handling of controversial issues in teaching is of high quality. With a few exceptions, these schools also have support structures that are of high quality. A characteristic of high-quality schools is that teachers share the same views and develop the teaching together. When working with controversial issues, teachers often have the support of the school health service. Teaching is characterized by a variety and breadth of strategies to achieve pupil activity, participation and trusting classrooms.