

A guide for teachers

Dealing with parents when teaching sensitive and controversial issues

A practical self-reflection tool for teachers for
handling conflicting parents when teaching
controversial issues in schools

MIKHAIL MOGUTOV
BJORN WANSINK

Contents

Introduction	3
Whole-school approach	6
Teacher-centered approach	12
Conflict resolution strategies	16
Endnotes	24
Accountability report	25
References and resources	28

Introduction



“That’s insane and wrong! I’m going to tell my parents” - is the phrase that school teachers are concerned to hear from their students when teaching sensitive and controversial topics in the classroom (Tribukait, 2021, p. 558). It is quite common for some teachers to report their worries about parents or grandparents coming to the school and complaining that students just learned another way of thinking about particular issues (Christophe & Tribukait, 2019; Chikoko et al., 2011). Indeed, raising controversial issues in the classroom might go into the hearts of students and their parents and challenge their sense of “truth” and “reality”. And as a result of that, teachers may perceive opposition from local communities and parents about the way they teach sensitive and controversial matters. Yet only a few school teachers receive training and support in addressing controversial issues in the classroom in general. Moreover, existing educational programs and materials for teaching controversy seldom mention how to handle opposing parents and it is rarely, if ever, addressed in teacher professional development.

To fill in this gap, this guide was prepared to help teachers to prevent or reduce real or perceived tension between the school/teacher and parents in a respectful, sensitive, systematic, and solution-focused way when teaching controversial issues in the classroom. This guide is also a self-reflection tool for school teachers to reflect on the way they approach communication with parents. Here, in the guide, we provide three main systematic approaches that might help teachers to handle conflicting parents on different levels.

Controversial issues

By “controversial issues” in this guide we define issues that “arouse strong feelings and divide opinion in communities and society” (Council of Europe, 2015, p.8). We would like to highlight that controversial topics are usually very situational and the intensity with which controversy is activated depends on various conditions. Namely, what is treated as controversial at one point may seem relatively innocuous at another, and what is controversial in one context may not be elsewhere. In education, controversial issues can arise in relation to any aspect of school life, mainly in the content of the curriculum, but also in school culture (e.g., rules, regulations, personnel behaviour) and school community (e.g., the way that immigrant students are treated in the school). Therefore, conflict situations with pupils' parents may arise from different grounds of controversy. With regard to curriculum, teachers

worldwide can experience difficulties with teaching a variety of topics. Some examples include: human rights, freedom of speech, history of war or conflicts, citizenship, sexual diversity, migration, racism, discrimination, climate change, genocide, Islam, abortion, terrorism, the Holocaust, evolution, and, recently, COVID-19 and vaccination.

Context is inevitable

Due to the variety of situations and differences in the (cultural) teaching contexts, the proposed steps in this guide might not always work the same way or can even be counterproductive in specific situations.

Before we delve into the approaches, we would like to draw attention to an important point when considering applying the proposed strategies. The extensive variety of situations and differences in the (cultural) teaching contexts, makes it difficult to suggest generalised strategies, therefore proposed steps in this guide might not always work the same way. For instance, teaching about the events of the Second World War in some countries, although is a controversial topic, still may not evoke the same emotions and touch on the identity of students and parents as the recent events of violence during the break-up of Yugoslavia in the Balkans. In this guide, we do not focus on specific controversial topics, but we recognise that parents' reactions to the teaching of particular topics may differ. This may depend on the recency of the historical events taught, the topics' impact on the students' families and/or how it is related to the student's family identity.

The pedagogical balance: school & home

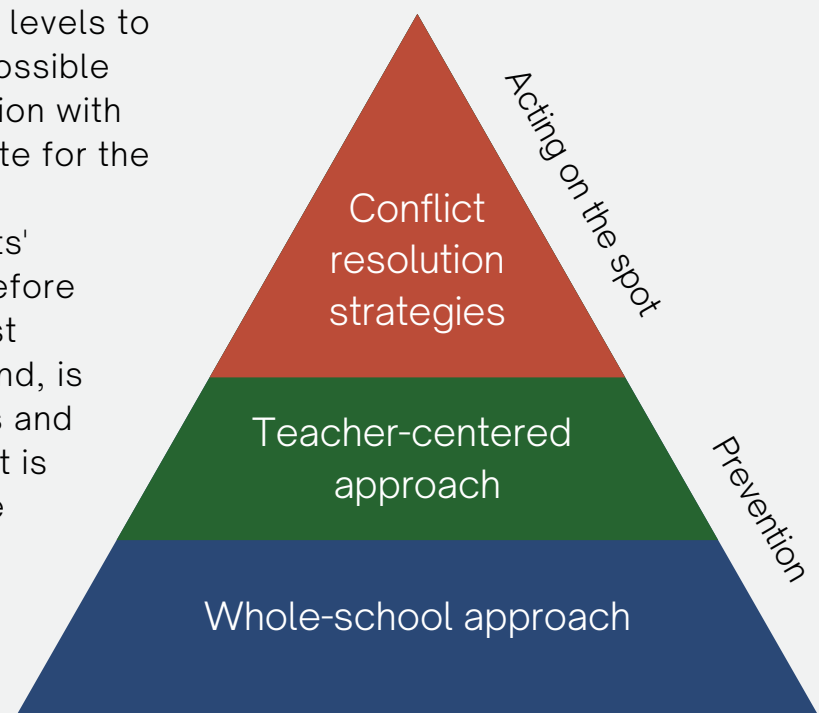
Teaching controversial issues, such as recent history in post-conflict countries, is a complex challenge for teachers that leads to a difficult pedagogical dilemma. On one hand, teachers need to touch upon controversial issues in the classroom and teach students how to approach the discussion of these sensitive matters. On the other hand, teaching such topics can create tension in the student's family, because family members might have a different viewpoint on the subject. Students often are loyal to their families. That is why we believe it is important not to ruin the connection and authority of the parent in the eyes of the child. Faced with this dilemma, some teachers choose an “easy way out” and try not to touch upon the topics that might arouse deep feelings and resentment in students and their parents. This guide seeks to help teachers establish a positive connection with parents and proactively address potential issues in advance.

Preventing the “Ticking Time-bomb”

We draw attention to preventive and proactive approaches that can help the teacher relieve possible tension with parents. First, preventive strategies will help ensure that an invisible upcoming tension does not turn into a “ticking time-bomb” that someday might intensively explode in unexpected collisions with parents. This may possibly happen when parents accumulate negative experiences about the school and teacher and might lead to a deep mistrust that might push the parent to voice their dissatisfaction in a more intense way. Second, teachers’ fear of confrontation with parents is not always based on real stories and experiences of teachers, but more often on the perceived likelihood that this could happen one day. Therefore, a preventive approach can decrease the perceived fear and help the teacher prepare and build confidence to face a possible confrontation with parents.

A model of dealing with conflicting parents through involvement

We have divided our guide into three different approaches: whole-school approach, teacher-centred approach, and face-to-face conflict resolution strategies. These approaches are intended to suggest a comprehensive response to possible difficulties that might occur in communication with parents when teaching controversial issues in the classroom. The teacher is part of the school system and cannot face challenging communication with parents alone, so strategies to address this need to work not only at the teacher level but also at the school level. The first two strategies described below focus on what teachers can do at school and personal levels to prevent and prepare for possible challenges in communication with parents. There we advocate for the importance of preventive communication and parents' systematic involvement before conflict escalates. The last approach, on the other hand, is aimed at solving problems and issues on the spot, when it is necessary to deal with the parents in person.



Whole-school approach

Since the teacher is part of the school, the teacher's perceived sense of safety depends on how the teacher feels and thinks about the school. For example, if the school does not agree on how to address controversial topics and teachers lack understanding of how the school can protect them in a situation of conflict with parents, this clearly reduces the teacher's confidence and sense of security in raising sensitive topics in the classroom. Teachers also partially influence the school's decision-making processes and can promote different ideas that help them feel secure and prevent tense communication with parents more effectively. Although the strategies listed in the whole-school approach are often outside the teachers' area of responsibility, they still allow teachers to influence the decision-making processes in the school and encourage school administrators to create and/or support the right conditions for teachers to feel more secure in challenging situations. Here we will detail three strategies that can be enacted at the school level.

1 Create a support structure within the school

- Foster supportive school culture and collaboration. Dealing with parents alone can be a hard pill to swallow. Teachers should not see themselves as isolated actors when it comes to tackling difficulties in communication with parents. It is essential to direct team effort to handle those challenges. Therefore, we suggest that conflicting situations be addressed in more detail and reflected upon in the regular meetings of teachers' communities within the school. In those communities, teachers together could think up and work through the best intervention to handle difficulties with students' parents but also be more supported and empowered to act proactively.

A teacher's perception of lack of support when teaching controversial topics (from our interviews)

"When I teach sensitive topics on the recent break-up of Yugoslavia and talk to parents who come to complain, I feel that I need to sort out what to do with aggressive parents myself. Some of the parents who come to me are former military personnel who were involved in that war and sometimes this conversation might turn out to be dangerous. We as teachers are alone in this situation. The administration is supportive, but only in words. Teachers need protection from the school, the Ministry of Education and society in order to teach such difficult topics with more confidence."

- Make sure that teachers are aware of their rights and have structural means to protect themselves. In addition, have an agreed protocol of teacher actions in case of escalated and aggressive conflicts with parents. It will empower teachers to confidently communicate with parents about sensitive issues and handle challenging situations efficiently. Encourage teachers to be consistent with the school values and act according to school rules and safety principles.
- Develop and provide a mediation opportunity in the school to handle conflict in teacher-parent communication. Both the teacher and the parent can be affected by deep emotions, therefore the qualitative involvement of the other side in mediation can reduce the degree of tension and resolve the situation in a more productive way.
- Consult teachers about their experience of teaching controversial issues:
 - How confident do teachers feel about teaching controversial issues?
 - What concerns do they have?
 - What kinds of training or support do they think they would need?

2 Parental engagement

The involvement of parents might help to avoid any misunderstandings and clear up any concerns they might have. However, if parents are not invited to influence some decision-making processes in school life, they may indirectly confront the school which may lead to an escalation of the tension between the school and parents. We suggest a few steps to consider for quality parental involvement.

- Consider how you create a positive parental attitude toward school and teachers. Think through steps to establish trust and relationships at the school level with students' parents. Above all, make them feel welcome in the school and try to convey these key messages in your communications and in your points of contact with parents. This might help turn down parental dissatisfaction about teaching sensitive topics. A “warmed-up” parent can be proactively involved in school life and join the effort in tackling difficulties that arise. Positive and ongoing communication between parents and school personnel (including teachers) is vital in this case.
- Increase parental participation through regular communication. For example, this may entail regular informative meetings where teachers and school administration can invite parents to talk through important issues including the curriculum of history lessons. Or since it might be easier to

address some issues in personal conversations, and organise regular one-on-one meetings or interviews with parents to discuss their opinions, concerns, and suggestions about history lessons. Whenever possible, invite the parent to solve problems together based on shared values and goals.

- Define the role of the parent and what power they have to influence decision-making in school life. Be aware that the level of parental involvement in actual decision-making differs from country to country, therefore consider the specificity of your traditions and routines when assigning the role to the parent. At the same time, it is not only necessary to plan what parents can influence, but it is also important to factor in where they have no opportunity to intervene. Parents' power in decision-making should always be carefully regulated. We propose that the teacher remains an expert in their subject and has the autonomy and right to make decisions about the content and the approach to teaching certain topics without involving the parent in this particular process.

3 Communicate school values, goals, and teaching principles

Keeping parents informed allows them to obtain information about the school, its educational goals, and its teaching principles and become more involved in mutual communication with the school. Informing parents in advance about the way you see history education and teaching sensitive topics can prevent parental resistance.

- Define and communicate inside and outside the school the values and teaching principles that your school adheres to. This shared understanding of vision might help teachers communicate with parents. In that case, teachers would feel backed up and further rely on these collectively agreed values and principles in their teaching practice.
- Communicate inside and outside the school the rules and agreements on how your school addresses the concerns and fears of both teachers/school personnel and parents. Ideally, before submitting the rules, those should be discussed and agreed upon with parents (e.g., parents' council).
- Ensure parents know how to contact key personnel and know whom to turn to in case of emerging concerns about teaching sensitive topics.

Some extra options (please note these pieces of advice are very context-specific):

- *Create an explanatory guide.* In the guide, you may introduce the curriculum, and the goals and reasons why you address controversial issues as a part of the history curriculum (see *Example 1*), and describe what the school does to teach high-quality history and citizenship education. Make parents aware of your approach to discussing sensitive issues. This might consist of a statement outlining the basic principles (see *Example 2*) and guidelines (see *Example 3*) of your approach and some examples of the main controversial issues being taught.
- *Share resources.* Inform parents during the school year about the themes of lessons in newsletters and via the school website. Share through the school website materials, resources, and links that teachers use when teaching history, so that parents can check and use those at home too.
- *Promote the opinions of parents and students.* You can collect the opinions of parents and students about what they think of the way you teach history lessons and address controversial topics in the school (see *Example 4*). You might post those testimonials on the website or social media of the school to convince more sceptical parents.

Example 1. The rationale of teaching controversial topics in the school

“Dear Parents, we would like to take this opportunity to talk to you about how we teach History in our school. We understand that some parents may have concerns about how we discuss the sensitive past with their children. However, we believe that it is important to provide a well-rounded education that includes a diverse range of perspectives and ideas through teaching controversies in history. Below we outline the main reasons why we decide to teach about controversial topics in history.

First, teaching controversial topics helps students understand the complexities of the world. History is not just a collection of facts and dates, but a complex web of events and ideas that shape the world we live in today. By studying controversial topics, students gain a deeper understanding of the processes that have shaped our society and the world around us.

Second, by teaching controversial topics, we are promoting empathy and understanding. By learning about the experiences and perspectives of people from different backgrounds and cultures, students gain a deeper understanding of the world and the people in it. Also, by learning about different perspectives, cultures, and histories, students come to appreciate and respect the diversity of the world. This promotes empathy and helps students become more compassionate and respectful of others.

Third, teaching controversial historical topics helps students develop critical thinking skills. By learning about different perspectives and competing interpretations of

historical events, students learn to evaluate and analyze information, rather than simply accepting it at the surface level.

Finally, teaching controversial topics is important to understand how history and society are interconnected, and how past events are still affecting the present and shaping the future. By understanding the historical context, students can have a better understanding of current issues and events.

We understand that these topics can be difficult to discuss, but I assure you that we will be approaching them with the utmost sensitivity and respect. Our goal is to provide an inclusive and respectful learning environment for all students. If you have any concerns or questions, please do not hesitate to reach out to us. Thank you for your understanding and support!"

One more template for the letter to parents: When to inform principals and parents

Example 2. The teaching principles

Here are some adapted principles you can refer to when explaining your teaching approaches to parents.

- *Principle 1.* In our school, we do not attempt to transmit a single truth about the past. However, we aim to approach the historical truth as near as possible based on solid facts and qualified evidence and by striving towards objectivity. We create an understanding that historical narratives are multi-layered, interpretative, and stimulate the willingness to question these narratives and think critically.
- *Principle 2.* In our school, we deconstruct historical myths and stereotypes by putting the traditional ‘mirror of pride and pain’ into perspective. This traditional narrative is based upon featuring national pride on the one hand, and the suffering of the nation on the other hand. It neglects the harm done to others and the histories of areas which did not connect to the nation’s narratives. By putting this into perspective, we support students to use their own logic and question cultural idioms.
- *Principle 3.* In our school, we raise awareness that the past is perceived differently according to a person’s social, generational, and sexual background as well as belonging to ethnic, linguistic, and religious communities, and diverging world-views in society. We encourage an acceptance that people and events must be appraised in the context of their values and time.
- *Principle 4.* In our school, we address sensitive and controversial topics in history in a responsible way to undermine the impact of one-sided, biased, and politicised views of the past and to bring into being its complex and multidimensional nature. This implies avoiding emotive, subjective, and hostile language and promoting the use of impartial concepts, while being sure to also avoid white-washing and sanitising problematic historical narratives which can paint a rosy picture of the past.

Principles are adapted from the “Manifesto on High-Quality History, Heritage and Citizenship Education: 15 principles for the recognition of the distinctive contribution of history to the development of young people.” More principles in different languages can be found here: <https://euroclio.eu/manifesto/>

Example 3. Teaching guidelines

Here is an example of teaching guidelines to assure parents that teachers will teach controversial issues in a balanced way.

Teachers in our school will:

- facilitate discussion and debate, rather than being the leading authority on a topic.

Teachers in our school will not:

- present their own views as factual evidence to the pupils;
- present their own views about the views of others;
- present information as opinions and not as indisputable facts.

Reference: Huddleston & Kerr (2017).

Example 4. Parent and student opinions about teaching controversial topics

(A) *Parent*: “Teachers giving students the chance to air out controversial issues is so important because that’s what the world is like. Students need to be able to do that before they go out into the world. They need to be able to handle people having views that they don’t agree with and find ways to work it out and have a civil debate. It’s really important that teachers teach them how to do that.”

(B) *Student*: “You learn so much by talking to people as opposed to reading a textbook or a one-sided article. You actually get in-depth and understand where people are coming from. You can see how people relate [issues to] their values, which is super important.”

(C) *Parent*: “We live in an increasingly volatile, complex world filled with animosity. By having a secure, safe forum that gives kids an opportunity to talk respectfully about complex topics, it opens kids’ minds to the idea of listening in. And that’s important. When we don’t listen to the other side, we become ignorant of what could be and unable to compromise.”

Reference: [Teaching About Controversial Issues: A Resource Guide](#)

Questions for self-reflection

Here are some reflection questions to help school personnel think through the different aspects at the school level.

- How safe does a teacher feel in school?
- What resources do teachers have in and out of school to be prepared for tense communication with parents?
- How do you support teachers in communication with parents?
- How do you make parents feel included?
- How do you inform parents about school values, goals, and rules?
- How do you see the role of the parents in the school and your lessons?
- What should parents know about the curriculum, vision, and principles?

Possible dilemmas

Here we present the possible dilemmas that a teacher may experience at the school level and invite you to reflect on how those can be solved.

- I have to deal with it alone. I am afraid that a holistic approach would not work because school administrators and colleagues are not interested or concerned about this.
- School administration pressure. Particularly when school administration views the inclusion of several perspectives and narratives in history lessons as a threat to the status quo and uses their influence to restrain the teachers' possibility to teach history critically and according to multiperspectivity principle.
- The school personnel disagree internally. It may happen that attitudes about controversial topics are very diverse or even extreme within the school personnel and therefore it can be a painful experience for teachers to raise the conversation about how best to teach such topics.
- Informing parents upfront might create potential tension from the beginning. Specifically, parents might react negatively to the information provided by the school which actually aims to prevent the escalation of the tension.
- Lack of time and overloaded work schedule. Teachers would not have enough time and resources to prioritise the enactment of these approaches.

Teacher-centred approach

Here we will break down a few possible ways in which the teacher can preventively engage parents, as well as prepare for possible conflicts with parents. Implementing these tips will help the teacher feel more prepared and confident.

- **Build relationships during peacetime.** It is always better to meet parents for the first time on a positive footing rather than face them only when a problem occurs. It will reduce the likelihood of heated conflicts with parents because if a parent knows you, things can resolve in a peaceful way. As a history teacher, you might hold a parent meeting to introduce yourself and establish a positive foundation, or you could just send an email introducing yourself.

**Please note that some teachers during the interviews preferred selective teacher self-disclosure and did not always inform the parents, as they thought that informing them would work counter-productively.*

- **Become aware of the cultural and social identity of parents.** Culture shapes people's interpretation of behaviour and their style of interaction with others. This applies to parents as well. Therefore, knowing the specificities of parents' cultural backgrounds may improve subsequent communication. Importantly, ask yourself questions such as:

- What are the cultural and social demographics of your classrooms?
- What is your cultural identity and what is the cultural identity of the parents?
- How do you think parents see you and interpret what you say?

- **Help parents see the big picture and make sure you see it too.** Let parents know about the history education curriculum and reasons why you teach controversial topics on a regular basis through the school website, social media, emails, and personal conversations. Introduce the main principles and guidelines you adhere to in your teaching approach. You may even create a frequently asked questions document which parents can reference in case of questions.
- **Inform parents in advance.** If you know that you plan to address an issue with your class, why not alert parents? Sometimes, being proactive in this way

removes concerns. Inform parents regularly - receiving information repeatedly is better than dealing with parents' assumptions resulting from details not being passed on.

- **Be transparent about your approaches, methods, materials, and sources.** Decide what and how you would share with parents about the way you teach sensitive history in your classroom. Share the sources and websites that parents could review at home to familiarise themselves with the main concepts and principles of teaching controversial topics.
- **Respond quickly to any concerns from parents.** Do not leave issues aside just because they feel too challenging and uncomfortable. It is likely will only make them grow. If you cannot address a need immediately, write a quick message to let them know that you have received their message and will respond to their concerns within certain time constraints.
- **Involve parents as learning resources.** Invite parents to participate in the learning process where they can share their views and perspectives. For example, as part of a homework assignment, students may interview family members on their attitudes and experiences concerning a particularly controversial issue. Or you can invite parents who have professional expertise in a specific curriculum area as speakers on a controversial issue.
- **Arrange free demonstration lessons for parents.** There you may introduce controversial topics and demonstrate the methods you use in a regular class to the parents. First, it will help parents better understand what the lessons look like. Second, it will give the parents a chance to become more knowledgeable themselves, so they can discuss it with their children in a quality way.
- **Trust yourself as an expert.** In order to keep yourself in tune and safe from parental comments and doubts about your competence, you need to remind yourself of your expertise regularly. Review why you teach controversial topics and how you teach them, as well as focus on your strengths as a teacher. It will help to stand tall and firm in conversations with parents.
- **Seek help!** Check with your colleagues and administration in advance to make clear who could help you in a possible heated conversation with a parent.
- **What do you want to achieve?** Prior to meeting parents, outline the main

directions you want to take in your communication with them. Weigh what kind of result you want to achieve and what to avoid. While with some parents it is more comfortable to have a calm dialogue and discussion, other parents might get straight into an emotional debate and argument, trying to defend their point of view. Therefore, think about what strategies you would use in different cases. Think in which situation it is important and possible for you to include the parent in deep communication, and at which point the goal would be to remove a parent from the school for your own safety.

What parents might ask about teaching controversial topics:

- What are you teaching my child?
- What topics will be covered?
- From which norms and values is the lesson taught?
- What right and competence do you have to teach my children?
- What perspectives are presented in the history lessons?
- How will my family's position and our culture be taken into account?
- How do you ensure a safe climate in the classroom?
- What materials and websites are used during the lessons?
- Who has designed those materials?
- What is the teacher's personal position in the themes of the lessons?

Self-reflection checklist for the teacher

To what extent I... (highly evident = 5, not evident = 1)

...know where to seek help and support.	1	2	3	4	5
...know what materials to rely on when working with parents.	1	2	3	4	5
...build relationships with parents.	1	2	3	4	5
...am aware of the parents' cultural backgrounds and know how to communicate with them in terms of their culture.	1	2	3	4	5
...communicate values and teaching principles that I adhere to.	1	2	3	4	5
...inform parents regularly.	1	2	3	4	5
...prepare and post essential information about teaching controversial topics on the school's website.	1	2	3	4	5
...am transparent about my approaches, methods, materials, and sources.	1	2	3	4	5
...keep a priority to respond quickly to parents' concerns.	1	2	3	4	5
...engage parents as learning resources.	1	2	3	4	5

Conflict resolution strategies

This part of the guide focuses on how to most effectively communicate with a parent who comes to school and wants to talk to the teacher in person. The aim of the strategies described below is to preserve the relationship with the parent but also to secure the teacher from possible pressure. We do not aim to change or radically influence the parent's point of view by suggesting these strategies. The strategies suggested are more suited to dialogue and discussion with parents and may not be suitable for dealing with more heated forms of communication with parents. For the latter case, we offer a case study of how one of the teachers dealt with a parent in a situation where dialogue is unlikely. In the section below, we offer some general advice and step-by-step communication tactics with examples of phrases and questions that can be used to moderate and de-escalate the conflict. We also suggest an example of how to respond to emails from parents who are concerned about teaching controversial topics.

Below we list other goals for communicating with parents that the teacher may choose based on the situation. It is important to understand, however, that each of these strategies has risks. Some are damaging to the relationship with the pupils' parents, while others may be less safe for the teacher.

Possible conversation goals

- Hear the parent out and help them deal with the situation together.
- Invite the parent to be involved in the creation of the lesson plan.
- Ignore a parent.
- Ask the parent to stay out of it and ask them to leave.
- Change the parent's mind about their point of view.

General tips for conversation

- **Do not take it personally.** Difficult parents always mean well – and do not always start out ‘conflicting.’ You never know what they are going through personally and more commonly. Remember that there are many reasons behind a parent’s anger that often has nothing to do with you. Knowing that will help you to step back and cool down your emotions.

- **Find a common ground with parents.** Concentrate on the things you both value and can agree on. Try to identify where the parents act in the best interest of the child. Focus not on what divides you but on what unites you! Try to frame it in a way that requests help from the parent, instead of making it sound as if you are blaming the parent.
- **Assess feelings beforehand and let them vent if necessary.** If the parent's emotions are high, let them cool down by either rescheduling the meeting or finding an excuse to let the parent let the steam out. For example, you can say something like "I am finishing my tasks, let's talk in 20 minutes". You may also offer the parent something to drink and leave them alone for a few minutes. It often helps calm parents down. Sometimes, ignoring or dismissing the aggression and continuing with your own agenda takes the wind out of an aggressor's sails. If necessary, it is possible to say directly "Let's take a break and get back to this issue when we've cooled down a bit".
- **Use "I" statements and non-violent communication.** This approach focuses on the feelings or beliefs of the speaker rather than thoughts and characteristics attributed to the listener. This way of communication is non-confrontational. Therefore, it will help you speak honestly about your feelings without placing blame on the parent. Focus on facts and observations instead of judgements. Share your feelings and if necessary express how the behaviour of the parent affects you or the students. Below are some examples:

- *"I have noticed/observed that... ."*
- *"When you said/did that, I felt (name the feeling)... ."*
- *"It is important for me because... ."*
- *"May I ask if you could... ."*
- *"May I suggest/request/ask... ."*

- **Use positive body language.** Be low and calm in your voice and settled in your movements. Keep eye contact natural and gestures open. Take long and deep breaths and remember to nod while talking to the parent. Do not cross your arms or point fingers at parents either.
- **Set boundaries.** Think in advance about what is unacceptable behaviour for you and how you can communicate this to the parent. If relevant, you may rely on the rules of the school. For example, if an angry parent is shouting, you can tell them that you will not continue to listen unless they lower their voice. If they do not accept the boundaries, end the conversation and say that you will reschedule a time to talk later.

You may use some examples below:

- *“Excuse me, I don’t have time for this conversation now.”*
- *“Unfortunately, I cannot talk to you right now.”*
- *“Let’s come back to this in a while after we have both had time to think.”*
- *“I can’t continue the conversation in that tone, and we can come back to this conversation when we have calmed down.”*

- **Show empathy and be helpful.** Treat parents as the ones who know their concerns better than you do. Also, keep in mind that parents perceive themselves as critical thinkers, therefore do not underestimate their experience and opinion but provide additional sources and information. You may use some examples:

- *“Could you tell me what bothers you and why?”*
- *“I understand how you are feeling.”*
- *“I would be happy to help you if I can.”*
- *“I see that you care about [X] and that it is important to you.”*
- *“Thank you for sharing your concern!”*

- **Invite support or a mediator.** Depending on how angry the parent is, it may be beneficial to have a third person present who can mediate the conversation or be a backup for you. In some cases, the conflict between a teacher and a parent might escalate to the point where it cannot be resolved without another party’s mediation. Inviting the school principal or a school administrator to the conversation will sometimes provide relief for you. You can inform parents about it in a way such as, “just to keep everyone in check, another teacher is going to join us as well.”
- **Determine the parent’s concern.** Make it clear whether the concern is about the curricular content in general or the instructions and teaching. Some parents are not concerned about the topic being brought up in the classroom, but they would like teachers to do it in a quality way and to have a variety of methods which fit right for different settings and contexts.

Defensive versus open communication

Teachers as well as parents might feel threatened when deeply held beliefs and feelings are triggered. That is why, in handling conflicts with parents,

teachers might keep responding in a defensive way. Since the stakes are high when emotions are high, we propose to use a different response - open communication. Open communication keeps the conflict from escalating. It redirects the conversation from the problem and teacher, to problem-solving instead. Below we present some examples of how to use open communication in conversation with parents.

Open communication examples (use them):	Defensive communication examples (avoid using them):
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>“Thank you for being honest with me.”</i> • <i>“I agree with you on... .”</i> • <i>“I heard your point about”</i> • <i>“I appreciate your contribution/hard work/involvement into... .”</i> • <i>“It would help me if you could give me examples of... .”</i> • <i>“Let’s work on this issue together.”</i> • <i>“Here is what we can do... .”</i> • <i>“The best option I think is... .”</i> • <i>“What do you suggest about this?”</i> • <i>“Let’s see how we can prevent this from happening in the future.”</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>“I’d like to finish.”</i> • <i>“What’s your intention in saying that?”</i> • <i>“Excuse me, I was speaking.”</i> • <i>“Don’t speak to me in that tone!”</i> • <i>“It is our policy/rules to... .”</i> • <i>“It is not true what you are saying.”</i> • <i>“That’s extremely inappropriate. I’m going to give you some time to rethink your behaviour.”</i> • <i>“I teach according to the national curriculum and can do nothing about it.”</i>

Steps for conversation

Here we have described step-by-step instructions on how teachers can organize a conversation with parents, as well as provide opening phrases with which you can start a particular step.

Step 1. Calm yourself down. Before you deal with aggression or anger remember to breathe deeply and remain calm. It will help to establish self-control.

Step 2. Take your time. Stand back, take a moment before approaching the parent and assess the situation.

Step 3. Approach the parent. Greet the parent calmly referring to the parent by name. Try not to make assumptions, just ask what a parent is worried about. Invite them to come into the classroom and sit down. Pay attention to the parent's personal space, do not move in too close and do not block the exit ways.

- *"Good afternoon, [parent's name]"*
- *"Did you want to talk to me?"*

Step 4. Set limits. At the beginning of the conversation inform the parent about your availability and where the conversation should happen. It's best to stick to 15-20 minutes for the conversation.

- *"I realize that this topic is important enough for you, therefore the discussion may take some time, however, I have only 20 minutes to talk, after which I will need to continue with other work duties..."*
- *"Shall we continue the conversation in my office/class away from students?"*

Step 5. Listen, ask, and then listen some more. Most parents just want to feel heard and validated. If they feel heard, they are more likely to calm down and listen to you as well. Let them know that you really want to find a solution. A parent does not always directly address the issues that actually reflect their fears right away, so try to understand what the parent is afraid of.

- *"Could you tell me what bothers you and why?"*
- *"Can you please explain your reasoning on this?"*
- *"It would help me if you could give me examples of..."*
- *"Thank you for being honest with me."*
- *"Thank you for making me aware of the situation and your concern."*

Step 6. Address the concern, not the parent. Make it clear that you have heard the parent and understand how important this issue is for them. Then provide them with more information to allay their fears and help them see the need for the way you teach. Describe your limitations as a teacher, too. Frame your answer in terms of common interests.

- *“I agree with you on... .”*
- *“I don’t see the situation like that... I think we both agree that...”*
- *“I recognize this is an unsatisfying situation for you, and I would suggest...”*
- *“Sometimes addressing sensitive topics might not meet the need of all students and families. What kind of activities/approaches would you suggest your child needs?”*
- *“Perhaps I could share some resources on where to find more information to help us find plausible solutions.”*

Step 7. Craft an agreement. Discussion about the issue may be necessary for understanding, however, do not spend hours on that. Try to reach the point where you discuss what both the teacher and the parent can do to develop a resolution for the parent’s concern and plan what to do next. Do not forget to involve the parent in the implementation of the resolution.

- *“Let’s agree on... .”*
- *“Let’s work on this issue together.”*
- *“Do you have any suggestions about it for now?”*
- *“As an immediate solution, I’d like to suggest... .”*
- *“Here is what we can do... .”*
- *“The best option I think is... .”*

Step 8. Ask for follow-up questions. Parents are not always ready to voice all the concerns they come up with at a time. So, find out if there are any other topics that worry them and that need to be addressed together.

- *“Is there anything else you wanted to talk through?”*
- *“Is there anything else you want me to know?”*

What to avoid?

- Do not stay around if the parent doesn’t calm down.
- Do not avoid uncomfortable conversations.
- Do not stand when parents are seated.
- Do not use your desk as a buffer between you and the parent.
- Do not impose your own values and beliefs over the parent ones.
- Do not interrupt or confront the parent.
- Do not talk with the parent in front of the students.

Replying to an email

Some parents do not voice their concerns through direct communication, but through e-mail. In this case, the teacher has an advantage because there is time to prepare and think through the response and set the right tone for subsequent communication. To reply to parent's e-mail, use the same general advice we gave above: use open communication, show empathy, show a willingness to help, find common ground, set boundaries, and put someone from school administration in a copy of the letter if necessary. Below we give an example of a parent's letter and a possible teacher's response to it.

Parent's letter

Dear [teacher's name],

I am writing to bring up a very important issue about how history topics are being taught in my child's classroom. I felt that the way you are teaching recent history is offensive and disrespectful to my family and my culture. I keep hearing shocking examples from my child about the inaccuracies and lack of sensitivity with which certain historical events and figures are being presented.

It is important for me that my children receive a balanced understanding of history without unnecessary and false glorification of certain events and figures and purposeful silencing of the real truth. Furthermore, I am disappointed that the opinions and values of the families of the students are not taken into account.

I hope that you take this letter in the spirit in which it is intended - as a call to action to take into account the perspective of our community because the way you teach certain topics now is completely inappropriate.

*Best regards,
[Parent's name]*

Teacher's response

Dear [parent's name],

Thank you for reaching out to me regarding your concerns about how certain history topics are presented in the classroom. I understand that it is important to you that your children receive a balanced understanding of history, and that the opinions and values of their families are taken into account.

I agree with you that it's very important that all students feel safe and respected. A safe environment in those lessons is my first priority. And I want to assure you that I take your concerns seriously.

Our primary goal in the school is to ensure that all of our students receive a thorough and sensitive education about the different events and figures in history. We are committed to teaching a comprehensive and accurate portrayal of the past. Therefore, I strive for accuracy and sensitivity in my teaching methods.

When it comes to teaching controversial topics, in the school we follow key principles that can help to make teaching more effective. You can look them up here: [link to the school's website].

Also here is an open-ended list of the basic methods I use to teach such complex topics: [link to the school's website].

I'll also attach the main sources I use when teaching the topics you mentioned: [link to the source websites].

If there are any methods, resources, sources, and perspectives that you want to share or are worried about, let me know. I would be happy to meet with you in person to discuss this further, and to hear about your perspectives and ideas for how we can better present these topics in the classroom. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any further questions or concerns.

*Best regards,
[Teacher's name]*

When dialogue is not an option

CASE STUDY

Description of the situation

This case study took place in a small secondary school in a Croatian town. In the a lesson, the history teacher began to teach the recent history of the Breakup of Yugoslavia and mentioned The Siege Of Vukovar. The teacher incorporated several perspectives into the lesson which allowed students to look at the course of the war from different angles. This approach provoked resentment in several students in the classroom, but the teacher successfully managed this and lowered the degree of the emotions. However, the next day, the furious father of one of the students, a former soldier who fought in the recent war, came to the school and ambushed the teacher with complaints. Without any greeting, he started accusing the teacher of not knowing how to teach history, of misrepresenting the facts and glossing over the "real truth" about that war. Father: "My son told me what you are teaching in history classes about the civil war. You don't know what really happened in that war. You're messing with their brains with your made-up nonsense. Everything you teach here is crap!"

Teacher's actions

During the interview, we asked the teacher to tell us how he dealt with the situation. He offered his solution for how to handle those arguments. In that particular situation, when the parent approached him, the teacher started talking from a position of authority about how and why he was teaching those sensitive topics without giving the parent a chance to object. The teacher also asked the parent what kind of job he had and pointed out that he was not an expert in history, unlike the teacher. The teacher continued to convince the parent referring to the materials he used and reasons why he needed to go through these sensitive topics. This strategy of reassuring the parent with teacher authority worked on that occasion. However, important to mention that this teacher also cautioned that it probably worked because he was a grown man talking to a man of the same nationality and had worked as a history teacher for many years and had enough authority. Therefore, we emphasise that this might be a high-risk strategy and may not work in another setting.

Endnotes

As teachers ourselves, we understand the difficulty and complexity of situations that can occur in teacher-parent interactions when teaching sensitive and controversial topics. If we choose to teach the difficult topics which are integral for high-quality education, it must be understood that this is not an entirely risk-free path. On that path, we may have to experience uncomfortable interactions and choose courage over comfort. In this case, we need to be flexible and be able to learn and relearn and be open to criticism. Therefore, cooperation among teachers and support from school leaders is very essential along the way.

We are aware that there are no simple solutions. That is why this manual should be used with care. It is always the teacher as a professional who should decide what to do and what might work. Our goal with this manual was to support teachers and to give possible solutions. Even if one piece of advice is of interest, we are happy with this achievement.

Accountability Report

Methodology

When creating this guide, we were guided by the vision of the systematic and preventive approach, and that partnership with parents and their active involvement is essential. We were inspired by the literature about family and community practices of the prevention of radicalism and extremism, peace-building education, multiperspectivity, partnership with parents and conflict prevention and resolution. We used some existing resources that include topics of parental involvement (e.g., Kerr & Huddleston, 2017; Seksuele vorming, 2022; Woolley, 2010). To our knowledge, there is still no systematic approach aiming to resolve disagreements with parents when teaching controversial and sensitive topics. There are not many practical guides and materials for teachers that are sensitive to the context. Therefore, the strategies we describe have been selected from the context of developed, democratic (North) Western countries, which is limited to its contextual knowledge. We encourage other authors to also write manuals situated in different cultural contexts.

Validation interviews

In order to ensure the credibility of the teacher's guide, we conducted a series of validation interviews with educational experts. The feedback from the experts helped to adjust and refine the manual based on the experts' experiences and their advice on the potential use of the guide. Moreover, those interviews served not only as an opportunity to get feedback on the guide but also to identify the challenges, constraints, and opportunities faced by teachers when communicating with parents.

Our final sample consisted of seven teachers and experts in civics and history education from Estonia, Croatia, Serbia, and the Netherlands. Five of them are history teachers and three of them are codirectors of the national associations of history teachers in their countries. All of the participants have teaching experience in the fields of history and civics, and all of them are involved in various associations that support teachers with sensitive topics.

About the authors

Mikhail Mogutov is a student in a research master's programme “Learning in

Interaction” at Utrecht University. By profession, he is a teacher, youth worker and trainer for educators in effective teaching and learning, project management, youth involvement and participation and effective and non-violent communication. Originally Mikhail is from Estonia and he identifies himself as Russian-speaking Estonian, the national minority in Estonia. He knows by heart how the discussion of sensitive topics in society, and in education in particular, feels, especially after the outbreak of war in Ukraine. By creating this guide, he wants to highlight the need for mutual communication and non-violent ways of interacting together in a polarised society.

Bjorn Wansink is an associate professor at the Department of Education, Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences, at Utrecht University. His main areas of interest are history, epistemology, teacher education, cultural diversity, critical thinking, and dealing with controversial issues. He regularly acts as an advisor for organizations such as the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, the Council of Europe and the Radicalisation Awareness Network. Wansink is also a trainer for the European Association of History Educators (EuroClio). His scholarly work is published in journals such as *Teacher and Teaching Education*, *The Journal of Curriculum Studies*, *Theory and Research in Social Education*, *Journal of Peace Education*, *International Journal of Educational Research*, and *Teaching History*.

We would like to thank **Rebecca Jackson** for editing this guide.

To cite this article:

Mogutov, M. & Wansink, B.G.J. (2023). Teacher’s Guide: Dealing with parents and teaching sensitive and controversial issues. *Euroclio*.

References and additional resources

Abbey, D., & Wansink, B. G. (2022). Brokers of multiperspectivity in history education in post-conflict societies. *Journal of Peace Education*, 19(1), 67-90.

Barton, K., & McCully, A. (2007). Teaching controversial issues ... where controversial issues really matter. *Teaching History*, 127, 13–19.

Bekerman, Z. and Zembylas, M. (2012). *Teaching contested narratives: Identity, memory and reconciliation in peace education and beyond*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Brown et al. (2012), *Democratic citizenship in schools: teaching controversial issues, traditions and accountability*, Dunedin Academic Press, Edinburgh.

Chikoko, V., Gilmour, J. D., Harber, C., & Serf, J. (2011). Teaching controversial issues and teacher education in England and South Africa. *Journal of Education for Teaching*, 37(1), 5-19.

Christophe, B., & Tribukait, M. (2019). *Learning to disagree: Needs assessment*.

Council of Europe (2003). *Multiperspectivity in history teaching: a guide for teachers*. CoE.

Council of Europe (2015). *Teaching Controversial Issues. Professional development pack for the effective teaching of controversial issues*.

Council of Europe (2016). *Competencies for Democratic Culture: Living together as equals in culturally diverse democratic societies*. CoE.

Council of Europe (2018). *Quality history education in the 21st century – Principles and guidelines - Chapter 7 on sensitive and controversial issues*. CoE.

Cowan, P. and H. Maitles (Eds.) (2012). *Teaching controversial issues in the classroom: Key issues and debates*. Continuum International Publishing Group.

Davies, L. (2018). *Review of educational initiatives in counter-extremism internationally: What works?*.

Ferlazzo, L. (2022, October 24). How Should Educators Respond to Parents Who Criticize What's Being Taught? (Opinion). Education Week.
<https://www.edweek.org/leadership/opinion-how-should-educators-respond-to-parents-who-criticize-whats-being-taught/2022/10>

Frank S. and Huddleston T. (2009). *Schools for society: learning democracy in Europe. A handbook of ideas for action*.

Hess, D., & Posselt, J. (2002). How high school students experience and learn from the discussion of controversial public issues. *Journal of Curriculum and Supervision*, 17(4), 283-314.

Huddleston, T., & Kerr, D. (2017). *Managing controversy: Developing A Strategy For Handling Controversy And Teaching Controversial Issues In Schools. A self-reflection tool for school leaders and senior managers*. CoE.

Kello, K. (2016). Sensitive and controversial issues in the classroom: Teaching history in a divided society. *Teachers and Teaching*, 22(1), 35-53.

Radicalisation Awareness Network. (2021). *RAN Activities on Families, Communities and Social Care*. RAN

Seksuele vorming. (2022, August). *Weerbaar! Ouderbetrokkenheid*.
<https://seksuelevorming.nl/kennis/weerbaar-ouderbetrokkenheid/>

Tribukait, M. (2021). Students' prejudice as a teaching challenge: How European history educators deal with controversial and sensitive issues in a climate of political polarization. *Theory & Research in Social Education*, 49(4), 540-569.

Woolley, R. (2010). *Tackling Controversial Issues in the Primary School: Facing life's challenges with your learners*. Routledge.

Your Roadmap for Teaching Controversial Issues | iCivics. (n.d.).
<https://www.icivics.org/professional-development/your-roadmap-teaching-controversial-issues?page=1&level=middle>
See the video "Talk the talk: Communicating with stakeholders."