



Article

Powerful Knowledge as a Conceptual Frame for Teaching Controversial Issues in Ethics and Values Education in Social Studies Subjects

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Abstract: Much has recently been written about how teaching on “controversial issues” may be designed and developed in accordance with various pedagogical and didactic guidelines and based on a democratic ethos. In this article, I develop an analysis of the theoretical prerequisites for a tenable and solid teaching on controversial ethical issues in social-studies subjects. With reference to Diana Hess’s research, which identifies four pedagogical strategies in teaching on controversial issues in a general sense, I critically examine how these strategies can be conceived in a context where ethics and values education are taught in school. I make a claim for the importance of exploring an ethical meta-language for the establishment of a theoretical framework, defined with regard to the concept of powerful knowledge, where teachers may find support for teaching on controversial ethical issues. This claim is supported by a critical discussion of Michael Hand’s well-known defence of the “epistemic criterion”.

Keywords: powerful knowledge; ethics education; controversial questions



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1. Introduction

Today’s images of people’s communication often seem to be characterized by conflict and contradiction, and by a more or less generally widespread disagreement, in which there is rarely a willingness to listen to the other party and to show mutual respect. In many respects, of course, the existence of contradictions between different positions is fundamental for both maintaining and developing a democratic discourse, and in this regard, these contradictions should be seen as politically and intellectually healthy signs that the social community is characterized by heterogeneity and provides a space for individuals and groups to express and defend their fundamental rights. At the same time, the tone and normative tactics played out on social media and in public discourse, where there is often an absence of willingness to listen and to critically examine both others’ and one’s own positions in ways that reach beyond quick and immediate attacks and counterattacks, can be considered ethically and epistemically troubling. The importance of factual, thoughtful conversations about issues where opinions differ is often neglected.

Much has recently been written about how teaching on “controversial issues” could be designed and developed in accordance with various pedagogical and didactic guidelines and based on a democratic ethos. As Anna Larsson and Niclas Lindström point out, there is “no generally accepted definition of controversial issues in the research literature”, although most proposed definitions “contain what we describe as emotional, cognitive and evaluative elements” (Larsson and Lindström 2020, p. 2). There is also disagreement as to whether it is at all possible to find an overall definition on either theoretical or practical grounds.

Sometimes a more confrontational understanding of the concept of controversial issue seems to find its way into proposals concerning how teachers should handle issues that generate discord in a classroom. In the Council of Europe’s published support material

for teachers, *Living with Controversy: Teaching Controversial Issues Through Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights* (Kerr and Huddleston 2016), controversial issues are defined as “issues which arouse strong feelings and divide opinion in communities and society” (ibid., p. 7). Of course, there are a number of issues that can arouse strong feelings and contradictions, and which lead people to position themselves for or against different opinions in a confrontational manner. These issues should be taken very seriously, not least with regard to a potential need for emotional education, aiming for the development of an ability to identify and cope with feelings that could interfere with or influence the discussion of controversial issues.

However, it should not be forgotten that issues on which people think differently do not always lead to big dramas. The word “controversy” has its roots in the Latin “controversum”, which means “turned against”, and when opinions are turned against each other, this does not necessarily mean that strong emotions support, or can be associated with discussions of, those opinions. I find it problematic that “strong feelings” are written into the very definition of controversial issues, because there is a risk of this resulting in the pedagogical and didactic discussion being blown off course, or even capsizing, in favour of various kinds of psychologizing analyses of how teachers can and should act in a classroom where opinions on different issues and themes differ. Of course, discussion and research on teaching controversial issues should not neglect the challenges teachers—and students—face in discussions where strong emotions are involved, quite the opposite! But this is not where the analytical work should begin. In order to successfully design strategies for knowledge-based teaching on controversial issues characterized by both more- and less-strong emotions, a theoretical foundation needs to be created for demonstrating how a factual conversation between disagreeing parties can be approached, and semantic as well as epistemological and ontological considerations need to play prominent roles. In this article, the concept of powerful knowledge will be the focus for a discussion of the philosophical–ethical prerequisites for the development of such a foundation.

It is the interpretation and design of such a foundation that is the focus of this article. There are a number of studies on the challenges teachers experience in relation to teaching about controversial issues (e.g., Alvéén 2017; Flensner 2020). In the current context, it is, however, issues relating to the understanding of the theoretical framework for such teaching that are highlighted. This examination is intended as a potential contribution to the discussion of theoretical prerequisites for teaching on controversial issues, rather than to the field of practice-orientated research on such teaching.

In the following, I will discuss some relevant issues, with a focus on social-studies subjects as these are perceived and designed in a Swedish context. Four subjects are included under this designation: geography, history, religious education (RE)¹ and civics. The Swedish policy documents describe a common aim for the four subjects: “These subjects should give children and young people the conditions to develop knowledge about democracy and values, social structures, social relations and sustainable development.” (Author’s translation) (Skolverket 2011, SKOLFS 2011:28).²

Questions about values and social relations are highlighted by the informants in a study where teachers for younger ages were interviewed about their views on what distinguishes social-studies subjects (Holmqvist Lid et al. 2020). The research on teaching about controversial issues that is published in the Swedish, and also Nordic, contexts often seems to have a focus on issues related to values and social relations, especially with regard to perspectives on democracy, societal structures and social sustainability, which correlates well with the content of the policy documents (e.g., Flensner and Von der Lippe 2019; Larsson and Lindström 2020; Franck 2023). Themes on the rights of humans and other living beings, on gender and LGBTQ, on racism, on discrimination and violations, on justice and injustice, on politically and ideologically motivated positions on ethical issues, on religious vs secular ethics, and so on, are recurrently included in the discussions highlighted in the research, in which teaching and classroom discussions have also been investigated (e.g., Flensner 2020; Osbeck et al. 2018; Lilja and Osbeck 2020).

Social-studies subjects thus encompass broad areas in which issues that can for various reasons be perceived as controversial are raised. Initially, as a practice-orientated background to the examination of potential theoretical frameworks which are in focus in this article, I will comment on the model of four strategies for how such issues can be dealt with in school classrooms, as presented by the American researcher Diana Hess. It is a model that has often been highlighted, and it has been used in empirical studies for the identification of teachers' approaches in teaching on controversial issues (e.g., [Flensner 2020](#)). I will briefly describe the model and comment on it, in particular, regarding what I find to be a risk in unilaterally using it as a platform for developing didactic strategies for teaching about issues where disagreements and differing positions are expressed in the classroom.

I then move on to discuss in more detail what it means to give "conditions for children and young people. . .to develop knowledge about democracy and values, social structures, social relations and sustainable development" ([Skolverket 2011](#), SKOLFS 2011:28) with regard to teaching controversial issues concerning ethics and values in social-studies subjects. With reference to Michael Young's thinking about powerful knowledge, I will highlight some important perspectives on knowledge-based teaching about ethics and values. First, however, I would like to draw attention to some considerations regarding the philosophical–pedagogical conditions for teaching controversial ethical and value-related themes in social-studies subjects.

2. Four Strategies for Dealing with Controversial Issues in Teaching

In her article "Controversies about Controversial Issues in Democratic Education", Diana Hess identifies four approaches that teachers use in "democratic education" when issues that can be perceived as controversial are in focus. The first, called *denial*, means that a teacher denies that a certain question is controversial, and then in her teaching behaves as if there were a "true" answer which the students should learn. Based on the position that "It is not a controversial political issue", it can then be said that: "Some people may say it is controversial, but I think they are wrong. There is a right answer to this question. So I will teach as if it were not controversial to ensure that students develop that answer" ([Hess 2004](#), p. 259).

A second approach, labelled *privilege*, is illustrated by this statement: "Teach toward a particular perspective on the controversial issue." This involves the stance that "It is controversial, but I think that there is a clearly right answer and will try to get my students to adopt that position" (*ibid.*, p. 259). Here, the demand for neutrality and objectivity is confronted in a sharper and more explicit way. A teacher who applies this approach not only assumes in his or her teaching that there is a position that is true, but explicitly pursues a defence of this position and is clear that students should embrace it and make it theirs (*ibid.*, p. 259).

The third approach, *avoidance*, means that teachers avoid teaching about issues that can be perceived as controversial. There are, of course, many reasons for such an approach: an uncertainty about how possibly opposing views can be handled, or uncertainty as to what happens if such issues create conflict in the classroom and some students experience discomfort or feel offended. Hess mentions a couple of examples, teachers she has met who have avoided raising abortion issues in the classroom; both said that they had a strong opinion about the right to abortion, and both stated that the reason they avoided introducing this theme was that they were unsure whether they could do so without influencing students, consciously or unconsciously (*ibid.*, p. 260).

The fourth approach discussed by Hess is described in terms of *balance*, which refers to a didactic approach that is not driven by an effort to teach students to embrace a particular point of view, but by an effort to help them to give different positions on a particular issue a "fair hearing", aiming for the "best case" (*ibid.*, p. 260). Hess emphasizes that "(s)uch a standard would be met if especially well-informed advocates of differing perspectives on an issue listened to the discussion and felt their views had been given a fair hearing.

This standard draws on ideals of objectivity (so perspectives can be analysed fairly) and equality (so that different perspectives have equal power)" (ibid., p. 260).

3. A Critical Reflection

The strength of what Hess has to say lies in the broad empirical basis of her investigations of democratic teaching on controversial issues (Hess 2002). An illustrative example involves her observations on three American social-studies teachers' teaching on controversial issues, in which she examines which strategies these teachers choose to engage students, encouraging them to actively participate in the discussion, and what roles "instructional strategies, issues, materials, and assessments play in this teaching process" (ibid., p. 14).

For example, one of the teachers, Joe, chooses a text about the United States Supreme Court's ruling on the "Pentagon Papers" in 1971, which students read in advance to identify the arguments the court provides for its decision. The students prepare in small groups, and the theme that is in focus is how to balance press freedom vs. national security. According to Joe, the purpose of the discussion is not to arrive at a definite result, but for participating students to see the complexity of the issue in question, and to justify a position, while also giving other participants' possibly divergent positions a fair hearing. The aim is to show what a discussion conducted on a democratic basis means (ibid., pp. 17–19).

This example, like others in Hess's research, shows how teachers seek to develop ambitious strategies for designing teaching on controversial issues, combining a determination not to silently ignore issues that may be perceived as controversial with an effort not to expose students to indoctrination and unjustified influence. These are strategies that, in Hess's words, are aimed at finding ways to develop a "balanced" teaching in which different opinions are given space.

As Hess points out, such teaching is part of a "balanced" approach to challenges of various kinds. It is not certain that there is a consensus that such an approach is the best way to go about teaching controversial issues; opinions may differ in a college, in relation to the management of a school, or among parents, as to the terms of teachers giving all perspectives, arguments and positions identified a "fair hearing" (Hess 2004) without any specific one being highlighted as the "true" or "right" one.

On this point, I agree with Hess, but I would also like to emphasize how important it is that the management of this challenge does not detract from the value of students encountering positions that go against their own. There is, I would argue, in some of the thinking found in the strong "safe-space discourse" in recent years, a one-sided focus on how a "safe classroom climate" should be created and developed. Of course, there are few, if any, who would object to the idea that it is essential that children and young people feel safe and respected within the education they participate in, and that disagreements need to be handled with both care and creativity. Disrespectful and abusive behaviour must be met with firmness and clear guidelines for how conversations should take place in mutual respect (Franck 2020).

But, as Callan (2016) has emphasized, the protection of a safe space must not lead to students being protected from encountering opinions and ideologies that express views and attitudes to life other than their own. Democratic education must include arguments and positions that challenge participating students intellectually. To face such challenges is to learn to see and listen to beliefs and opinions other than one's own, and one needs to learn this in order to practise active citizenship in a heterogeneous society.

Empathy-creating attitudes and measures are here seen to be social and even existential prerequisites, so that all teaching can be conducted on ethically justified grounds. It is such an attitude that forms the very heart of the "balanced" teaching on controversial issues that Hess describes. Here, however, one needs to be more explicit about what expectations should be attached to such teaching—pedagogically, epistemologically and ethically. I believe that the thinking associated with the concept of powerful knowledge can make an important contribution. In particular, as we shall see, the concept of *empowerment* associated with this thinking has an important role to play, theoretically, but also practically.

4. Powerful Knowledge

Powerful knowledge has been described by Michael Young as specialized, disciplinary and differentiated (Young 2013, p. 108). The fact that it is specialized means that it is not general knowledge. Instead, the specialization in how it is produced and transmitted is “expressed in the boundaries between disciplines and subjects which define their focus” (ibid.). Secondly, powerful knowledge is differentiated from the experiences that students bring to school. According to Young, it is fundamental that school curricula are rooted in and reflect such disciplinary knowledge. Young and his frequent co-author Johan Muller focus on issues concerning curriculum rather than teaching, which does not mean that in their writing there are no indications of what is expected to follow from discipline-based curricula for teaching school subjects (Young and Muller 2010; Muller and Young 2019).

In a time of epistemic and ethical worries, when both science and democratic values are challenged, the need for a disciplinary anchoring of both curricula and teaching appears to be a burning one (see Franck 2023; Thalén 2023; Franck and Liljefors Persson 2023). This is especially true in those arenas where issues relating to scientific and ethical claims are discussed and give rise to controversy. Issues concerning, for example, conspiracy-theory challenges to science and proven experience, or expressions of discrimination against people and other living beings and their rights and values, are discussed in many present-day contexts. The school and its teaching cannot turn a blind eye to these challenges and discussions. With respect to this, the democratic responsibility for creating conditions for children and young people to develop a scientifically and ethically well-founded approach, and a critical competence in relation to the investigation of contemporary controversial issues, appears fundamental. Here it becomes important to consider how an exploration of the concept of powerful knowledge contributes to balanced teaching.

5. Knowledge-Based Teaching on Controversial Issues

Generally speaking, teaching on controversial questions can make space for the presence of emotional, as well as intellectual, challenges. In the following, I shall concentrate on the latter, bearing in mind that the two types of challenges are often closely interwoven.

As I have pointed out, the spectrum of what is perceived as being controversial in the teaching of social studies can be expected to be broad, and there are different kinds of strategies that it may be relevant to try in order to develop a balanced approach with room for giving a “fair hearing” to different positions. A condition for these strategies, however, is that the positions that are identified are dealt with in an objective and epistemically satisfactory manner (see Franck 2023). The aim as to these different positions and opinions is for them to be analysed with a focus, partly on content, partly on arguments that representatives propose for the different positions and partly on a critical examination of these arguments. As Hess emphasizes with regard to the examples she describes in her study referred to above, the time available for carrying out such a thorough analysis was very short due to the limited class time available in the examples she describes (Hess 2002). It should be stressed that teaching about a controversial issue, in social studies or in other subjects, needs to be given an adequate amount of space in order for analysis and discussion to be meaningful and knowledge-promoting.

In the following, I will discuss how powerful knowledge can contribute to an epistemically and ethically rooted teaching on controversial questions in social-studies subjects. In other contexts, I have shown how Michael Young’s and Johan Muller’s thoughts about powerful knowledge can make important contributions to knowledge-based religious education (Franck 2021, 2023). Teaching about religions must, like all teaching, allow for questions and notions that reach beyond students’ personal experiences, such as existentially and scientifically grounded platforms for the development of knowledge, in a world characterized by diversity.

The same holds for other social-studies subjects. These subjects have to be anchored in the academic disciplines of the social sciences in order to lay a solid foundation for the development of an active and responsible citizenship. Such a citizenship includes

the exercise of critical competence, which is expressed in the subjects' ability to critically examine various kinds of arguments and positions (Larsson 2021). This is an ability which children and young people have a democratic right to develop, and teaching on controversial issues should offer relevant and potent prerequisites for such development. Therefore, it is vital that teachers realize the importance of teaching controversial issues, and that students can study such issues as may arise in social-studies subjects and examine the epistemic and ethical status of these issues.

Whether a classroom discussion on ethical issues is characterized by agreement or disagreement, a balanced approach that leaves room for a "fair hearing" is important. However, it is not enough to draw attention to similarities or differences in attitudes towards a particular issue; arguments and positions need to be subject to a dialogical analysis that goes beyond personal reasons. What kind of knowledge can support a balanced teaching with a "fair hearing" of different arguments and perceptions? What do students need to know in order to carry out an authoritative assessment of such arguments and perceptions and critically examine them, and what do teachers need to accomplish to create good conditions for and contribute to such knowledge?

Well-anchored subject knowledge is a necessary condition for the development of knowledge-based teaching on controversial issues concerning ethics and values in social studies. But such knowledge is not sufficient to satisfy reasonable criteria for teaching built around the concept of powerful knowledge. Such teaching must have something substantial to offer in order for children and young people to understand what ethical disagreement means, and for teachers to be able to lead teaching in a way that allows students to see the existential and philosophical conditions required for an ethical conversation—which can help make the very meaning of discussing ethical issues transparent and tangible. I will return to this later in the text.

6. Navigating as a Knowledgeable, Democratic Agent

Biesta et al. (2019) have discussed a conception of *religious literacy* in which the focus is on an ability to navigate in a world and a society where religion and religious beliefs and claims are present in people's lives and in public debate. This requires knowledge of relevant concepts and of the historical and contemporary roles of religion in societal and human relations, but also of religious as well as religiously critical arguments and discussions on various social issues (ibid., p. 25). Here it becomes important to familiarize oneself with what Biesta et al. describe as "non-didactical" dimensions of religious literacy, which it seems reasonable to interpret in terms of "disciplinary knowledge" which can lay the foundation for a reliable knowledge-based religious education (see Franck and Liljefors Persson 2023). Similarly, one could talk about the importance of a civic, a historical and a geographical literacy characterizing the teaching of social studies, history and geography, respectively. A knowledge-based teaching of these four social-studies subjects would also invite the interdisciplinary collaboration mentioned by Young and Muller in relevant respects, for example, on certain controversial issues.

This applies in particular to such ethically significant issues mentioned above as being relevant in social educational discourses: the rights of people and other living beings, gender and LGBTQ, racism, discrimination and violations, justice and injustice, politically and ideologically motivated positions on ethical issues, religious vs. secular ethics, and so on.

It should be borne in mind here that disciplinary knowledge does not only refer to knowledge of the facts. In the study by Biesta et al., interpretation of the concept of literacy in relation to religious arenas also refers to a knowledge of how religious beliefs and outlooks on life can serve as bases for people's arguments and positions—for as well as against, for example, religiously substantiated ethical claims.

Questions concerning, for example, sexual equality, which may be perceived by some people as controversial, can be interpreted and answered in various ways by religious individuals and groups. Just as there is no consensus on this issue among religious

adherents, there is also no consensus among individuals and groups with secular roots. Issues relating to justice, rights and equality can all highlight fundamental variations in how ethical disagreement is expressed and perceived. Reliable teaching about how such issues are open to different interpretations and positions in different social discourses needs, as Hess emphasizes, to sanction “fair hearing” and be balanced.

However, this is not the only thing that is important in teaching about ethics and values. Such teaching also has to introduce children and young people to an approach according to which ethics and morality are not only about the application of rules and regulations, but also about the existential dimensions of ethical issues and ethical disagreement, dimensions that cannot be reduced to issues and debates in terms of *truth* but which also relate to *meaning*. In fact, it seems difficult to develop a creative and critical ability to navigate in relation to ideological plurality, and to the ethical discussions that are conducted in a democratic society, in the absence of the insight that controversial questions that focus on ethics and values require more than formulating and taking a stand on rationally motivated, conflicting arguments.

7. Powerful Knowledge in Swedish Social-Studies Curricula: Ethics and Values

The Swedish National Agency of Education has presented guidelines for how teachers can highlight controversial questions in teaching. The aims for both religious education and civics are that the students will develop critical thinking, empathic ability, understanding of others’ experiences and understanding of others’ situations (Author’s translation) (Skolverket 2011).

The syllabi of the four social-studies subjects represent a comprehensive body of content which can be described as specialized and differentiated. This is a foundational knowledge which is specific to the four subject-theoretical contexts, while at the same time being disciplinary, in that it refers to areas that are anchored in the corresponding academic disciplines, directly or indirectly. This also holds for the integration of ethical aspects and dimensions which occurs in all four subjects.

In the academic disciplines with which the content in the syllabi can be correlated, a substantial amount of research on ethics and values regarding, for example, democracy, equality, justice and discrimination, is represented (see Osbeck et al. 2018). According to the syllabus for civics, the students should develop “reasoning on different questions with a connection to the possibilities and challenges of democracy”, and examine “information and opinions regarding societal issues in various sources” (Skolverket 2022, pp. 195–202). Similar content is mentioned in history, geography and religious education, and the RE syllabus refers to “fundamental principles within some ethical models, for example consequentialist ethics and deontological ethics”, and analysis of and reflection on ethical questions regarding, for example, “freedom, justice and solidarity with regard to the students’ own arguments and interpretations within religions and other life views and ethical models” (Skolverket 2022, pp. 188–94). This content can be considered as differentiated; teaching in social-studies subjects should contribute prerequisites for children and young people to transcend their everyday experiences and perspectives, and to encounter different ways of interpreting and explaining reality and society, for example, with regard to historical, social-scientific or geographical considerations. This is also subject content which in all four subjects can contribute to a subject literacy of the kind described by Biesta et al., knowledge which makes it possible to understand how subject-related discussions can be conducted, with a focus on issues regarding ethics and values.

8. Powerful Knowledge with Regard to Teaching

Osbeck (2020) raises the issue of whether Young’s definition of powerful knowledge, presented above, is too narrow, and, referring to Gericke et al. (2018), she states that “it has been regarded as important to expand the concept to also include transformations of that specialised and differentiated knowledge so that considerations concerning the selection of teaching content also take into account what could be possible for the pupils to

learn" (Osbeck 2020, p. 6). What is described here is the possibility that didactic processes, which are thought to empower students through participation in transformative ethical education, can also contribute to powerful knowledge: "Perhaps it would be useful to include practices in which the pupils, through interaction with more competent actors, were guided to see general patterns in the discussions they have" (ibid., p. 6). In this way, students may also be able to develop an ethical metalanguage which, according to Osbeck, is a goal in the Swedish curriculum (ibid., p. 6).

Osbeck discusses such an interpretation with regard to a research project (EthiCo II) investigating how fiction-based ethics education may develop students' ethical competence, a project in which she, as well as the present author, is engaged. It is an interpretation of how powerful knowledge can be related to teaching, which to a large extent corresponds to the interpretation in this article. In particular, Osbeck's emphasis on the importance of students' and more competent actors' joint development of a metaethical language is fundamental in knowledge-based teaching about controversial issues regarding ethics and values.

However, I would like to voice a reservation about the use of the term "transformative teaching". Osbeck uses it with reference to Gericke et al. (2018), in which the term is used to describe a teaching in which knowledge content is transformed in relation to the didactic triangle's parameters, "what" and "how" (ibid., p. 6).

"Transformative teaching" is a tricky concept. There are a number of possible interpretations of what it is that ought to be "transformed", and in which way this may be done: is it specific knowledge content, a teaching method, students' learning—or maybe a "discipline", a term used by Hudson et al. (2023)? The concept is ambiguous, which creates doubt about what is supposed to happen with which content in relation to whom or to what—the students, the teachers or the content in the curricula? This doubt also paves the way for the risk that the knowledge content will be instrumentalized in relation to teaching. If "transformation" is supposed to refer to the widely known fact, which is constantly present in teacher education in particular, that subject knowledge needs to be the subject of teaching which students have the opportunity to understand and absorb, it is difficult to see what substantial contributions it would make. In such cases, the concept seems to be reinventing the wheel.

As I have pointed out in another context, the "what" and "how" questions of teaching need to be related to each other in a subject–didactic discourse, but if the latter are allowed to play a leading role unilaterally at the expense of the former, there is a risk of a somewhat reductionist interpretation of what is meant by knowledge-based teaching taking over. (Franck 2023, pp. 49–50). When it comes to teaching about controversial issues, it is perhaps even more urgent to draw attention to such a risk. If there is a concern that contradictions and conflicts make themselves felt in the classroom, and if an overriding focus is about safeguarding what has previously been described as a safe space, where disagreements are interpreted, in particular, in terms of risks, it may be natural for a teacher to first and foremost concentrate the work on paying attention to "how" instead of "what" questions.

It is the task of subject didactics to explore scientifically based procedures for the development of didactical strategies, making them available in, for example, teacher education and in-service training for teachers. The task also involves an examination of how to identify and problematize "what" questions, with a focus on the knowledge content that will form the basis for the education. A more suitable use of terminology could be to describe such processes in terms of a "reconstruction", which, unlike the term "transformation", may not risk signalling a reductionist translation.

9. Social Scientific and Philosophical Discourses of Powerful Knowledge

When it comes to the question of what powerful knowledge in teaching about ethics actually means, it may be important to distinguish between social science and philosophical discourses where ethical issues are highlighted. There are ethical issues that are rooted in an interdisciplinary manner in the social-science disciplines that form the academic

basis for social-studies subjects. A great deal of research is being conducted at universities and higher education institutions on democracy, equality, justice, gender, racism, sexual equality and discrimination within the framework of social-science disciplines, that is, on issues that, as mentioned above, are described in the Swedish school curricula. Here there is a correlation between academic disciplines and the school curriculum of the kind that Young emphasizes.

Hudson et al. (2023), with respect to a study by Nilsberth et al. (2022), point out that teachers, in practice, choose which curricular elements they use in their teaching, and take this as an example of how powerful knowledge is didacticized in a transformative way (ibid., p. 126). In line with that which I have pointed out above, it seems misleading to call the teachers' selections from the curricular knowledge content "transformative". It relates rather to a reconstruction or restructuring of this content, and here it is important for teachers to be aware of the extent to which the selection they make, which is probably based on what they consider to be pedagogically and didactically motivated in relation to students' ability to understand and absorb, has a basis in current disciplinary knowledge and research on, for example, ethical issues.

But it is not only in relation to social-science disciplines that such a correlation needs to be traced in order for a specialized teaching on controversial issues related to ethical areas to be possible. Philosophical ethics are also fundamental for ensuring that the theoretical and practical conditions of ethical discourse are made visible in the school's teaching. Some might want to assume that the specialization (in Young's sense) which is relevant here would only be about anchoring the ethical issues that are studied and researched in the knowledge production of the social-science disciplines. But such a limitation carries the risk of excluding fundamental perspectives on the existential and philosophical conditions for people's conversations about the ethical dimensions of existence and society, and for how ethical disagreements as well as unity should be understood. Such dimensions should be given space in all school subjects—and in the Swedish curricula, explicit references to ethics and values appear in many curricula, such as biology and physical education.

This brings us to a central parameter in this context, namely, what the grounds might be for describing an issue as "controversial". I pointed out at the beginning of this article that there is sufficient reason to criticize the assumption that strong emotions define such a question. Of course, it is often the issues that arouse emotions that are highlighted in public debate, and at school, teachers may be worried about including these in teaching. But one reason for discussing pedagogical and didactic strategies such as Hess's, and questions concerning what a knowledge-based teaching on controversial issues means, is to open up arenas where there is space for challenges as well as opportunities for developing teaching that gives room for disagreement and for ways to deal with it—for students as well as teachers.

What I would like to point out in this context is the importance of children and young people being confronted with the question of what it means in a philosophical sense to take different positions on ethical issues, and to have critical discussions with mutual respect. This is necessary in order for them to have the opportunity to develop such knowledge of the semantic, epistemological and ontological conditions of ethical discourse, which can allow for well-founded critical analysis, as well as creativity and innovation.

It is good that students learn something about ethical models for argumentation, such as deontological ethics and consequentialist ethics, as the Swedish curriculum, for example, prescribes. But there is a risk that these models will be perceived as more or less unambiguous and reliable technical methods for taking a stand on ethical issues, unless the teaching initially and continuously provides space for an analysis of what the fundamental ethical platform for such positions is. Therefore, ethics education needs to be anchored in a knowledge of which truth and meaning claims can be linked to ethical language according to different interpretations. It is reasonable that fundamental perspectives on issues concerning, for example, forms of ethical subjectivism and ethical objectivism are touched upon, in order to create an initial pedagogical and philosophical foundation for

the communicative arena where issues concerning ethics and values are discussed and become the subject of teaching. Creating awareness among students, at least those who have left the earliest grades, of what is implied by the assumption that ethical statements are expressions of emotion, or that these statements refer to norms and values that are in some sense objective, provides a basis that may be important for developing an empowerment to actively explore the meaning of ethical statements and thereby also explore possible interpretations of these statements in social debates. Choosing relevant and constructive paths to approach a controversial ethical issue depends on an understanding of what semantic, epistemological and ontological status can and should be ascribed to arguments for or against the issue. Such an understanding relates to having an ethical metalanguage, such as that referred to by Osbeck, as mentioned earlier.

10. Two Potential Paths for the Development of a Theoretical Foundation for Teaching on Controversial Issues

Here it is relevant to introduce a reminder of the discussion which has taken place throughout the history of philosophical ethics regarding the semantic, epistemological and ontological status of ethical arguments and opinions. Such a discussion has, in recent decades, been conducted with a focus on controversial, ethically relevant questions, and I will comment briefly on one of the possible approaches that has emerged from this discussion. This approach concerns, among other things, whether disagreement between two or more ethical positions in relation to a controversial issue should ultimately be perceived as “morally” or as “non-morally” grounded.

What does it mean that an ethically relevant question is controversial? And in what way should teaching about such questions be designed? Almost forty years ago, the philosopher of education Robert Dearden formulated “the epistemic criterion”, which he understood as being that a matter should be taught as controversial when “contrary views can be held on it without those views being contrary to reason.” (Dearden 1981). In order to be considered controversial, an issue consequently has to be the object of (at least) two opposite positions, both of which can be supported by rational reasons.

A philosopher who has been associated during recent debates with such an approach is Michael Hand, who has developed Dearden’s criteriologic formulation (e.g., Hand 2008, 2018). Hand’s approach to the epistemic criterion has been critically discussed by a range of commentators (e.g., Cooling 2012; D’Olimpio 2019), and I will not go deeply into these discussions. I will, however, briefly give attention to a contribution in which the basic prerequisite for a semantic, epistemic and ontological understanding of the essence of moral disagreement is explored, and which is critical of Hand’s theory of moral education. This contribution has a specific relevance to the question of how the teaching of controversial issues on ethics and values in social-studies subjects may be designed.

In *A Theory of Moral Education*, Hand discusses how a moral life can be justified with regard to an analysis of what it means to subscribe to basic moral standards. According to Hand, moral educators have the task both to encourage students to subscribe to robustly justified moral standards (moral formation), and to make available the rational arguments and considerations which constitute the grounds for such a justification (moral inquiry) (Hand 2018, pp. 29–30). In Hand’s discussion, the focus is on the question of what a justification of subscription to moral standards means. He highlights here “the problem-of-sociality justification”, which “arises because of three contingent but permanent features of the human condition. These features, sometimes described as the ‘circumstances of justice’, are (1) rough equality, (2) limited sympathy and (3) moderate scarcity of resources” (ibid., p. 60). The conjunction of these three conditions challenges people’s ability to act morally; in that we have a reasonably equal chance as others to achieve the desired good, and given that our sympathies are primarily closest to ourselves and those close to us, while available resources are limited, the question arises as to how we should act (ibid., p. 62). The question “Why be moral?” presents us with challenges, and according to Hand, the problem of sociality claims to offer a convincing answer here. To subscribe to a standard

“which specifies something to be done or not done” means that a person intends to comply with it. And here Hand emphasizes that what a justification for a moral subscription must show is not only that there is good reason for me to comply with a standard, but also that there is good reason for me to expect the compliance of others and endorse penalties for non-compliance (*ibid.*, p. 24).

Since morality is optional, in the sense that we can choose whether we will follow standards that are universally enlisting and penalty-endorsing, and since such standards hold not only for ourselves but also for others, a “robust justification” is needed:

... the problem of sociality will not be solved or ameliorated by subscription to conflict-averting and cooperation-sustaining standards unless everyone, or almost everyone, subscribes to them ... What the problem calls for, then, is not just subscription to the relevant standards of conduct, but universally-enlisting and penalty-endorsing subscription to them. We must each take responsibility not only for complying with the standards ourselves, but for actively encouraging others to comply and for standing ready to punish them when they do not.

(*ibid.*, p. 67)

Hand emphasizes that, even though sympathy and collaboration often work as motives for how we act, these are not enough for a continued interaction and an avoidance of conflicts, a challenge which may be approached with reference to the problem of sociality. Here we “need a supplementary kind of motivation for keeping to cooperative agreements and treating each other in non-harmful ways. We need the conative, affective, and behavioural dispositions that constitute subscription to standards” (Hand 2023, p. 316). It is a matter of the prohibitions on killing and causing harm, stealing and extorting and lying and cheating, and the requirements to treat others fairly, keep one’s promises and help those in need. (*ibid.*, p. 318). Moral standards which ameliorate the problem in this way are considered to be “robustly justified”, a condition which, according to Hand, has to be satisfied to avoid improper indoctrination.

Needless to say, Hand’s theory of moral education is comprehensive, and it certainly needs a thorough analysis to be fairly represented. Here I do not have space to discuss its various parts in detail, including, for example Hand’s conception of “indoctrinary teaching” (Hand 2018, pp. 2–3). Nevertheless, I have chosen to briefly mention it here because, together with the responses it has aroused, it shows an arena that is specialized and disciplinarily rooted in academic philosophy, and one which has a clear relevance for teaching controversial ethical issues in social-studies subjects. I mentioned earlier that extensive research on ethics and values is carried out in social-science disciplines, and that such research should therefore, with the help of teachers as “more competent actors” (Osbeck 2020, p. 6) in a mediating role between academia and school, leave its mark on teaching for children and young people. In other contexts, Hand has, based on “the epistemic criterion”, discussed issues that can be perceived as controversial, such as sexual equality (Hand 2007) and the rational status of religious beliefs (Hand 2003), questions that are linked, in the Swedish arena, to the syllabi for social-studies subjects. I emphasized earlier how important it is that such teaching does not stop at listing what are perceived as arguments for and against certain positions according to the ethical models mentioned in these syllabi, where these are perceived as kinds of apparatus that more or less unambiguously and obviously support one or the other position. Here, by studying Hand’s approach to moral education, teachers can find a contribution to broadening and deepening teaching on controversial issues concerning ethics and values.

Such a potential contribution becomes particularly clear in light of the criticism Hand’s approach has been the subject of (e.g., Cooling 2012; Tillson 2019; Aldridge 2019), especially when it comes to the grounds on which prevailing moral standards are justified—which is certainly a question that should interest teachers, not least in social-studies subjects. Is Hand’s approach, according to which moral standards can be robustly justified on non-moral grounds, namely, insofar as they help to ameliorate the conditions for resolving

conflicts and creating cohesion in a society, a reasonable one to take? If it is, what are the implications for the school's teaching of ethics and values and for how moral disagreement should be handled? If, in accordance with the epistemic criterion, such disagreement should be approached on the basis of an assessment of whether the divergent positions—on non-moral grounds—can be linked to improvement in the sense that they contribute to “a supplementary kind of motivation for keeping to cooperative agreements and treating each other in non-harmful ways”, then this has certain consequences for the school's teaching of ethical issues.

On the other hand: how could such an education be designed if we take it that Hand's approach is not satisfying, and that it lacks capacity to provide a potent and defensible strategy for teaching about controversial ethical questions? His theoretical framework and its applications have been the objects of various critical arguments, and one of the questions that has been in focus is exactly his advocacy of the idea that subscription to moral standards is justified by non-moral reasons.

Ilya Zrudlo has argued that “the broader trajectory of the rationalistic project” developed by Hand is “misconceived” (Zrudlo 2021, p. 187). When Hand refers to non-moral grounds as the bases for cooperative agreements and lack of conflict, and non-harmful treatment of other people as a robustly justified choice ameliorating the challenges which arise from “the problem of sociality”, this is a misdirected interpretation, according to Zrudlo. With reference to Charles Taylor, Zrudlo claims that there “is no such thing as a non-moral argument that can, as it were, serve as a gateway into morality. There is no non-moral point outside of morality because... as human beings, we are always and already oriented in moral space” (ibid., p. 187).

Zrudlo argues that Hand's approach, in which morality is treated as a device for social stability, neglects its foundational role for human togetherness and human relations, and for how the motives for action in a complex social community can be formed. The difficulty is, according to Zrudlo, that few moral standards can be judged as “robustly justified”, in the sense that Hand uses the expression, based on the argument that “the problem-of-sociality justification is radically indeterminate because it admits both minimal and maximal interpretations and vastly oversimplifies societal dynamics” (ibid., p. 195). References to ethical convictions or moral intuitions as motives for how people act in problematic situations are dressed in social, and potentially rational, clothes, in cases where the main areas of focus are the presence of collaboration and an absence of conflict and harmful actions, which leads in the wrong direction, not least with regard to the task of the moral educator:

(I)t is worth noting that this understanding of morality as a device for social stability, which the Handian moral educator would need to embrace, would surely be communicated to students. In other words, the Handian moral educator is not only helping students appreciate that conflict-averting and cooperation-sustaining moral standards are robustly justified, but she is also conveying to them the idea that morality is essentially a device with this aim. Do we want students to become convinced that this is *the* purpose of morality? Moreover, is there not an implicit view of the good for society being conveyed here?

(ibid., p. 196)

Zrudlo's criticism regarding the manner in which morality, in Hand's theory, is reduced to a device for creating and shaping social stability, and the former's question about whether this aim is the one we wish ethics education in schools to have, is important to consider. When we, for example in social-studies subjects, highlight questions which could be perceived by some people as controversial—such as how economic injustice, lack of equality between men and women, and absence of sexual equality can be explained and countered—it is fundamental to reflect upon the aim of this teaching. Is morality ultimately about finding and using effective ways of creating social collaboration and stability, or is it about something behind, or rather perhaps *under* such an aim, about ethical

convictions, about the *sensing* of what to do or not do in a certain situation, about thinking and reasoning in search of wisdom, about intuitions of what seems right and wrong—and about a form of ethical conversation in which thoughts, feelings, reflections, convictions and insights meet in mutual inspiration for activity and action? Or could it perhaps be that there are approaches in which these two possibilities may both contribute to a significant and empowering teaching about controversial issues?

11. The Need for a Metaethical Language

I have briefly, and without doing any one of them justice, referred to parts of Hand's and Zrudlo's approaches to the question of on what philosophical grounds moral education can be founded. One aim of this has been to emphasize the importance of discussing how teaching on controversial ethical issues can be explored. Such questions are continuously present in teaching in social-studies subjects.

I have claimed that such an education ought to be conducted in accordance with a balancing strategy such as the one that Hess proposes, and that the theoretical framework which is connected to the concept *powerful knowledge* may here offer important contributions. If such education is to be *empowering*, it is necessary that the students encounter solid subject knowledge, rooted in social-science disciplines, and that such knowledge includes relevant ethical dimensions—but also that an ethical metalanguage is made available in order for the students to express and evaluate arguments anchored in a philosophical framework.

Both Hand and Zrudlo develop such frameworks, and both can inspire moral educators to consider the purpose of teaching controversial ethical issues. Teaching carried out against the background of a notion that the purpose of morality is to improve conditions for social stability, conditions based on the thesis that moral standards can be rationally substantiated in ways that make them “robustly justified”, will probably take other paths than one in which such a judgement is considered to be “reducing”. Zrudlo mentions Charles Taylor, while rejecting the suggestion that non-moral reasons can justify moral positions. In addition to Zrudlo's discussion of Taylor's ethical framework, I would like to mention Taylor's thinking on “life-goods” such as authenticity and benevolence, and constitutive goods of the kind that create meaning and frames of references for the anchoring of moral opinions and perceptions, such as the Christian one, centred around the concept of *agape*, and a transcendent call to love (Taylor 1989). Such a philosophical, existential foundation seems to lead quite far away from the rationalistic approach developed by Hand.

The metaethical arguments that Hand and Zrudlo use are examples of important aspects of a powerful knowledge of what ethical discussions and ethical disagreements are about. Such knowledge also provides the conditions for developing an ethical metalanguage that makes it possible to approach ethical issues where disagreement exists, in an objective and analytical way. It is important to realise this possibility in the teaching of controversial ethical issues in social-studies subjects. It allows different ways of approaching core issues such as what ethics and morality are, why it is important to keep ethical and moral issues alive—and along which paths it is possible to interpret and handle moral disagreements in ways that empower students to develop as democratic, committed, objective and empathetic debaters in ethical conversations about various social issues. And it is this goal that ought to be considered primary in the school's teaching of controversial ethical issues in social-studies subjects. It is a way of understanding what is described in Hess's thinking as “balanced teaching”.

12. Conclusions and Future Directions

The purpose of this article is to make a contribution to the ongoing discussion regarding potential theoretical frameworks for teaching controversial ethical issues in social studies. It is important to develop such a discussion in addition to, and in relation to, analyses of and proposals for various kinds of teaching strategies.

As mentioned earlier, according to Hand, moral educators have the task both to encourage students to subscribe to robustly justified moral standards (moral formation)

and to make available the rational arguments and considerations which constitute the grounds for such a justification (moral inquiry). The question of how such a double task may be handled raises challenges, and Zrudlo points out that Hand does not explore the relation between the two tasks in a satisfying and convincing way. Here one may, without taking a definite stand on either Hand's approach or Zrudlo's criticism, recapitulate that the relation between encouraging students to think and act as reflective moral agents and teaching them the prerequisites and the argumentative methods for critically analysing and evaluating ethical positions involves possible tensions on a fundamental level. How can teachers handle the tasks of accepting and respecting those norms and values which constitute the foundations of the school's rules and activities, while at the same time introducing the ways in which ethical positions and arguments can and should be subject to critical analysis? Often this can be accomplished without much difficulty, but there are examples in which the responsibility for combining education with critical thinking can present challenges, for example when non-democratic notions are expressed in a classroom (see [Franck 2021](#)).

When it comes to teaching about controversial, ethically relevant questions, it is important that "moral formation" and "moral inquiry" are both given space within a dynamic, creative and knowledge-based strategy. Teachers in social-studies subjects do have a responsibility to create the prerequisites for powerful knowledge, ones anchored in social-sciences disciplines as well as in philosophical ethics, to be reconstructed in ways which make them accessible to students. Such ways can certainly vary, depending on a range of circumstances, such as the ages of participating students, but the general aim is for children and young people to be empowered to develop their ability for active, knowledgeable, objective and empathic conversation about controversial ethical issues in social-studies subjects.

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- ¹ Following the terminology in international contexts, the Swedish label "religionskunskap" (knowledge about religion) is translated in this article as "religious education".
- ² In the current context, it is the common curricular elements for the four subjects that form the bases for the discussion of potentially cross-curricular theoretical frameworks for teaching controversial ethical issues in social-studies subjects. Certainly, there are many examples of research in which teaching about controversial issues is treated on a subject-specific basis (e.g., [Franck 2023](#); [Alvén 2017](#)). However, such an analysis is beyond the scope of the present examination.

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