

CONTROVERSIAL TOPICS IN EDUCATION

A pluralistic approach

Karin Årman. Ph.D in
educational work and project
manager at the Living history
forum





Presentation Overview

- Context: Hypercomplexity & Sjögårdaskolan
- Framework: Theoretic base and definitions
- Findings: Student/Staff Views & Teacher Strategies
- Moving Forward: Leadership Qualities & Structure
- Key Takeaway: Embrace Controversy!



How are controversial issues expressed and handled in a secondary school located in an industrial town characterized by hypercomplexity?

How do secondary school students experience, view, and interpret these issues, and how do they wish teachers and school staff would address and manage them both inside and outside the classroom?

Issues that have a
deeply polarizing effect
on society as they
generate conflicting
explanations and
solutions based on
alternative worldviews.

(Stradling, 1984)



**Nationality
Ethnicity
Culture**

**Sexuality
Gender**

If my son says he likes men, I would take him to a doctor to try to make him understand what is wrong.

Hamid

If boys could change their gender to become girls and have children, okay. But they can't. They usually undergo surgery, but even then, they can't have children. So, what are you trying to say?

Swedish culture it's not just like holidays or Christianity. It's also like you don't marry off your daughters. And you don't do genital mutilation on your kids.

Linnéa

They had all the flags up on Multicultural Day, but no Swedish one. It really got on my nerves, to be fair.

Tekla

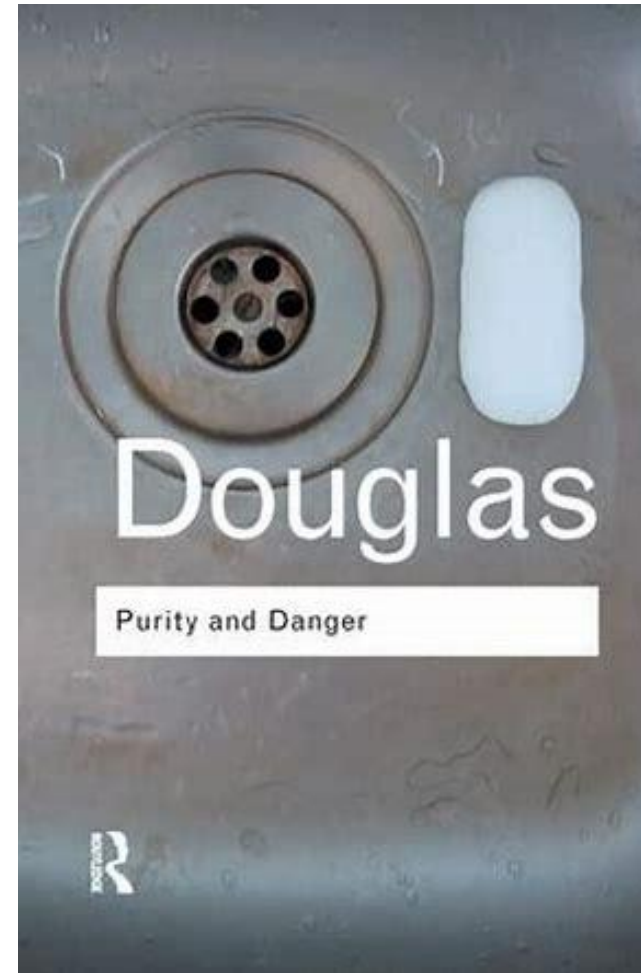
Forced marriage is a bad thing, you know. It's still there. Parents might think like their kids don't fit in with Somali culture. But they don't know if it just makes stuff worse.

Bilan

I can't talk about their religion without it coming like 'Racist, racist!' It's so sensitive I think teachers just back down.

Vega

The beliefs which we accept without question, our conceptions of right and wrong, good and evil, are not statements about reality. They are reflections of the social structure of our society.



Differences in attitudes towards controversial issues

Students

Wish to discuss controversial issues

Teachers/schoolstaff

Generally, avoids conversations about CI

Differences in attitudes towards controversial issues

Students

Wish to discuss controversial issues

Does not consider groupings based on cultural belonging or ethnicity to be strange

People naturally seek out those who are similar to themselves (socioeconomically and in terms of values)

Teachers/schoolstaff

Generally, avoids conversations about CI

Believes that groupings based on ethnicity are a result of failed integration policies – potentially dangerous to talk about. Sensitive topic. Interprets it as racism, etc.

Differences in attitudes towards controversial issues

Students

Wish to discuss controversial issues

Does not consider groupings based on cultural belonging or ethnicity to be strange

People naturally seek out those who are similar to themselves (socioeconomically and in terms of values)

A wide range of opinions – values that exist on a broad spectrum in relation to Liberal-democratic ideals

Teachers/schoolstaff

Generally, avoids conversations about CI

Believes that groupings based on ethnicity are a result of failed integration policies – potentially dangerous to talk about. Sensitive topic. Interprets it as racism, etc.

Narrow range of opinions - most embrace Liberal-democratic ideals

Differences in attitudes towards controversial issues

Students

Wish to discuss controversial issues

Does not consider groupings based on cultural belonging or ethnicity to be strange

People naturally seek out those who are similar to themselves (socioeconomically and in terms of values)

A wide range of opinions – values that exist on a broad spectrum in relation to Liberal-democratic ideals

Demonstrates - despite plurality of opinions
- agreement on effective leadership strategies

Teachers/schoolstaff

Generally, avoids conversations about CI

Believes that groupings based on ethnicity are a result of failed integration policies – potentially dangerous to talk about. Sensitive topic. Interprets it as racism, etc.

Narrow range of opinions - most embrace Liberal-democratic ideals

Exhibits relatively large differences in leadership strategies

Denial

It is not a controversial political issue:

"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."

Privilege

Teach toward a particular perspective on the controversial political issue: "It is controversial, but I think there is a clearly right answer and will try to get my students to adopt that position."

Denial

It is not a controversial political issue: "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."

Avoidance

Avoid the controversial political issue: "The issue is controversial, but my personal views are so strong that I do not think I can teach it fairly, or I do not want to do so."

Privilege

Teach toward a particular perspective on the controversial political issue: "It is controversial, but I think there is a clearly right answer and will try to get my students to adopt that position."

Denial

It is not a controversial political issue: "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."

Balance

Teach the matter as genuine controversial political issue: "The issue is controversial and I will aim toward balance and try to ensure that various positions get a best case, fair hearing."

Avoidance

Avoid the controversial political issue: "The issue is controversial, but my personal views are so strong that I do not think I can teach it fairly, or I do not want to do so."

Privilege

Teach toward a particular perspective on the controversial political issue: "It is controversial, but I think there is a clearly right answer and will try to get my students to adopt that position."

Denial

It is not a controversial political issue: "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."

He said he was gonna teach us something about Trump. And then he was like, Trump is dumb. And it's maybe not cool to say that. He said, 'You shouldn't vote for him.' I didn't like that he did that. He was just trashing Trump the whole class. He never said anything good he did.

I'm not saying I like Trump, but I'm just saying he could've done it differently. I think students should be able to make up their own minds, and you shouldn't try to change their opinions, but instead try to understand how they think.

Igor, 15 years old

Students seek adults who...

- 1) Views friction as an inherent aspect of a hyper-complex society.
- 2) Exhibits a relational ethos that transcends ideological boundaries.
- 3) Demonstrates an understanding of the unique local context and conditions.
- 4) Maintains discipline by ensuring adherence to established rules.



You gotta have a thick skin to be a teacher,
'cause these students, they're gonna call you
everything. So, if you're the kind of person who
gets upset easily and starts crying – this ain't the
job for you, man.

Be tough, or, like, be firm. Don't let anyone walk
all over you – but also be welcoming, or open,
and supportive, you know?

Zulima, 15 years old



Thank you for your
attention!

karin.arman@levandehistoria.se