

Article

Controversial issues in Swedish social studies education: Success and failure in teachers' task perceptions

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Highlights:

- The study examined teachers' perceptions of success and failure in their teaching about controversial issues.
- 18 interviewed teachers in civics in Swedish school years 7, 8, 9.
- Relational aspects are decisive.
- Values included neutrality, pluralism, civil behaviour, and students' well-being, which were central to the teachers.
- Tensions concerned the level of emotional engagement and how to deal with students' opinions.

Purpose: This study seeks to gain an understanding of the complexities involved in real-life classroom teaching. The aim is to trace values and tensions displayed in what the teachers regard as successful and unsuccessful.

Design/methodology/approach: Teachers were interviewed to explore their perceptions of success and failures in their teaching about controversial issues. Data was analysed thematically and cross-analysed to find underlying didactic values and tensions.

Findings: Successful and unsuccessful are mainly related to the students' learning, teachers' efforts, and reactions of parents, not to specific issues. Values included concern for students' well-being and a desire for less polarisation. Tensions concerned students' level of commitment and how to deal with students' own opinions. Successful teaching is not only about achieving curriculum goals but also must be understood in relation to teachers' task perceptions.

Practical implications: Results of the study can provide teachers with a ground for didactical reflection.

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INTRODUCTION

Teaching about controversial issues in schools has been much debated over the last decade. According to the Council of Europe (2015), it is essential to promote values associated with democracy, tolerance, and human rights. However, we know from research that teaching about controversial issues can be didactically challenging and that teachers sometimes try to avoid them (Anker & von der Lippe, 2018; Cowan & Maitles, 2012; Gindi et al., 2021). Hence, many authors have sought to identify the most appropriate approaches to address them in teaching (Beck, 2019; Hand & Levinson, 2012; Kello, 2016; Levy, 2019; McAvoy & Hess, 2013; Swalwell & Schweber, 2016). Nevertheless, there is still limited knowledge of how teachers experience real-life, concrete aspects of teaching controversial issues, such as what they find challenging and rewarding, how they address the issues, what they think of their teaching, and what they regard as successful or unsuccessful teaching episodes. Investigating subjective aspects like these can provide a deeper understanding and enrich research-based knowledge about teaching controversial issues.

This article presents findings from a research project financed by the Swedish Research Council to address these aspects. This project focuses on social studies teachers as they are responsible for conveying knowledge about societal, political and religious issues, thereby often dealing with potentially controversial issues in the classroom. For this article, a specific set of data collected in the project has been used, consisting of 18 social studies teachers' narratives regarding episodes in their teaching of controversial issues that they considered to be successful or failures, what they regarded as constituents of successful occasions, and implications of failure or lack of success in this context. Examples of successful and unsuccessful teaching experiences can provide valuable case knowledge, i.e., "knowledge of specific, well-documented, and richly described events" (Shulman, 2004, p. 207). It has been argued that examples of successful teaching can serve as role models and offer ideas that can help efforts to improve education (Kelchtermans, 2015; Shulman, 2004). We argue that also examples of failures can be educative for both teachers reflecting on their own teaching and researchers seeking to understand factors that influence teaching and learning.

This study seeks to gain an understanding of the complexities involved, by exploratively examining teachers' reflections on real-life classroom teaching. Through a thematic analysis of teachers' narratives, the aim of this article is to trace the values and tensions displayed in what the teachers regard as successful and unsuccessful. Thus, the article offers a deeper understanding of the everyday reality of teaching controversial issues.

PREVIOUS RESEARCH

The teaching of controversial issues in schools has received increasing research attention in recent decades (Larsson & Lindström, 2020; Zimmerman & Robertson, 2017). Empirical studies have shown how teachers understand and teach controversial issues in different national and educational contexts (Anker & von der Lippe, 2018; Cassar et al., 2021; Copur & Demirel, 2016; King, 2009; Pollak et al., 2018; Zembylas & Kambani, 2012). The results have provided important findings, showing, for instance, that such teaching is particularly challenging in national contexts where there are relatively recent experiences of conflict and the students have personal affiliations with different factions (cf. King, 2009; McDermott & Lanahan, 2012; Pollak et al., 2018). Nationally based conflicts may also clearly affect schools not only locally but also globally (Flensner et al., 2019).

Previous research has also shown that teachers' actions strongly influence how controversial issues are addressed in the classroom (Misco, 2012). There may be huge variations in issues that

are controversial in classrooms due to variations in diverse social, cultural, political, historical, and psychological factors (Larsson & Larsson, 2021; Zimmerman & Robertson, 2017). Some controversies raised may also be ‘fake’ in the sense that they concern scientifically established processes such as evolution or climate change (Cassar et al., 2021). Moreover, the teacher is never in full control over what happens in the classroom, which can lead to “unplanned controversial situations” (Cassar, 2021), so teaching controversial issues can be regarded as risky (Pace, 2019).

Teachers’ choices of action are based on complex professional considerations (Biesta, 2015; Hopmann, 2008; Kelchtermans, 2009; Persson & Berg, 2022), some of which may be related to attitudes towards controversial issues (Byford et al., 2009), views of the subject (Kaarlöp et al., 2022), views of the overarching purpose of education (Flensner 2020), or the character of the specific classroom situation (Persson, 2022). To capture some of this complexity and factors associated with educational success, this article explores both teachers’ experiences of teaching controversial issues (cf. Cassar et al., 2021; Cotton, 2006; Flensner, 2020; Oulton et al., 2004) and evaluations of their teaching (cf. Atjonen, 2014; Segolsson & Hirsch, 2019).

THEORY

This article presents an explorative study with a phenomenological starting point (Denscombe, 2010) to discover and analyse what the interviewed teachers regarded as successful and failures in their teaching about controversial issues. Thus, the researchers did not decide in advance what should be counted as a success, a failure, or a controversial issue. It is known from previous research that there is a wide variation in issues that do and do not raise controversy in a classroom (Cassar et al., 2021; Larsson & Larsson, 2021; Zimmerman & Robertson, 2017). Therefore, it is motivated to avoid a predefined definition and instead let the teachers determine what is controversial according to their own experiences. However, if an interviewed teacher asked (and some did) what we meant by controversial issues, we gave a brief description based on the following definition: controversial issues are those that “arouse strong feelings and divide opinion in communities and society” (Council of Europe, 2015). However, we stressed that we were interested in the teacher’s own experiences and whatever they would think of.

Our focus on the teachers’ experiences and their narratives of success and failure builds on the basic but theoretically important position that “teaching is done by somebody” (Kelchtermans, 2009, p. 258). Because of the personal interactions involved, the individual attributes of the person who performs a teaching act are much more important than those of people engaged in many other professions. In addition, how teachers regard themselves “inevitably affects their interpretation of the reality in the classroom” (Koenen et al., 2022). The quality of teaching cannot be separated from the person who teaches. It cannot be reduced to simple metrics related to output, instructions, and quality control criteria (Biesta, 2015; Kelchtermans, 2009). Furthermore, teaching cannot be fully understood through external observation alone, as this perspective overlooks the teacher’s own intentions and interpretations. The self-image of a teacher is also highly influential. Nias (1989) has argued that how “teachers construe the notion of work and their developing relationship to it” (p. 2) is highly connected to a sense of personal identity. As Kelchtermans (2009) emphasised, self-image is also conditioned by what students and others reflect back to the teacher, which means that teaching is a strongly relational endeavour.

One aspect of teachers’ self-image is related to what Kelchtermans (2009) calls task perception: a teacher’s idea of his or her legitimate duties and what he or she must fulfil to have a justified feeling of doing well. Task perception is infused with “deeply held beliefs about what constitutes

good education, about one's moral duties and responsibilities to do justice to the students". Task perceptions reflect "value-laden choices" (p. 262) among, for example, different desirable but non-combinable goals, implying tensions. The values and tensions explored in this study are thus understood as elements of task perception, reflecting these deeply held beliefs.

METHOD

The empirical material this article is based upon consists of 18 interviews with teachers teaching social studies in Swedish schools in years 7, 8 and 9. In addition to a specific school act, Swedish schooling is centrally governed by a body of curricular documents, including a general text that states common goals and values relevant to all school education and specific chapters with goals and content for each school subject. Throughout nine years of compulsory school, students study four closely related subjects of 'social studies': civics (including aspects of political science, law, economics, and sociology), geography, history and religious education. Often, a teacher is assigned to teach all social studies subjects in years 7, 8 and 9, especially in relatively small schools. Such teachers may have a formal university education in all four subjects or two or three of them. However, all interviewed teachers taught all four subjects. Sixteen of them had national certification for teaching all four subjects. The other two, who were in their first two years of employment, had such certification for only two subjects, but as they were also assigned to teach the other two, they were about to obtain certification for all four subjects. For this article, we regard them all as social studies teachers.¹ The interviewed teachers included men and women between 25 and 55 years old (median 42 years); they had been professionally teaching from 1 to 26 years (median 17 years). The teachers, who were found through personal and professional contacts, taught in schools of diverse sizes in locations ranging from small villages to large cities scattered across Sweden. Even though this procedure can be characterised as a "convenience sample", it provided us with the range of individual narratives of perceived successful and failed episodes necessary for the projects' design. They were all interviewed remotely, by phone, Zoom or Skype, and the interviews lasted between 30 and 65 minutes. The interviews were recorded for analysis, with the consent of the anonymised interviewees.

Before the interviews, the teachers were asked to prepare by thinking of one teaching episode about a controversial issue they would call successful and one they felt did not go very well. In the interviews, the teachers were asked to tell the researcher about these episodes, and the researcher could follow up with further questions about what happened, how and why. Thus, the researcher's interest fully focused on the teachers' experiences and interpretations.

The interview data were subjected to thematic analysis by organising interesting data units into meaningful groups (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In the first coding step, interesting utterances (statements expressing something about successful or unsuccessful teaching episodes) were identified. In the second step, the statements were organised into themes regarding significant apparent aspects of successful or unsuccessful episodes in an active interpretation and meaning-condensation process (Silverman, 2000). Thus, the themes were identified mainly at a semantic level, although some latent level interpretation may have been involved (Braun & Clark, 2006).

The identified themes were finally cross-analysed in relation to underlying values and tensions as reflections of task perceptions. In this way, the analytical procedure reflects the aim and

¹ For an analysis taking the different subject affiliations into account, see Larsson & Larsson (2021).

research questions. The teachers were anonymised with the codes T1 to T18, and the quotations presented were translated from Swedish into English by the authors.

The presentation of the results follows the identified themes in the teachers' narratives, i.e., reflections on content, students' learning, teachers' efforts and parents' reactions.

SUCCESS AND FAILURE: RESULTS

Controversial issues as content

As mentioned, all 18 interviewed teachers described examples of teaching occasions that they regarded as successful or unsuccessful. The presented examples concerned various issues. Three of the 18 successful and five of the 18 unsuccessful examples apparently concerned "unplanned controversial issues" (Cassar et al., 2021). In these cases, the teacher had not planned a lesson on any presumed controversial issue. Still, an issue was raised and proved to be controversial in a teaching situation that was planned to focus on something else. Thus, unplanned situations could result in either successful or failed teaching, and whether attention to the controversial issue was planned or unplanned did not clearly affect the teachers' experiences of success. Neither did the chosen issue. As noted above, the teachers were asked to give examples from teaching about any issue they would call controversial, and the examples they provided varied greatly. So, successful and unsuccessful teaching could be linked to diverse issues, and there was no clear, strong relationship between the content and experiences of success. However, some slight tendencies were detected.

Some narratives of success concerned occasions where teachers had taught about climate, consumption and resources. This was apparently connected partly to the teachers' level of subject knowledge, as teachers with high levels of geography education and interest mainly presented these examples (Larsson & Larsson, 2021). At the time of the interviews (late 2020 and early 2021), the climate issue may have been somewhat overshadowed by the global pandemic in mass media despite its high ongoing importance. Another possible explanation for this tendency is that climate change has similar relevance for all students in a class, so there may be relatively little variation in experience of its importance. In contrast, many of the examples of failed teaching occasions concerned issues related to refugees, migration, racism, and antagonism between ethnical and religious groups. This indicates that issues associated with group-related divergences might arouse more controversy within classes than climate issues, especially if the classes include members of antagonistic groups. Apart from these possible tendencies, the success of the teaching did not seem to have depended much on which controversial issue was addressed.

When the teachers talked about successful and unsuccessful teaching, they mainly discussed the people and relationships involved in the teaching process. They made statements concerning the students' learning in one way or another, statements about themselves and their efforts, and about parents' reactions.

Students' learning

In the examples of successful teaching episodes, a common theme is that the students' views broadened, and they learnt to understand different perspectives on an issue. One teacher talked about an example concerning the use of natural resources. This episode began with a film produced by a mining company that presents and celebrates mining, creating enthusiasm for mining among the students. Then, the teaching switched to the perspective of the Sami (indigenous people of northern Scandinavia and Kola peninsula) and their conflicting needs, which also engaged the students. That

was followed by a film showing cobalt mining in the Congo and associated exploitation of people. According to the teacher, the different perspectives presented enabled the students to understand the mechanisms of colonialism and gain a greater understanding of the vulnerability of indigenous peoples. They also gained insights into conflicting aspects of sustainable development and were often motivated to think about their consumption. The teacher highlighted how this teaching example touched on several controversial issues and how it enabled students to see multiple perspectives:

Of course, when we sum up the course, some still think it's most important that we expand welfare, that economic growth should be the main priority...Not everyone thinks the environment should come first, but everyone understands the problem, and that's the most important thing for me. That you don't just have a one-sided view of the whole thing. (T5)

Another teacher (16) talked about a successful teaching situation that dealt with discrimination. There were conflicts between students in the class based on different lived experiences of socio-economic class and ethnic affiliations. In this situation, the teacher managed to get the students to engage in dialogue. The teacher finds that the students can learn to understand the perspectives of others by eliciting the opinions present in the classroom. A positive aspect of such situations from the teacher's perspective is that the students obtain a more nuanced picture by encountering other people's points of view in discussions. One teacher expressed the experience of successful teaching as follows, "when students start to think. All of a sudden they can think a little differently, and they get some kind of respect for each other." (T1)

Two elements of successful teaching that were frequently mentioned were the students seeing different perspectives despite holding strong opinions and the ability to have a civil conversation in a class despite differences in opinions. When the students can disagree and meanwhile recognise and respect the rules and laws of society and each other in whole class discussions, "then I've felt satisfied as a teacher". (T16)

Some teachers explicitly stated that teaching about controversial issues is successful when everyone can stay neutral:

When you manage to have a good conversation... when you talk about radicalisation, and it's neutral, you can talk about the concepts or racist labelling and why you shouldn't use those, for example. Then, it can be quite neutral. (T11)

Another element of success in some of the teachers' examples consisted of students abandoning an opinion based on a wrong perception. One teacher talked about prejudices and misconceptions about immigration held by some members of a class, such as "all immigrants go on benefits" or "a great many are criminals":

We talked a bit about it, about what was true and what wasn't true, and a lot of people got an eye-opener and became very interested in what we were talking about and had sort of 'aha' experiences, and well, OK, maybe it isn't as I had thought. (T15)

In such cases, success lies in the students being able to correct incorrect beliefs through teaching.

Success can also be about students gaining an empathetic understanding of what it is like to be in a vulnerable situation and, thus, a better understanding of other people's life situations. This appears to be seen as a quality, although, of course, it may also lead to changes in viewpoints in the same manner as in previous examples. One teacher's example concerned law, justice and the death penalty issue. A group in a seventh-grade class (in the first year of high school, so the class was composed of students who had previously attended several different 'middle' schools) claimed that

the death penalty should be introduced in Sweden. Those in favour of this became quite dominant as the others were shy and quiet. The teacher took on the role of representing different perspectives but found it difficult to be heard. However, a girl with a foreign background raised her hand and said that her brother was sentenced to death:

There was a turn in the whole discussion; even those who were in favour of the death penalty became interested. We began to discuss the risks of the death penalty, particularly its irreversibility. The quality of the discussion completely changed. The guys in favour of the death penalty still were, but they understood that it wasn't a simple question. They could discuss the issue from several perspectives, which they couldn't before this girl had shared her story. This was very sensitive at the time because I didn't really know how to handle this information that I didn't know about, but somehow, it worked out very well in the end. I reached what I think most teachers want to reach: the students realising that a question or problem can always be viewed from different points of view. (T18)

From this teacher's perspective, a successful student effort does not necessarily entail an empathic commitment; an intellectual commitment may also count, for instance, when students are motivated enough to ask relevant questions and discuss them. One teacher regarded a lesson as good when the students actively engage in discussions "in a good way.... Then it has been a good lesson (...) When a lecture that I thought would take 15 minutes instead takes 45 minutes, then I think they really listened." (T2) Two other teachers stated that teaching is successful when all students are engaged and participate in a common classroom conversation (T17), and "I'm quite happy as a teacher when there's a good discussion" (T16). Thus, classroom conversation with questions from the students and relevant discussion seems to be indicative of successful teaching, and the teachers seemed to regard a good discussion not only as a vehicle for learning about controversial issues but also as somewhat of a desired end in itself.

When it comes to what teachers describe as failed classroom episodes, many examples are characterised by various kinds of clashes between students or groups of students, students being offended by other students (e.g., by racist comments), or the teacher taking a stand against a student's statements, leading to one or more students feeling upset (T17). One teacher emphasised that students being unable to maintain a neutral attitude towards the focal subject, groups being divided against each other, or the teacher needing to take a stand are hallmarks of teaching failure. The teacher expressed beliefs that the purpose of a task is lost when a conflict between groups occurs and the teacher is forced to choose a side: "When there are really bad conversations, and I end up in a situation where I'm not neutral but have to step forward and defend some group" (T11). Upset feelings and arguments between students are featured in several of the teachers' examples. One stated that she tried to avoid debate in the classroom: "It hardly achieves anything; it usually just gets derailed, and people say stupid things instead" (T2).

Some examples also concerned students with strong opinions preventing other students from expressing deviating opinions or holding on to opinions that clashed with the school's fundamental values (T4, T5, T15, and T12). One teacher described the teaching of Islam in a class with a group of orthodox Christians, and the teacher failed to get the students to see others' perspectives:

It was difficult to respond to them because they were so incredibly convinced of their own opinion. It was so hard to have a conversation because they didn't want to understand the other side because 'Why would you when the other side has never understood us? They can all die.' It was really bad then and there in that group. (T12)

Here, the failure is closely related to the students' strong beliefs and inability or unwillingness to understand or empathise with others' perspectives. The teacher stated that the students have the right to think and believe what they want; they do not need to accept other perspectives but must try to understand how others perceive things. When this did not happen, the teacher regarded the teaching as a failure.

A consequence of certain students or student groups strongly pushing their views is that other, more cautious students may not express themselves at all, which several teachers highlighted as an element of failed teaching (T3; T16). One of them provided an example of teaching about the Israel-Palestine conflict. According to this teacher, some students had deeply emotionally anchored positions. Because it is so emotionally charged for some, other students refrained from expressing their views, regardless of whether they agreed or disagreed (T16).

Various affected aspects of students' learning could thus be distinguished in the teachers' stories of success. The students broadened their views or acquired the ability to consider an issue from several perspectives, abandoned an undesirable opinion, became empathetically engaged and understood other people's situations or became interested in a focal problem and could reason objectively rather than arguing or debating irrelevantly.

Conversely, in the stories of failed teaching, the teaching did NOT lead to the students broadening their viewpoints, abandoning undesirable opinions or showing empathy. Instead, there were quarrels and irrelevant debates, leading to some students feeling hurt.

Teachers' efforts

Some teachers' stories concern their own efforts, independently of the students' learning or reactions. Elements of successful teaching in these examples included the teachers feeling that their efforts were good and that they managed to balance something difficult or break through prejudices. At the same time, failure occurred when they were caught off guard and did not manage to manoeuvre in a manner that enabled successful teaching.

An example cited by one relatively inexperienced teacher (T8) concerned how, on one occasion, he handled historical designations of ethnic groups by problematising them as controversial concepts. His example concerned proper terms for the indigenous people of North America. The teacher admitted that he accidentally used a historical term himself but then de-dramatized his mistake through a historical problematisation of terminology. Thus, according to his self-evaluation, he managed to balance something that he found difficult in a successful manner.

Furthermore, several teachers stated that their teaching was successful when they helped to break down prejudices. "I busted myths about immigration" (T15), one said, and another stated, "The risk is, of course, that you can dilute and even confirm prejudices and other [undesirable] things. Ideally, you punch holes in them instead" (T14). Although part of the message here is that the students learnt and absorbed correct information in such cases, as in the themes already presented, the teachers focused on their efforts in these examples of successful teaching.

Conversely, several stories about failures concerned the teacher's shortcomings. Often, they blamed themselves when something did not go well. For example, one teacher (T6) told of a student who reacted to a factual film about the slave trade and commented that it showed racism. The teacher did not respond to the comment but thought afterwards that she should have addressed the issue, both to support the offended student personally and discuss in class how to relate to historical events that violate current values. Another example concerned the teacher's inability to understand and manage the reactions of individual students and interactions between them in a

classroom discussion on abortion. It turned out that one of the students in the class had had an abortion and:

I didn't know this, but things like that can happen when they're in the 9th grade. Several of her religious classmates reacted very negatively to this, both to the decision and towards her as a person at the time. And this was something everyone knew about, except me, obviously. This led...led to this girl moving to another school. I have to say that I've never felt such... such... failure as an adult or educator. (T18)

In some examples, the teachers expressed worries about failing to give a fair picture of a difficult-to-navigate phenomenon or marginalised groups (T8, T13, and T14). In one case, the teacher (T13) believed that due to her ignorance, the teaching may have given a simplified, generalised picture of groups already marginalised in one sense or another. Such teaching risks reproducing inequitable social structures. The teacher found this problematic but felt unable to break the patterns. Thus, the failure in such examples lies in a kind of personal pedagogical defeat as teachers do their best but feel that it is not good enough and see no realistic approach to solve the problems.

In similar cases, teachers may feel that they have missed something they should have thought of in advance. In one example, the teacher (T8) showed an old Asterix cartoon film to a new class. During the screening, he realised that people in the film are depicted in a condescending, racialising way "like they were drawn in the past". In the interview, he reflected that the presence of dark-skinned students in the class made him aware of his mistake. He dealt with the situation by talking to the class about it after the film was shown, but still labelled the incident as an example of failure in his teaching.

Parents' reactions

Several stories concern parents' reactions to the teaching about controversial issues. This occurred almost exclusively in the examples of failed teaching and involved parents becoming dissatisfied and stridently responding. One teacher (T10) told of an occasion when she strongly reacted to a student's offensive, racist statements in the classroom. In 'a great conversation' with the principal and parents, it was agreed that the student must apologise in front of the class. After the apology, some parents of other students in the class thought that the teacher had gone too far, and the teacher was reported for violating the student who expressed racist views. However, the teacher said that her responses would be the same for a similar event. Later in the interview, she stated that she "made the general mistake of getting very angry in public" and should have stayed calm. However, she repeated that you SHOULD be angry and the school should react when fundamental values are challenged in such a manner. The whole story was still clearly highly sensitive for the teacher, even several years after the event.

Another teacher (T17) stated, "Something very difficult to balance in teaching is this intolerance, racism, extremism and so on." In a specific situation, the teacher objects to student's racist generalisations about a recent occasion of gun violence. Unintentionally, polarisation occurs where the class is divided between one side, including the teacher, that discusses sociological explanations for gang violence and another side that condemns criminality. Later, the principal is contacted by a parent who is very upset. The family had itself been affected by a similar shooting violence, and the parent accuses the teacher of glorifying the violence by pursuing sociological contextualisation. Although, according to the teacher, it was all a misunderstanding, the incident was clearly stressful.

The same teacher (T17) also spoke about an occasion when several parents of students contacted her in a class, who objected to what they thought was an offensive homework assignment, asking the students to think about the family's energy use and if anything could be reduced. In contrast, a few years later, the same task worked very well, and both parents and students participated in positive discussions about helping each other to reduce the burden on the planet. The teacher's interpretation was that societal controversy over the climate issue had decreased.

TASK PERCEPTION, VALUES AND TENSIONS: DISCUSSION

In line with the aim of this article, we will now discuss the values and tensions that can be discerned in the teachers' narratives of success and failure. The 18 interviews revealed several distinct characteristics of successful and unsuccessful teaching about controversial issues. As has been shown, these mostly concern students' learning. We have shown how signs of success noted by the teachers included students broadening their viewpoints, abandoning unwanted opinions, becoming empathically engaged and understanding others, and interested and objectively reasoning about a problem. Conversely, they perceived quarrels and violations that cannot be resolved as signs of failure. These findings provide clear indications of underlying values. Firstly, they reveal a deep concern for the students' well-being among the teachers and a strong belief that no student should have to feel exposed or violated. Most teachers' comments also indicate a belief that it should be possible to converse civilly about an issue despite differences in opinions. The teachers wanted the students to be able to address issues neutrally, even when they had strong personal opinions. Most also expressed (explicitly or implicitly) beliefs that facts should be accepted and dissenters tolerated. Many examples revealed a desire for less polarization. Still, the interviewed teachers also expressed beliefs that a pluralistic perspective is valuable and that students should be able to understand and apply varying perspectives. To a high degree, this aligns with the values and norms outlined in the national curriculum, reflecting a task perception that is generally consistent with national educational policy.

The narratives also indicate some tensions within the area of task perception that clearly imply didactic challenges for the teachers. Commitment and emotions are both sought and difficult to manage. Many teachers seemed to regard the ability of students to imagine and emotionally engage with the situation of refugees, for example, as desirable. However, they differed in the degree to which they welcomed commitment and emotion. Some wanted to see emotional involvement, while others mainly seemed to perceive students having strong beliefs as problematic. One teacher explicitly regarded the students behaving neutrally instead of becoming emotional as a key characteristic of successful teaching. Also, many previous studies have found that students having personal, highly emotionally charged experiences is didactically challenging for teachers, especially when it leads to division among groups in the classroom (King, 2009). A classroom that is too loud and conflict-filled is difficult to handle and very undesirable for most teachers (cf. Cassar et al., 2021; Flensner, 2019; Pollak et al., 2018).

Another clear tension and didactic challenge concerns the students' own opinions. The teachers regarded students retaining positions that they deemed contrary to fundamental societal values as failures and students changing their positions towards desirable values as successes. While the teachers thought that different opinions are welcome and that the students must be allowed to have their own opinions, this is obviously challenging to handle in the classroom. Several of the teachers clearly struggled to find appropriate ways to respond to some of the students' stated opinions. Since learning can be defined as a change of thought, unavoidable tensions related to opinion raise

difficult challenges, including the following three: Should the students be left to develop their own understanding? Or should their learning be consciously directed? Or should the learning be an open process that can result in any opinion? These tensions have been discussed as a conflict between the socialising and subjectifying functions of education (Biesta, 2015, 2020; Persson, 2022), with potential resolution through disagreeing successfully.

As we have seen, several identified characteristics of successful and unsuccessful teaching concern the students. Others are related to teachers' self-image, i.e., their perceptions of themselves and how they value their contributions (which can be experienced as either successful or unsuccessful depending on the students' perceptions). Our interpretation is that this is highly related to the need for control in the classroom and teachers managing to act appropriately in potentially stressful situations in a manner that allows them to stay trustful and maintain good relationships with all students. This is consistent with the known desire of most teachers to avoid 'a classroom in turmoil', as discussed by Cassar et al. (2021), and the well-known risk of teachers losing control over the classroom when teaching controversial issues (Barton and Levstick, 2004). Clearly, teachers sometimes experience uncertainty about their ability to cope appropriately with students' identities or personal experiences. This can be exceptionally challenging, especially when they are intimately linked to controversial issues, but in such cases, it is particularly crucial to manage associated tensions sensitively and effectively.

Finally, highlighted elements of teaching failures in some interviews included adverse parents' reactions, which can also be related to the teacher's self-image, control, and authority. Comments of respondents whose examples of unsuccessful teaching included parents reacting negatively and contacting the teacher's superiors show that this can be extremely stressful for teachers (cf. Lassila et al., 2021). Unlike other examples, this constitutes a kind of involvement from the outside world in the classroom sphere, which can otherwise be perceived as a rather closed arena where the teacher has exclusive decision-making rights. However, other authors have noted that classroom teaching can engage not only the students but also external 'audiences' like parents (cf. Davis & Neitzel, 2011; Nias, 1989). Clearly, there are risks that teaching about controversial issues may displease and involve disciplinary sanctions, which teachers try to manage in various ways (cf. Hess, 2009; McAvoy & Hess, 2013).

CONCLUSION

This study has provided insights into teachers' experiences of successful and unsuccessful teaching about controversial issues. A summarised conclusion is that teaching about controversial issues is challenging and risky for teachers but also has great potential to promote students' learning. Overall, the stories of success and failure in this study vividly show the huge variation in potential outcomes of teaching efforts in the classroom, however well-planned they may be (cf. Kelchtermans, 2015), and the enormous complexity of concrete teaching realities. It also shows how successful teaching is not only about achieving curriculum goals but also must be understood in relation to teachers' task perceptions and self-images.

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