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# Editorial: Teaching controversial issues in secondary education

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## Editorial on the Research Topic

### Teaching controversial issues in secondary education

The teaching of controversial topics—understood as opposing viewpoints that generate rational disagreements—plays a crucial role in the development of critical awareness skills and the civic competencies necessary to address them effectively (Ibagón-Martín and Miralles, 2021). Their inclusion in the secondary education curriculum aims to foster the contrast of reasoned perspectives, enabling students to critically analyze sources and narratives while engaging with opposing beliefs, values, and interests. This pedagogical approach enhances elective rationality—that is, the ability to make informed and justified decisions in complex contexts—and promotes social engagement as an integral part of the democratic process (Ortega-Sánchez and Pagès, 2022). Therefore, it not only seeks to facilitate an understanding of social complexity but also to prepare students to anticipate, intervene in, and resolve the challenges that affect it. Addressing these topics offers numerous benefits, as supported by recent research (Meral et al., 2022). Among these, the development of critical-reflective thinking stands out, equipping students with the ability to contemplate real-world issues, assess diverse perspectives, and propose adaptable solutions. Furthermore, it fosters active citizenship by promoting participatory and responsible attitudes toward social issues and encourages students' willingness to engage in collective wellbeing. In this way, the teaching of controversial topics serves as a fundamental tool for understanding the complexity of social issues and for critically and responsibly contributing to their resolution.

For this teaching to be effective, it is essential to integrate it into the educational curriculum through curricular problematization or the didactic treatment of socially relevant problems, controversial issues, or socially significant questions. This requires that selected content be of particular social relevance, be connected to contemporary societal challenges and interests, and adopt a transdisciplinary approach. From this perspective, teacher education programs should, according to Ortega-Sánchez (2024), provide both the pedagogical and substantive knowledge necessary to navigate diverse interpretations and multiple perspectives. This would help to overcome tensions between traditional curricula and the inherent complexity of controversy, particularly in disciplines such as social studies (Jerome and Elwick, 2019). In this context, the present Research Topic focuses on the teaching of controversial topics as a means to educate critically engaged citizens who are reflective and committed to social justice. Its incorporation into education thus seeks to connect students with real-world problems and prepare them to participate actively in a democratic, inclusive, and equitable society.

The monograph *Teaching Controversial Issues in Secondary Education* brings together eight studies on the teaching of controversial topics and their curricular inclusion within the framework of education for critical and democratic citizenship. The research conducted by Ibagón and Miralles-Martínez, *The Conceptions of Spanish and Colombian Students Regarding Processes of Historical Reconciliation*, seeks to analyze the historical judgments of Spanish and Colombian students regarding historical reconciliation processes and their influence on the construction of their identity as well as their ethical and political stances. Their findings indicate that students tend to express ethically and politically correct judgments when the topics do not affect their national identity; however, they adopt more neutral or less critical positions when the issue is directly related to their own identity.

The evaluation of history teaching through the promotion of critical thinking skills is the central focus of the study by Miralles-Sánchez et al., *Design and Validation of Two Tools to Observe and Analyze History Lessons in Secondary Education*. This valuable contribution significantly addresses the longstanding lack of robust measurement instruments in the field of Social Sciences education. The study aims to describe the design and validation process of two observation and analysis instruments (*History Class Observation Tool* and focus groups) to enhance the teaching of historical thinking in secondary education. Both instruments were validated with high reliability and proved to be suitable and relevant for assessing history teaching and fostering critical thinking in secondary education.

In the field of gender inequalities in literary education, the research conducted by López-Valero et al., *Exploring Family Models and SDG Number Five in Picture Books: Dialogical Alternatives for Secondary Education*, examines how picture books can serve as key educational resources for understanding new family models and gender equality in secondary education. The findings highlight the existence of suitable picture books for addressing family diversity and gender equity in the classroom, as well as their potential for implementing dialogical teaching strategies that promote critical thinking and respect for diversity.

In this line of research, the contribution of Ortega-Sánchez et al., *Affective-Sexual and Gender Diversity in Spanish Education: A Systematic Literature Review*, presents the first systematic review of the scientific literature on affective-sexual and gender diversity education in Spain (2013–2023). Aimed at identifying advances, challenges, areas for improvement, and research gaps in this field, their findings highlight the factors influencing attitudes toward diversity in educational settings. The study reveals the persistence of hegemonic gender representations, the curricular invisibility of affective-sexual and gender diversity, and deficiencies in teacher training, among other dimensions. Although diversity education is associated with the promotion of democratic citizenship and social inclusion, it faces structural barriers such as LGBTIQ+phobia and the lack of specific educational protocols.

Within this field, the study by Marolla-Gajardo and Castellví-Mata, *Transform Hate Speech in Education from*

*Gender Perspectives: Conceptions of Chilean Teachers Through a Case Study*, explores opportunities to teach students how to construct counter-narratives against hate speech and gender-based violence through the teaching of History and Social Studies. Their findings indicate that teachers perceive a growing presence of gender-based violence and hate speech in classrooms, express concern over the normalization of these attitudes, and acknowledge a lack of training and tools to address them effectively.

The influence of conceptual change pedagogy on students' attitudes and behaviors toward pluralism and associated rights in culturally sensitive contexts is the focus of the study by Rea-Ramírez et al., *Evaluating the Impact of Conceptual Change Pedagogy on Student Attitudes and Behaviors Toward Controversial Topics in Iraq*. Their results demonstrate the effectiveness of this pedagogical approach in fostering respect for diversity, the inclusion of religious and ethnic communities, gender equality, and the non-violent resolution of conflicts.

The study by Singh and Mukeredzi, *Teachers' Experiences of Continuous Professional Development for Citizenship and Social Cohesion in South Africa and Zimbabwe: Enhancing Capacity for Deliberative Democracies*, analyzes teachers' experiences in professional development programs focused on citizenship and social cohesion. Their contribution highlights a pervasive concern regarding professional training in these areas, revealing it to be fragmented and inconsistent, as well as the avoidance of political topics, whose content and competencies are often neglected.

Finally, the study by Fernández Tilve et al., *Emotional Competence Profile in Secondary School Counselors: Controversy or Need?*, evaluates the perceptions of school counselors in Galicia regarding the importance of emotional competencies in their professional practice. Despite confirming their interest in such competencies and acknowledging their impact on interpersonal relationship management and personal wellbeing, the study identifies the need to explicitly integrate these competencies into both initial and ongoing training for counselors to enhance the quality of secondary education.

Collectively, these eight studies define, through the lenses of historical thinking, gender equity, citizenship, and professional development, the objective of establishing a holistic educational model capable of integrating cognitive, ethical, political, social, affective, and emotional dimensions to address and engage with contemporary controversial issues and social problems. From this perspective, the monograph offers rigorous and multidimensional analyses of the teaching of controversial topics in secondary education, providing evidence of both the challenges and opportunities for their curricular and instructional inclusion. Through diverse methodological approaches and educational contexts, the selected studies emphasize the importance of ensuring a curriculum that is comprehensively oriented toward the development of critical, creative, and social thinking skills, as well as civic and emotional competencies, in both students and professional practice.

## Author contributions

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## Conflict of interest

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