

DD@S Policy Recommendations Report



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DD@S POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS REPORT

DD@S (Democratic Dialogue at School) is delivering its final policy brief, which includes recommendations based on the project's 30 months of work.

14/06/2024



Introduction

The DD@S (Democratic Dialogue at School) Erasmus+ project, which ran from 1 January 2022 to 30 June 2024, aims to empower European secondary school educators to deal with multicultural challenges at school. The project contributes to the professional development of secondary school teachers and educators in general, helping them acquire effective dialogue skills to cope with ethnic, religious, and multicultural conflict situations and discussions on various controversial issues at school.

This initiative involves partners from Belgium, Greece, Italy, and Cyprus and aims to enhance inclusive education by equipping educators with the skills needed for effective dialogue in diverse and often contentious settings. By focusing on the professional growth of educators and fostering a supportive environment through collaboration with school boards, DD@S endeavours to create a competent system that promotes democratic dialogue and addresses the broader socio-political context of education.

The aim of this document is to compile insights and suggestions based on the experiences acquired during the DD@S project implementation, as well as the information collected through focus groups and LTTA activities conducted throughout its 30 months of work. This report provides policy recommendations to support the implementation of democratic dialogue at schools across Europe, aiming to contribute to the professional development of teachers and educators. It seeks to empower them with effective dialogue skills to manage ethnic, religious, and multicultural conflicts and discuss various controversial issues in school settings. By addressing institutional and individual capabilities, the report will guide school boards in creating favourable conditions for implementing democratic dialogue in schools, thereby enhancing inclusive education and fostering a competent system within the broader socio-political context.

Context and Challenges

DD@S recognises the complex landscape of today's European secondary schools, where multicultural challenges are ever-present. This section examines the multifaceted context in





which educators operate and the specific challenges they face. It explores the diverse classroom environments that mirror broader societal dynamics, the nature of controversial situations that can arise from this diversity, and the varying levels of preparedness among educators to handle such challenges. By understanding these factors, we can better appreciate the necessity for targeted professional development and institutional support to foster democratic dialogue and inclusive education in schools across Europe.

Diversity in the Classroom

Schools serve as microcosms of broader society, reflecting its varied perspectives, values, and norms. This translates to a hyper-diverse mix of interreligious, intercultural, and intersocial value frameworks in metropolitan and urban settings. The DD@S research results illustrate this diversity, with significant proportions of educators across Belgium, Greece, Italy, and Cyprus reporting the presence of social, linguistic, and ethnic minorities in their classrooms.

For instance, 97% of educators in Belgium note social diversity, while 68% in Cyprus and 54% in Greece and Italy report similar conditions. This diversity manifests in various forms, including religious differences, as seen in Greece and Cyprus, where educators report religious minorities other than Orthodox Christianity. In Belgium and Italy, diversity extends beyond Catholicism and includes a range of religious beliefs. Linguistic diversity is also notable, with 65% of educators in Italy and 66% in Cyprus reporting pupils from linguistic minority groups. This rich tapestry of backgrounds requires educators to be adept at managing a range of cultural, social, and linguistic dynamics within their classrooms.

Educators often find themselves navigating seemingly innocuous classroom situations that can escalate into polarising discussions due to these underlying diversities. For example, discussions on religious holidays, dietary restrictions, or even historical events can quickly become contentious. The challenge lies in balancing these diverse perspectives while fostering an inclusive and respectful learning environment. The high levels of reported diversity underscore the need for targeted support and professional development for educators to manage these complex dynamics effectively.

Controversial Situations

According to the DD@S survey results, in classrooms across Belgium, Cyprus, Greece, and Italy, educators frequently find themselves navigating contentious issues that arise from the rich tapestry of diversity among their students. Approximately two out of three educators regularly encounter controversial situations, with Belgian and Greek educators facing them most frequently on a weekly basis. These situations often involve pupils as the primary actors, although colleagues can also be involved, reflecting the complexity of interpersonal dynamics within school environments.





The competence of educators in managing these sensitive topics varies significantly across the surveyed countries. Italian and Belgian educators generally express greater confidence in handling controversial themes, while Greek educators tend to feel less competent. Despite these differences, educators share a common understanding that guiding discussions on difficult subjects is crucial. Many adopt a facilitative approach, allowing students to engage in dialogue while providing necessary guidance to steer conversations constructively.

Turning polarising conversations into opportunities for mutual understanding is another significant challenge. A notable proportion of educators in Belgium and Cyprus admit difficulties in achieving this, highlighting the need for further support and training. In contrast, educators in Italy, in particular, feel well-prepared to navigate and redirect contentious discussions effectively.

Throughout these interactions, educators employ principles of democratic dialogue, such as active listening, exploring diverse opinions, and distinguishing between facts and opinions. These practices are essential in creating an inclusive classroom environment where diverse viewpoints are respected and discussed constructively.

Comfort levels with discussing specific controversial themes vary across countries. For instance, Cypriot educators express less comfort than their peers in Greece, Italy, and Belgium. Themes like discrimination, gender equality, racism, and freedom of speech are generally well-accepted topics for discussion among educators in these countries. However, some topics, such as religion, politics, and suicide, pose greater challenges, particularly in Belgium and Italy.

In conclusion, managing controversial situations effectively requires competence in facilitating dialogue and a nuanced understanding of cultural and social dynamics within the classroom. By equipping educators with the necessary skills and support, educational systems can better harness these challenges as opportunities for meaningful learning and growth among students.

Challenges Faced by Educators

The DD@S field research in each partner country revealed that educators face unique challenges in addressing controversial topics in their classrooms, shaped by their country's specific socio-cultural context. The high diversity in schools, as reflected in the survey results, underscores the need for tailored approaches to these challenges.

Due to Brussels's diverse population, educators in **Belgium** frequently engage with controversial topics like the headscarf, homosexuality, and evolution theory. Enhanced training and support are needed to navigate these discussions effectively, leveraging the strengths of complementary teaching teams.





Educators in **Greece** express unease in addressing issues related to sexual orientation, gender identity, and extreme political ideologies. They highlight curriculum constraints and lack of adequate training as significant barriers. Policy recommendations should focus on comprehensive training programmes and curriculum integration.

In **Italy**, educators confront challenges associated with discussing topics such as euthanasia suicide, the death penalty and other ethical issues, migration stereotypes, gender-related issues and femicide. There is a clear demand for specialised training in conflict resolution and democratic dialogue, along with curriculum adjustments that promote critical thinking and civic engagement.

While educators in **Cyprus** demonstrate a strong willingness to address controversial issues, they face obstacles such as academic autonomy and parental reactions. Policy measures should emphasise creating safe spaces for dialogue, providing infrastructural support, and developing strategies for managing spontaneous discussions.

Recommendations for Policy Makers

Addressing controversial issues in educational settings requires a multifaceted approach that empowers educators and cultivates an inclusive learning environment. As schools increasingly reflect the diverse social fabric of their communities, educators play a pivotal role in guiding discussions on sensitive topics while promoting critical thinking and mutual respect among students. This section outlines key recommendations for policymakers to enhance professional development, integrate controversial topics into the curriculum, foster supportive school environments, encourage collaboration, and implement effective engagement and evaluation strategies. By implementing these recommendations, policymakers can equip educators with the necessary skills and resources to navigate complex classroom dynamics and promote meaningful dialogue that prepares students for active citizenship in a pluralistic society.

Enhance Professional Development and Training

Comprehensive Training Programs

- Develop and implement comprehensive, mandatory training programs for educators across Europe. Provide regular retraining opportunities to address new issues and foster a deeper understanding of emerging trends in controversial topics. These programs should be informed by current news and developments and by using platforms such as the DD@S e-learning platform. The initiatives should prioritise managing contentious topics, fostering democratic discourse, and mastering conflict





resolution strategies customised to meet the diverse requirements identified across various nations.

- Include training on various teaching styles, techniques for managing spontaneous questions and remarks, and methods for creating an inclusive classroom environment.

Ongoing Support and Mentorship

- Set up ongoing professional development opportunities, including mentorship programmes and learning communities, where experienced educators can exchange ideas and best practices and guide their colleagues through challenging classroom scenarios.
- Grant access to a library of resources encompassing case studies, lesson plans, and tactics for addressing sensitive topics effectively.
- Utilise the DD@S e-learning platform as a central repository of these resources, providing case studies, lesson plans, and strategies for facilitating spontaneous discussions and fostering inclusive learning environments.

Curriculum Integration

Embedding Controversial Issues in Curriculum

- Incorporate discussions on contentious topics into the school curriculum to enhance students' citizenship competencies and critical thinking abilities. This can be achieved by integrating pertinent themes across various subjects and encouraging project-based learning and real-world scenarios to promote deeper comprehension and active engagement with sensitive issues. Additionally, utilise non-formal education activities and e-learning opportunities to enrich the learning experience and foster a well-rounded understanding of complex topics.
- Utilise the DD@S Training Course to foster students' citizenship competencies and critical thinking skills through project-based learning and real-life scenarios.

Inclusive Curriculum Design

- Ensure the curriculum reflects students' diverse backgrounds and perspectives, promoting an inclusive and respectful learning environment. This includes representing minority groups and their contributions to society within educational materials.





Foster a Supportive School Environment

Creating Safe Spaces for Dialogue

- Designate safe spaces within schools where students and educators can engage in open dialogue about controversial issues without fear of reprisal. These spaces should be equipped to handle sensitive discussions and promote mutual respect and understanding.
- Implement clear guidelines and ground rules to ensure respectful discussions where all voices are heard and valued.

Infrastructure and Resources

- Invest in the necessary infrastructure to support structured activities and dialogue on controversial themes. This includes appropriate classroom setups, technology, and access to information and research resources.
- Provide schools with the tools needed to create a conducive environment for democratic dialogue, including training in mediation and conflict resolution.

Encourage Collaboration and Peer Support

Team Teaching and Peer Learning

- Promote team teaching approaches where educators with complementary skills and backgrounds can support each other in addressing controversial issues. This collaborative approach can help mitigate individual educators' discomfort and enhance the overall effectiveness of discussions.
- Foster peer learning communities where educators can share experiences, strategies, and resources for handling controversial topics.

Engage Stakeholders

- Involve parents, community leaders, and other stakeholders in discussions about controversial school issues. This broader engagement can help align school initiatives with community values and expectations and provide additional support for educators and students.
- Develop partnerships with organisations specialising in diversity, inclusion, and conflict resolution to provide additional expertise and resources.

Implementation Strategy

Pilot Programs

- Launch pilot programs in selected schools across Europe using the DD@S Training Course to test the proposed recommendations. Monitor and evaluate these





initiatives to gather insights and make evidence-based adjustments before wider implementation.

Monitoring and Evaluation

- Establish robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to assess the effectiveness of training programs, curriculum changes, and other interventions. Use this data to make evidence-based adjustments and improvements.
- Collect feedback from educators, students, and other stakeholders to ensure that the initiatives meet their needs and address emerging challenges.

Policy Advocacy

- Advocate for policy changes at the national and European levels to support the integration of democratic dialogue and controversy management into education systems. Highlight the benefits of these approaches for fostering inclusive and tolerant societies.

Conclusion

The policy recommendations report of the DD@S project represents a comprehensive effort to improve secondary education in Europe through democratic dialogue. The project, which lasted 30 months, emphasised the crucial role of educators in addressing multicultural challenges in diverse classrooms. The findings revealed significant diversity across Belgium, Greece, Italy, and Cyprus, highlighting the need for effective strategies to manage sensitive topics.

The policy recommendations in this brief are intended to provide guidance for the successful implementation of DD@S findings in schools, providing educators with the necessary skills and support systems. By promoting comprehensive training programs, continuous professional development, and inclusive curriculum designs, policymakers can prepare educators to create inclusive learning environments where controversial issues are constructively addressed. Creating safe spaces for dialogue, fostering collaboration among educators, and involving stakeholders are crucial steps in nurturing a culture of mutual respect and understanding in schools.

As the DD@S project concludes, its legacy lies in the practical tools and strategies provided and in its advocacy for systemic changes that promote democratic values and inclusive education. By implementing these recommendations, policymakers can ensure that European schools continue to develop as centres of learning where diversity is celebrated and dialogue serves as a cornerstone of civic engagement and societal cohesion.





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