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Research article

# Controversial issues and the nature of history: Teachers' views on controversial historical issues in Swedish lower secondary school

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## Abstract

Controversial issues are often regarded as abundant in history education. Most topics can be regarded as controversial in one way or another. The purpose of this article is to analyse the way history teachers in Swedish lower secondary schools relate controversial issues to a particular view of the nature of the subject of history. By analysing statements from six teacher interviews which centred on the risks and opportunities associated with teaching about controversial issues, the authors were able to see a clear relation between views on controversial issues and views on the nature of history as such. The teachers' reactions to the introduction of controversial issues, whether introduced by the teacher or by the students, was in many cases directly related to a specific view of the subject itself and its epistemological nature.

**Keywords** controversial issues; Sweden; history teaching; epistemology

## Introduction

At times, the subject of history has been regarded as inherently controversial (see, for example, [Elmersjö et al., 2017](#); [Epstein and Peck, 2018](#); [Taylor and Guyver, 2012](#)). Perhaps this is a result of debates about historical justice and how a past characterised by conflict, war and oppression can be made meaningful in the present in a way that allows for a sense of justice that can give rise to a sense of hope for the future ([Ahonen, 2012](#); [Keynes et al., 2021](#)). History teaching has always been caught up in the politics of state and citizen identity, where the subject has been involved in conveying important concepts about the nation, collective values, democracy, and the rights and obligations of the individual. However, in the Swedish case, history teaching has also been about critical thinking since the first half of the twentieth century (see, for example, [Nygren, 2011](#)). In recent years, this aspect of the subject has been even more highlighted, and has also pointed towards the necessity for histories to be deconstructed. This gradual shift has been researched and discussed in many different cultural contexts, and in many different ways (see, for example, [Alvén, 2017](#); [Cannadine et al., 2011](#); [Elmersjö, 2021](#); [Gustafsson, 2017](#); [Malmros, 2012](#); [Persson, 2019](#); [Soysal and Schissler, 2004](#); [Symcox, 2009](#)).

This has led history teachers into a balancing act between very different aims: conveying narratives that support collective values of the nation state, and at the same time deconstructing those narratives. It could be argued that almost every aspect of a given history curriculum might be considered controversial in one way or another, depending on the moral lesson perceived to be important, or on the identity which students are expected to adopt. At the same time, there is little doubt that certain issues in the history classroom can be considered more controversial than others, for example, the Israeli–Palestinian conflict or different ideas about how democracy should be perceived. It is an open question, and one that can be evaluated empirically, whether or not history teachers consider history teaching controversial *per se*, or if they consider only some aspects controversial, and in that case which aspects those might be.

In subjects included under the broad label ‘social studies’, controversial issues can be problematic for several reasons. The starting point in this kind of research is often Stradling’s classic definition from 1984, where controversial issues are regarded as ‘those issues on which our society is clearly divided and significant groups within society advocate conflicting explanations or solutions based on alternative values’ ([Stradling, 1984](#): 121). Another way of looking at controversial issues has an epistemological basis. A social issue is seen to be controversial if different viewpoints about it exist without there being any contradiction in reason and logic ([Dearden, 1981](#)). There are also more emotionally based definitions of controversial issues, where the focus is instead on students’ emotions and the right they have to a safe space of learning. Then, controversial subjects become those that engage students emotionally, and that provoke a reaction from them ([Hickey, 2016](#); see also [Larsson and Lindström, 2020](#)).

History teaching, which in Swedish lower secondary school is one of four parts of the broader ‘social studies subjects’ (the other parts being civics, religious education and geography), can be perceived as a safe haven for discussions on controversial issues because of the distance between the subject matter and the student that is provided by the dimension of time ([Foster, 2013](#); [Goldberg and Savenije, 2018](#)). Teachers and students may find it easier to discuss something that in contemporary terms is felt to be controversial, as long as the discussion is about events far back in time. However, the more teachers and students connect the content of history teaching to the present, and to contemporary issues, the less likely it is that the ‘history-space’ remains safe in that regard. The fact that students and teachers view the distance between the present and the past in a particular historical narrative differently might also mean that they will have different notions about what actually is controversial (see, for example, [Mårdh, 2019](#)).

The purpose of this article is to analyse the issues in history teaching that lower secondary school teachers (school years 7–9, ages 12–15) view as controversial and, more importantly, to provide an in-depth analysis of their way of relating controversial issues to the nature of the subject of history. The focus is on the results of semi-structured interviews with six social studies teachers in six different Swedish lower secondary schools. The interviews were centred on how the teachers view risks and opportunities, as well as on how they view their role as teacher when introducing subject content that

they themselves consider controversial or that is made controversial – for one reason or another – in the context of the history classroom. This means that there was no particular definition of what should be considered a controversial issue beforehand, and whether the teachers had an epistemological, emotional or value-based reason for considering a specific topic controversial is not considered in this article. The research questions were: (1) How do controversial issues arise in the history classroom, and what is this a result of, according to the teachers?; and (2) How do history teachers reason about the nature and conditions of the subject in relation to controversial issues?

In other words, our general theoretical starting point is that the conceptualisation of the subject of history (Elmersjö et al., 2017; Evans, 1989; Seixas, 2000), or discrepancies between teachers and students over its purpose (Halldén, 1986, 1994, 1997), can offer different ways of addressing and viewing – in general terms – controversial issues in history education. However, it is still an empirical issue to find out how this might manifest itself, in the teachers' statements.

## Previous research

Overall, this article can be seen as addressing the intersection between two different and in themselves extensive fields of research. On the one hand, the study engages with research that examines controversial issues in history teaching in relation to knowledge questions; on the other hand, it addresses the research that deals with teachers' understandings and beliefs about what comprises historical knowledge. One of the few studies that closely addresses both of these research areas is that by Kaarlöp et al. (2022). Their study distinguishes between four possible types of teacher: (1) the traditional type that does not see the subject of history as controversial; (2) the type whose teaching has a basis in historical thinking, and whose teaching predominantly involves explaining the complexities of history; (3) the type that bases their teaching on epistemology, and clearly links the subject of history to historical consciousness; and (4) the type that bases their teaching on ethics, and feels a strong emotional connection to history, yet at the same time is open to everyone's relative assessment of historical accounts. That said, the individual teacher may exhibit traits from each type, and one of the clearest results of Kaarlöp et al.'s (2022: 114) study is that the teachers 'had not reflected critically upon the meaning of history and its epistemological nature'. In line with previous research, the authors also noted how it is often the history of the twentieth century that is considered to be the most controversial, thus suggesting that distance in time is important when it comes to affording students a safe space to deal with controversial issues within history education.

Chhabra (2017) also points to how epistemological starting points are included in teachers' more practical actions and didactic choices when more difficult issues in history teaching are being dealt with: for example, where students have a perceived direct relationship to historical and contemporary violence between distinct groups. Chhabra (2017) calls for history lessons in which the teacher allows the epistemological point of departure to clearly emerge in the didactic practice when it comes to the treatment of controversial and problematic history.

The relationship between views of knowledge and controversial issues has been dealt with in a number of ways in previous research. In several cases, researchers have offered advice to active teachers based on various pre-given epistemological distinctions and reasoning (see Hand, 2008). As early as the 1980s, for example, Thomas Kelly (1986) claimed that there was a risk of controversial issues in school teaching being reduced to uncritical factual knowledge (see his distinction between exclusive neutrality, exclusive partiality, neutral impartiality and committed impartiality). Kelly's (1986) overall advice was that controversial issues should be utilised to train students to act upon reasoned conviction. Regarding the teaching of the subject of history, however, this conclusion has not gone unchallenged. For example, while Foster (2013) and Seixas (2000) emphasise the potential of disciplinary history teaching in connection to teaching about controversial issues, McCully (2012), as based on the distinction between psychological and historical truth, has almost conversely argued for how students' understanding of controversial issues can be stimulated if they engage in 'storytelling history'.

McCully (2012) is far from alone in taking an interest in how teaching about sensitive and difficult issues in history can contribute to students' knowledge development, and in what this subject knowledge consists of. For example, Alongi et al. (2016) focus on the question of how working with controversial historical issues and ideas – for example, liberty – affects both the conceptual understanding of students and their societal engagement. In a similar way, Jovanović and Marić (2020) and Dryden-Peterson and Sieborger (2006)

examine the extent to which work with controversial issues and so-called 'difficult history' can constitute a form of historical lesson that changes both the students' own attitudes and their understanding of 'the other'. Against the background of the ambition to teach 'difficult history' as a means to nurture a new generation of empathetic and loyal anti-racists, Zembylas (2022) points to a kind of reversed tension between such aspirations to cultivate knowledge and a more postmodern and relative way of looking at knowledge.

Among the studies that touch on the question of knowledge in relation to controversial issues, there are also those that draw attention to the gap between the ways teachers and students look at and understand historical knowledge. In a comparative study, for example, Maren Tribukait (2021) investigates how a more politically polarised political landscape has come to affect the way history teachers deal with controversial and sensitive issues in different European countries. A recurring challenge thus emerges in the gap between students' more absolute understanding of historical knowledge and teachers' more disciplinary understanding of historical knowledge as a culturally conditioned retrospective construction.

Tied to the question of knowledge, there is also a substantial field of research that concerns epistemological thinking on the subject of history among students and teachers. Research on history teachers shows, as mentioned, that they rarely reflect in a structured way on the knowledge claims of the subject they teach. Rather, they seem to have difficulty verbalising their basic epistemological view, while also tending to shift their view depending on the history under discussion and from which perspective they speak – that is to say, from the perspective of the historian, the student or the teacher. This has been highlighted in many studies in different cultural contexts over the last ten years (see, for example, Kaarlöp et al., 2022; Mathis and Parkes, 2020; McCrum, 2013; Miguel-Revilla et al., 2021; VanSledright and Maggioni, 2016; VanSledright and Reddy, 2014; Voet and De Wever, 2016; Wansink et al., 2018).

This shifting understanding, perhaps more as a result of teachers' pragmatic view of what works in the classroom than as a result of their own thoughts about knowledge, sometimes fits poorly with the assumptions inherent in history curricula that teachers have a fairly clear idea about the knowledge requirements of the subject of history, an idea that can sometimes be a prerequisite even for a basic interpretation of the curriculum. A related general problem that has been discussed in the research on epistemological thinking in history concerning students is how complex categorisations can capture various ways of looking at knowledge claims. Instead of discussing shifts or nuanced ways of relating to the question, some researchers have tried to capture this complexity by expanding the number of categories (see, for example, Stoel et al., 2017).

Among the studies on teaching about controversial issues, there are also those in which the investigations are most directly about how history teachers relate to these issues, and how this affects the content and orientation of their teaching. For example, Kitson and McCully (2005) distinguish between teachers as avoiders, containers and risk-takers. This categorisation is based on whether or not teachers actively encourage students to work with sources with different (and conflicting) perspectives, and whether they relate historical accounts to contemporary conditions. Yet when Pace (2019), more than a decade later, uses the corresponding categories to identify four ways that teacher educators prepare student teachers for 'the charged classroom', it is to a large extent risk-taking that seems to be favoured. However, when Zembylas and Kambani (2012) investigate the ways in which active teachers view the value of working with controversial issues in deeply divided Cypriot society, the answers seem to connect largely to the teachers' own perceptions and feelings about the conflict. This result is repeated when Kello (2016) notes five different approaches among Estonian and Latvian history teachers who talk about their own teaching about controversial issues. Particularly notable here is how the position of 'leav[ing] the truth open' seems to correspond with teachers' own identity-related relationships to the issue in question.

This article focuses primarily on the relationship between teachers' way of looking at historical knowledge and controversial issues. One researcher who has studied how teachers' pre-understanding affects their way of thinking about their own teaching of controversial issues is Diana Hess. In her case, however, it is not teachers' basic epistemological view but rather their political view that she suggests influences the way that teachers relate to controversial issues (Hess, 2005).

In summary, research on teaching controversial issues has often been about what this teaching does to students' understanding of, and attitudes towards, controversial issues. When it comes to the studies that are aimed at the way history teachers look at how to teach controversial issues, these have mainly been about relating the outcome to the cultural context, values associated with the teaching

profession in specific contexts, teachers' own political views, and students' pre-understanding. We seek to contribute to this research area by discussing how teachers' reasoning about controversial subjects relates to the history subject and its role in students' general education.

## Method

The purpose of this study is to examine history teachers' experiences of, and stories about, their teaching. This study focuses on teachers' views on controversial issues and the wider meaning and characteristics of the subject of history. As a result, our analyses and conclusions are based entirely on teachers' stories. Our approach is based on an overarching endeavour to search for similarities and differences between the ways in which work with controversial issues can be understood in relation to teaching history. This means that we as researchers seek to understand and articulate different starting points, rather than seeking to understand and categorise the views of individual teachers.

Our attempt to identify different types of starting points influenced the way we collected, processed and analysed our data. We interviewed seven teachers who teach history in Swedish secondary schools (school years 7–9). One of the teachers did not connect any of their reasoning to the subject of history, so their interview was discounted. Therefore, only six interviews were used in this study. Although the informants teach according to the same curriculum, their situations differ in several ways. Four of the teachers teach in medium-sized Swedish cities (population greater than ten thousand), one in a large city (population greater than one hundred thousand), and one in a small town (population fewer than ten thousand). The teachers fall into two groups according to age and experience: three teachers were under the age of 35 at the time of the interviews in autumn 2020 and autumn 2021 (T1, T3, T5) and had been teachers for less than five years; the other three (T2, T4, T6) were aged between 46 and 52 at the time of the interviews (autumn 2020 and spring 2021), and had been teachers for between 20 and 26 years.

In an attempt to represent several different starting points in the material, the authors conducted the six analysed interviews in two ways and followed the history lessons of two teachers (T5 and T6) before letting them, with reference to the completed lessons, discuss the opportunities and challenges that come with working with controversial issues. The other four interviews (T1–T4) were conducted without first sitting in on these teachers' lessons. Ahead of these four interviews, the informants were asked to think about lessons in which they had taught a controversial issue, and to come prepared to discuss one lesson that was successful and one that was less so.

Although the interviews were conducted in two ways, their purpose was the same: to identify different points of departure in their teaching of controversial issues in history. Our interest focuses consistently on the types of starting points that emerge in the material as a whole. Therefore, how teachers teach in the classroom or how students receive the teaching has not been examined, despite the fact that we as researchers sat in on two lessons in direct conjunction with the interviews.

Furthermore, it is *statements* that are interesting *in principle* – or, put differently, statements that say something interesting about controversial issues and identity in the history classroom – that have been analysed. This means that the statements were considered atomically, and we did not try to categorise the teachers in terms of any supposed holistic view of them; as a result, the same teacher could stand for different principles. Our aim was to try to describe and analyse the reasoning in each individual statement and not, consequently, the teachers' holistic view of these issues (see also Day, 2011; Kello, 2016). Since we did not seek to explain or understand why the teachers expressed themselves in the way they did, we did not relate their statements to external factors such as governing documents or school systems. This approach both limits and broadens the scope of the research. It limits the scope because it is not possible to discern any holistic views, or to answer questions regarding why specific teachers hold different views. At the same time, it broadens the scope, since a larger variety of statements and views that it is possible to hold can be analysed, even though only six teachers have been interviewed.

Our analysis process can be described as multistaged. To begin with, we each read the transcribed interviews several times. Next, we sought to identify and highlight relevant sections of the interviews that suggested starting points or manifested positions. We then grouped the statements that we identified into categories that were clearly distinguishable. Finally, we returned to the collected material in its entirety to check whether in the interviews as a whole there were additional categories besides the group types we had already identified.

## Results

### Controversial issues – a challenge when history is now for the student

The collected interview material contains several examples of what can be described as subject-specific concerns associated with current controversial issues. The first of these concerns seems to be actualised in the situations where the students relate the historical content to self-experienced and contemporary oppression and discrimination. This was actualised most clearly when one teacher talked about his recent efforts to teach the Industrial Revolution and its origins in Britain. To illustrate the triangular trade, he chose to show a film. Unexpectedly for him, the depiction of the slave ships in the film triggered strong reactions from one of his students. In his description, he starts with the connection between the triangular trade and industrialisation, and then moves to the film that triggered the following incident:

We discussed the triangular trade and they were shown footage from the slave ships and how the slaves were transported, and there is a girl in the class who is dark-skinned, and ... this is also a girl who finds herself outside the class and the class situation, so she struggles quite a bit with this ... her identity, that is. Who she is, and, you know, this thing about self-esteem. When I met her for the first time a little over ... yeah, a year and a half ago, I only spoke English with her, she didn't speak much Swedish then yet. And that's something we've discussed with the mentors [teachers specifically responsible for the well-being of a particular class] as well, how we can help her. So she shouted out during the film that 'That's racism!' And there was someone who ... there were several in the class who looked back at her and 'Huh? Huh?, Aha, OK, she shouted.' So everyone kept watching. ... But, that situation in itself, it was precisely that that I have to keep in mind for the future how ... because it didn't feel good to let the class leave and have, well, her, thinking this was racism, this is kind of offensive ... and that ... that the Brits and others have acted in that way and ... or that she took it more personally and I didn't bring it up for discussion with her. I just let her walk out of the classroom and ... and she took it with her without discussing it any further. But I felt like at that moment that I didn't really have ... I wasn't prepared to handle that situation. (T1)

This teacher's statement suggests that he remained unclear whether it was the film that the student thought was racist, or whether it was what the film depicted, but he concludes his story by saying that: '[it] was probably the slave trade itself, you know – that they took Africans from Africa, and brought them against their will to America. That was probably what she thought was racism' (T1).

That the reaction of the student was so strong seems in this case to have come as a surprise to the teacher (see the discussion on positionality in [Peck, 2018](#)). To an outside observer, it seems as if students and teachers have different ideas about the immediacy of historical knowledge, even if this is somewhat speculative. For the teacher in this case, historical knowledge seems to be a factual description of something that no longer is – something that can be described objectively and dispassionately. For the teacher, this teaching moment seems to have simply involved a factual description of historical racism. For the student, historical knowledge seems to be an emotional happening, a story that describes something familiar and close. For this student, being taught about racism seems to be perceived as close and connected to the actual experience of racism. Later on in the interview, the teacher himself reflected on this difference in how history is perceived. He also emphasised how the same historical depiction could appear differently, depending on the observer:

I guess I think more from her perspective, that she feels it as a person, but that ... If we put it like this ... if it had been another class or another student who had shouted 'That's racism!', then perhaps I wouldn't have thought the same way, but knowing that she struggles with self-image and has had to deal with racism, it felt like this was something that I should ... somehow ... deal with in some way other than I did, which was to just leave it alone. But definitely ... so regardless of ... let's say, the student's background, skin colour and so on, so ... if it had been a student who I knew was very confident who had called out, then I probably wouldn't have reacted in the same way, but then it's probably more the case that: Well, we've looked at the end of the eighteenth century and how industrialisation came about, what the whole economic system was like, and well ... historical racism as well ... We went into that too a bit, ... what racism quite simply was like at that time, and that it was something that was completely, how

should I put it? ... the norm in Sweden and in Europe at that time, just as some things are normal for us, that was normal for them. (T1)

Here, the teacher shows how he clearly separates the historical events he teaches from the reality he and his students occupy in the 2020s. He is clearly surprised, taken aback even, by the emotional connection this student draws between herself, the society in which she lives and the events that happened more than two hundred years ago that she is watching in a film in her history classroom (see, for example, Foster, 2013; Goldberg and Savenije, 2018).

Other statements in the material suggest that some teachers think history should be kept separate from the present, and that historical terms must be described accurately, even if this is uncomfortable for students. In one class, a teacher showed an animated film from the 1970s that depicted a dark-skinned person who had been drawn in a way that would be unacceptable today. Remarking on this, the teacher said:

[I] think it is wrong that some teachers – perhaps not history teachers, but Swedish teachers or teachers of other subjects – who do not know the historical context don't want to show images like that at all. They are lacking the reason behind them, the why. You always have to ask why it is people were drawn like this, different groups of people in that way. (T3)

Just like the previous teacher, T3 places an emphasis on the distance in time. They suggest such an awareness should always be the case – in other subjects too – so that students can be taught the historical context behind the use of epithets that were once acceptable, but that now are inappropriate.

On several occasions during the interviews, the teachers highlighted this change in language as being something that students needed to learn, while at the same time speaking about the difficulty of teaching at the right level. One teacher pointed out that, although it was difficult in the classroom to use the racist language adopted by the Nazis in the 1930s and 1940s, it was important that students heard these words and recognised them:

It's difficult, but I have to say what they actually said. It would be strange if I changed their language, because then it wouldn't be what they said. The students have to understand the context. If they don't, they won't understand why these words shouldn't be used today ... but ... language is tricky, I mean, I have to talk about race, but at the same time I have to point out that there are no races. But regardless. It has to be said in this context, like the thing about 'negro boxers' ... they have to connect the words to the movement [the German Nazi Party], and they don't do that if I don't say the words. (T6)

Other statements by the teachers indicate that students find some of the issues dealt with in the history classroom to be controversial at a more personal, identity-related level. It is no surprise, then, that some students perceive certain teaching content to be both loaded and sensitive (see Hickey, 2016; McCully, 2012; Peck, 2018; Zembylas, 2022). As one teacher pointed out:

I mean, society consists of a large group of individuals, and different opinions and ideologies, which means that they will be represented in our classrooms as well. What this then means is that there may be students in the classroom who are both relatives of survivors or who have some kind of Jewish connection or who know someone, and there may also be people who are right-wing extremists or who deny the Holocaust took place – and that means that this [unit of teaching material] can, potentially, become a nuclear weapon. (T5)

In some cases, these issues can be about a type of conflict that is politically charged even in our current times. One interviewee, for example, stated how the Armenian genocide created an intense and emotionally charged discussion in their classroom, where several of the students had Turkish origins:

Perhaps we do that unconsciously. [hesitates a bit] And I think ... now I'm really quite convinced that in this group I won't encounter this kind of problem – but, for example, that I end up in a discussion about [the Armenian genocide] not having happened – or get questions about the equal value of people, or such things as that. If, on the other hand, I suspect that I have individuals in the group who in some way represent that tendency, then I would have to think of additional steps to try ... above all, to be more prepared for what might crop up and how to tackle a situation. (T5)

Regardless of whether or not teachers are prepared, and regardless of whether or not they consider historical knowledge to be a permanently and logically motivated fact or a constantly negotiable politically charged construction, these examples illustrate how students' personal interest in history presents a didactic challenge. What appears to the teacher to be either something that is simple to convey, or something that at a rational level can be problematised, exposed and questioned, becomes for the student associated with something private and emotional. What for the teacher is a question of reference knowledge is for the student also a question of identity and their own being, and, as such, inseparable from the contemporary situation.

### **Controversial issues – a prerequisite/opportunity for history teaching**

Some statements in the interview material accept that the content of much history teaching is inherently controversial, and that this is not in itself a problem, but rather is what is needed – it is the prerequisite for the teaching of history. This position is perhaps most clearly represented by the explanation given by one of the teachers about how she gets students to speak even when they feel the material is controversial:

No, but I'm trying not to make [the Israel–Palestine issue] controversial, from my perspective. Instead, I'm trying to show an issue just like any other issue that we deal with, or that we cover or look at. Whether it's about nationalism or imperialism or racism or whatever. I don't try to begin with it as though it's a controversial issue, an issue that actually has ... or where you can think in the wrong way. Because then my students won't dare to think. A controversial issue is controversial because you might 'think in the wrong way', perhaps ... or you might express yourself incorrectly, or you might not be considered to be politically correct, or whatever the case may be. There is always something that makes it controversial. But it is controversial in the types of schools I teach in [schools in vulnerable areas with a large proportion of Muslim students from the Middle East] because there is a strong connection to anti-Semitism, and that is what makes it controversial because I can go in, present the issue, present what we are going to discuss, or bring up something that makes them think I am wrong. That I have a controversial opinion. And then I won't be able to get my message across. (T2)

This teacher also believes that it is difficult to think back to a time when a controversial issue made her feel that she did not meet the objective of her teaching. She also links this absence of major issues in both the classroom and her teaching to her way of seeing the controversial elements of the subject of history – that are always present – as opportunities to expose students to the interpretive nature of history:

I can't think of any specific time when it didn't go well, but that could also be because my students are quite used to being asked questions that they have to think about and ponder, and they also understand that there is not often one correct answer, but rather many correct answers. That the discussion itself is what gives us the answers sometimes. (T2)

She motivates her desire to de-dramatise what is controversial in different types of positions in a more elaborate reasoning where her teacher role (with the stated exception of the values related to a democratic upbringing) is associated with her intention not to take a stand on controversial issues, but rather to convey the notion that every issue has elements that are controversial:

But it's also a bit about the fact you have to be able to say ... you have to be able to say what ... from the perspective of society ... how I should try to express myself. I usually try to think about how I word myself on any matter. So, you can't go in and take a position on an issue, for example. That's not our job. Our job really is, if it is not about it directly ... undemocratic, or if it is the case that it is a dictator oppressing people or something similar, then we have to be on the side of democracy, or we have to think about human rights. But a controversial thing would be to look at human rights in the conflict that exists right now. What constitutes human rights from this point of view or that. After all, our job is to show both sides, because there are ... always two sides to a story. (T2)

Consequently, for this teacher, historical knowledge seems to be something that is almost always created with a basis in perspective. Since all reasoning is assumed to proceed from a given point of view, no

opinion or question becomes more controversial than the next (see Segall, 2006; Seixas, 2000). The teacher's endeavour seems rather to build on the notion that all questions can always be considered from several points of view, and that it is the teacher's job to ensure that several perspectives are made evident. This teacher went on to say that she often asks provocative questions that she knows will get a reaction from students. When asked why she does that, she responded:

Well, to get them to think, because there is always more than one side to a story. In my classroom, you can never just answer 'yes' to a question. You must always explain why you think the way you do ... so I think ... that I teach my students to think for themselves. And if they never have to think about difficult questions but always just get ... 'when did King Charles XII die?', well then they never get to learn to think for themselves because they won't get the same questions that I have ... it's not that that I've taught them really. So the questions I ask here and now, those are the ones I assess, but I train them to think for themselves when they encounter questions that I haven't asked. (T2)

Another teacher made a similar point about opportunity in an interview. This was brought up in conjunction with a discussion about the appropriateness of showing an animated film where people of African descent are portrayed in a derogatory manner. Even though the teacher articulates his rejection of this stereotypical portrayal of dark-skinned people in the film, he points out how the representation, like all historical depictions, can also be used in teaching if you adopt a clear historical perspective:

Absolutely! That is the cornerstone, one of the cornerstones of history teaching, looking at what has happened in the past and connecting it to today, how history has changed ... or how the world has changed. Why was it viewed differently then? What were the underlying causes? Then you can sort of, yes ... then you can teach the students something about history, and also see that things were sort of different, and things have been worse ... (T3)

In these cases, controversy seems to be an important catalyst for talking about what is important to students, for voicing opposition, for forcing students to justify their beliefs, and perhaps also for training students to deal with emotionally difficult issues. This reasoning can also be thought to have support from a view of the subject of history as political. In the context of school and socially oriented teaching, the statements seem to suggest that learning history is above all a way to qualify critical thinking.

### **Controversial issues – not an issue at all because controversy is rare in history education**

Some of the teachers' statements seem to suggest that for them the teaching of history is rarely controversial in and of itself. They seem to believe that historical knowledge, at least as it is taught in school, essentially comprises factual knowledge about which there is rarely, if ever, any divided opinion. One of the clearer examples of this attitude stems from an explanation where one of the teachers describes how he and his colleagues do not have to deal with Holocaust deniers:

No, I've really thought about this, and I've talked to colleagues and [they] agree that at the age they [the students] are now, 13 to 16, it's not particularly controversial, but it's more ... well, they just buy it [that the Holocaust really happened]. They've heard about the Holocaust, and they've heard about the slave trade and ... it's like ... we've not had to deal with Holocaust deniers, we've not had to deal with Nazis ... so... just the history teaching, it doesn't feel controversial at all, it's like they accept it wholeheartedly and have heard about it before and ... think, well, this is just how it is, right? (T4)

As this teacher sees it, the students' way of looking at historical knowledge as something fixed contrasts with how he sees knowledge working in the social and natural sciences. While research can change our view of the origins of natural phenomena, perceptions of historical periods such as antiquity and the Viking age tend to remain, for the most part, intact:

But look at the social sciences, look at ... because I think history and religion are a bit more like ... 'this is how it is'. Social sciences and geography are significantly more changeable. Things that were considered a geological fault in the past have turned out to have a meteoric impact ... borders change, countries change, social sciences change politically. It feels like things are

more preserved in history and religion. Like this ... yes, but it's old stuff, there won't be any new perspectives on it. Yes ... 'this is how it is'. Then it can certainly be the case that over time, the image of Sweden's role during the Second World War has changed, but then if you look at antiquity or, indeed, ... the Viking age ... there isn't much that comes to light that sort of turns things on their head. I think the two subjects are more conservative, like 'this is how it is'. Not much happens with it. ... Most people ... there is not much of a difference between the views on ... well ... there are perhaps people who question the Holocaust from shady corners, but otherwise there is quite a large consensus on the Second World War, on what was decisive or not. (T4)

This teacher's statement seems ultimately to rest on the understanding that history is characterised by duration, stability and consensus. The more you know about a historical phenomenon, the more difficult it becomes to claim something other than what is accepted, he argues.

That there is little room for divergent interpretations in the subject of history is something that the teacher exemplifies by pointing out how, with the help of generally accepted knowledge, it is possible to demonstrate the absurdity of claiming that people are divided by race. Therefore, it is important, the teacher later maintains, to be critical of your sources, and not be led to believe those who publish facts that are incorrect:

You need to know what facts are reliable. Not, you know, Nazi-Pete's Nazi facts. You need to be critical of your sources and know how to access reliable information, and based on that form an opinion that this is what you think. Then it can be very difficult when it comes to certain questions. Then I cast a blank vote and let the others decide. (T4)

The absence of controversial issues when it comes to historical knowledge is something that this teacher attributes to the distance in time between our present and the past that is covered in the history classroom:

Proximity in time and space ... it's clear that it ... it's obvious that what's closest in time is clear that ... things get older and older and things that are further back in time, it's clear that it will be of less value over time. That's how it is, I think. (T4)

Apart from more recent events that may still have a certain emotional charge, history seems ultimately to be regarded as distant and remote, according to this teacher. Since no clear distinction is made between this already distant past and subsequent attempts to depict it (in history teaching), the reasons for establishing or comparing multiple, competing perspectives appear to be few, in this teacher's mind. Consensus and constancy, rather than disagreement and movement, seem to pervade his perception and understanding of historical knowledge.

This teacher (T4) identifies himself primarily as a physical education teacher, although he also holds a teaching licence for history, and works as a history teacher as well. In the interview material, he is the only one who thinks that history is uncontroversial. Nevertheless, his statements are interesting since they show, on the one hand, the diversity of perceptions among teachers who teach history and, on the other hand, how the teaching of history can differ greatly from classroom to classroom, depending on the teacher and the established norms of any given classroom.

## Discussion

Even though our data set is quite limited, the results of these teacher interviews clearly show that the relationship between the ways teachers teach about controversial issues in the subject of history and teachers' ideas about how history is structured is fruitful to examine more closely. First, it seems that the teachers who were interviewed deal mainly with issues that the students perceived to be controversial and problematic – a view that was not necessarily shared by the teachers. These issues tended to be contemporary, and closely related to the times and circumstances in which the students find themselves living. They were controversial because (some) students viewed history as ongoing and unfinished. The safe space for discussions about historical issues that teachers want to create disintegrates quite simply because students interpret history to be ongoing, and historical events to be part of their contemporary life world (Barton and McCully, 2007). This is most clearly illustrated by the distance between the teacher

who felt that the slave trade was something that existed long ago and that was no longer controversial, and the student who felt that oppression was still a relevant part of life, and thus the slave trade could be considered controversial.

This distance is also clear from what teachers say about using historical concepts that they deem necessary so that students' perceptions of the past do not become distorted. Here, too, the teachers' statements suggest that it is the students who create the controversy because they are the ones connecting the historical subject matter to the here and now. Even in statements where controversial subjects were stated to be catalysts for learning opportunities, the focus was on subject matter that the students felt to be controversial and difficult to deal with. The teacher was depicted as someone who deliberately constructed events and processes – often those that the students viewed as unproblematic – as controversial, in order to disarm the specific issues that the students saw as controversial. By doing so, the teacher could generalise the controversial aspect as something embedded in the subject itself.

By considering the teachers' statements by theme, we created two categories for conceptualising this subject that link to the teaching of controversial issues. These two categories represent the view of historical knowledge either as something that exists in itself – and can and should therefore be apolitical and uncontroversial – or as something that can and should be considered as a contemporary (political) construction. A similar difference exists between the view of historical knowledge as an isolated object, or as something that arises in the space between the depiction and the contemporary observer. Both can be linked to the tendency that the teachers in this study demonstrated of placing the controversial issue with the students. In this study, the teacher and the students quite simply seem to have different notions about what historical knowledge is. While this study is not extensive when it comes to the number of teachers interviewed, our approach in considering different statements, rather than types of teachers, might indicate that there are important issues to take into account for both history teaching as such, and for future research regarding controversial issues in history education.

There is thus a need for a discussion about whether or not history teaching can by its nature be considered political (and thus, to some extent, controversial). This is an epistemological question. How a teacher views the relationship between past reality and material taught in the history classroom is probably related to whether or not they see history education itself as a political act – that is, political in [Ranci re's \(2001\)](#) conception, where what is made visible and invisible is part of the political. In the case of controversial issues, it depends on whether or not a controversial issue can be resolved by accumulating more knowledge or whether other aspects need to be considered, such as how events are interpreted, how they come together in narratives, what or whom the stories are about, and what we need to make visible (and invisible) to understand the protagonist's situation.

In this study, the teachers' statements are, in a sense, based on the idea of historical narration as a possible portal to a past reality (c.f. [Chhabra, 2017](#); [Mathis and Parkes, 2020](#); [McCrum, 2013](#); [Seixas, 2000](#); [VanSledright, 2014](#)), and they reflect a particular view of the relationship between the past itself and the history of the past. The way they view this relationship seems to be the basis for their understanding of controversial issues as either unwanted challenges or catalysts for deeper learning processes in the teaching of history. It is quite possible that a large proportion of lower secondary school teachers of social studies subjects in Sweden do not have a clear idea of this distinction between the past itself and the stories that are seen to capture this past reality. This might either be because the teachers have not reflected on the issue (perhaps because there is no clear definition of historical knowledge in the curriculum), or because they have different approaches to history depending on whether they are talking about teaching it as a school subject or about studying and researching it. That is, they might separate how they think about the subject in general from what they believe to be possible to teach in their classroom (see [Elmersj , 2022](#); [M rdh, 2019](#)). Nevertheless, the statements we analyse in this article show that teachers do express a particular view of this distinction.

It is important to understand the basic epistemological view that might lie behind these statements, because that position can subsequently influence how a teacher – in a given teaching situation – will treat controversial issues. Do they become a problem that must be solved in order for a politically unaffected objective truth about the past to become evident to students, or do the controversial issues instead become useful in creating an understanding of the past where the making of meaning is highlighted as a political act in and of itself?

The fact that a teacher sees history and history teaching as fundamentally political does not mean that they are more likely to promote any one particular political agenda. Such an approach might be seen to force the teacher to consider the political potential of historical stories in much the same way

as teaching about political parties requires parties' political statements to be presented in a teaching situation as partisan documents, but without any particular political preference being given to any one of them (see also [Elmersjö and Zanazanian, 2022](#)). This suggests a completely different view about what kind of knowledge historical knowledge is. This question about the inherently political nature of history taps into wider debates about the role that 'presentism' plays in historical interpretation. Some forms of 'presentism', such as the teleological approach of the 'whig interpretation' of history, are viewed largely in negative terms. History ought not to be presented as having the present moment as its ultimate goal. That said, as the ideas encompassed within the understanding of 'idealist' presentism point out, the present must inevitably play a decisive role in the sort of past we are given ([Miles and Gibson, 2022](#)). Some of the statements in our material express, quite simply, a negative view of presentism, while others see it more positively, and as a productive element in history teaching, even if they do not specifically use the term. This clarifies the epistemological question: is historical knowledge the same as knowledge of the past itself and its (inherent) meaning, or is it simply knowledge of what we choose to highlight as meaningful in order to understand ourselves? Here, previous research has highlighted a tension between students' more absolute understanding of historical knowledge and teachers' more disciplinary understanding ([Tribukait, 2021](#)). In our material, it is possible to discern a reverse positioning among teachers, where they exhibit an absolute understanding of historical knowledge that conflicts with the students' more emotional interpretations.

The interviews can be understood to show a clear division between two different views on presentism in history teaching. On the one hand, there are statements that highlight history as political in itself, and thus indicate a view of history teaching as a political act with clear elements of (idealist) presentism. On the other hand, some statements do not articulate any clear political stance, and seem to imply that history teaching is apolitical. From this perspective, the teacher becomes shackled by the reality of the past and the requirement to teach 'how things really were', preferably without elements of (teleological) presentism. This might have great significance when it comes to the teaching of controversial issues.

In the statements that describe controversies as important catalysts for the discussion of what students consider important, for encouraging their opposition to accepted truths, for forcing them to give reasons for their beliefs, and for training them to deal with emotionally difficult issues, these teachers imply that history teaching is a political act where some things are made visible and others are not. The political potential of history is made evident simply by involving controversial issues as a means to help students formulate their opinions and argue for alternative outcomes. Their way of approaching controversial issues means that there are no direct problems and risks when such issues are raised in the classroom – problems and risks that some of the other teachers pointed out in their statements. Instead, for them, controversial issues are a key to critical thinking. Controversial issues can help students to learn to argue for and against matters with which they might come into contact outside school, and that might be unpredictable. To some degree, this way of looking at controversial issues in teaching means that almost every element of a history lesson could be seen to be controversial – at least to some extent and to some people. It can also be seen as a way of de-dramatising this notion of the controversial by creating provocative claims against even widely accepted historical notions, simply to show that most things are political to some extent and for some people. However, the statements that suggested this approach also emphasised the fact that the teacher needs to have a positive relationship with the students, so that there is a context within which a controversial issue can be safely raised.

When the teachers in this study claim that an apolitical and objective history has to be taught, the appearance of a controversial issue creates very different and more far-reaching problems. In these cases, the teachers seem to feel that the responsibility for this transformation lies mainly with the students. It is because the students express a (teleological) presentism that problems arise. They see a meaning in the past that is imposed from the present, and not the intrinsic meaning of the past, to which some of the teachers seem to subscribe. These claims assert that if there are no Holocaust deniers in the classroom, then teaching about the Holocaust does not become controversial. If students do not take personally the teaching about the past that concerns people with whom they share a national, ethnic or other identity, then history teaching about the slave trade or racial depictions will not become controversial either, according to this view.

Our assumption was that the conceptualisation of the subject of history, or discrepancies between teachers and students over its purpose, could offer different ways of addressing and viewing controversial issues in history education. This connection between epistemological ideas about history and what is

seen as – or made – controversial proved to be prominent in these teachers' statements. We have also shown how this connection may manifest itself in different ways of teaching controversial issues, implying that research about controversial issues in history education needs to take this connection into account in future studies.

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## Declarations and conflicts of interest

### Research ethics statement

The authors declare that research ethics approval for this article was waived by the Regional Ethics Review Board in Umeå (2018/371-31).

### Consent for publication statement

The authors declare that research participants' informed consent to publication of findings – including photos, videos and any personal or identifiable information – was secured prior to publication.

### Conflicts of interest statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the authors during peer review of this article have been made. The authors declare no further conflicts with this article.

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