

Teaching Controversial Issues: a European Perspective

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An issue in citizenship education – but why?

This guidance has been written by teacher educators from England, Finland and Germany where education for citizenship is seen as important but is approached in different ways.

For example, in Finland the debate is around values and equality, in the particular context of an emerging multi-cultural society. In England, education for citizenship has been made statutory for English secondary schools from September 2002, and recommended for primary schools.

Other European countries are also re-thinking these aspects of their education system. In France, *education civique, juridique et sociale* (ECJS) has been introduced for all secondary pupils, with the emphasis on social issues and 'real' political problems, which marks an important departure in a country where there is a strong tradition of neutrality in schools (Tutiaux-Guillon 2001).

This is not a phenomenon restricted to schools in Europe, however. The need for such education has been debated (and implemented) in many other countries, including Australia, Canada and the United States. The inclusion of discussion of controversial issues - in terms of methodology and content - appears central to effective education for citizenship.

A survey of international research gave these characteristics of effective citizens of the 21st Century: they

- work co-operatively with others
- develop social justice principles to guide own actions
- think in a critical and systemic way
- appreciate and learn from cultural differences
- evaluate problems in the wider community and global context
- resolve conflicts non-violently
- change lifestyles to protect the environment
- recognise and defend human rights
- dare to strive for a fairer future
- participate in democratic politics

Cogan and Derricott (2001)

If we are to educate young people in such a way as to produce citizens with these characteristics, then citizenship education will need to have at its core the open and democratic discussion of controversial, topical and political issues.

This approach is reinforced by many US authors who have indicated that classroom discussions about controversial public issues are

essential to citizenship education and often have positive outcomes in terms of improved civic tolerance and interest in social and political issues.

The evidence for a link between a democratic discussion and deliberation-based classroom practice, and anti-authoritarian or pro-democratic attitudes and value commitments is strong.

Frazer (1999)

What are controversial issues?

There is, unsurprisingly, no one definition but that offered by Wellington (1986) is still used by many. He states that a controversial issue must

- involve value judgements, so that the issue cannot be settled by facts, evidence or experiment alone
- be considered important by an appreciable number of people (Wellington, 1986, p3)

The issues under discussion will often be those that deeply divide a society, that generate conflicting explanations and solutions based on alternative value systems (Stradling *et al.* 1984). The content of issues chosen by teachers may range from those of local interest – for example, decisions made about youth and leisure facilities – to international issues such as the involvement of one's country in global environmental campaigns or in international wars. Children may have their own controversial issues which also merit discussion and of which the teacher may be unaware – for example, the use of playground space or treatment by older pupils. Likewise in extra-curricular settings, young people will have their own issues for discussion.

In general terms a controversial issue is one in which

- there are competing values and interests
- there is political sensitivity
- emotions become strongly aroused
- the subject/area is complex
- the subject/area is of topical interest.

There is thus no mandate on what the content of such discussions should be; rather the onus is on the facilitator to ensure that there are opportunities to discuss topical issues and events whilst at the same time allowing space for the pupils to bring up their own controversial issues for debate.

In a teacher education context, trainee teachers need time to come to their own understanding of the nature of controversial issues, and space to voice their concerns. For example the relationship between parents and teachers is a concern for many trainee teachers: this is discussed later in this booklet in a Finnish context.

However, as an example of the complexity and diversity of current approaches to citizenship education and the inclusion of controversial issues, we present the current situation in three European countries: Germany, Finland and England.

Germany



In Germany there is a current debate about the purpose of and appropriate teaching methods for political education. Sometimes political education has become a tool for teaching values through active learning.

Approaching the enlargement of the EU – to give just one example – teachers were advised to use role games to help students understand the interests of European states. Such activities successfully brought children in touch with power, through visits to Parliament, meeting Ministers, etc., thus overcoming the gap of silence between sides and between generations. However, other actions are often designed to raise awareness of the disadvantaged, like understanding asylum seekers living locally: these may have more to do with charity or community-building than raising issues of conflict for debate, or putting pressure on local authorities. The debate is thus about the *purposes* of political education.

Political education, according to one argument, is about children understanding how politics function, the role of institutions, the basic values of the constitution and the implementation of human rights at local, national, European and global level. In this approach, democracy is a type of polity to be analysed empirically.

The other view is that we should help children **'to learn democracy'** in daily life, in school and in the community. Social learning is seen as one outcome. In this approach, democracy is an attitude to be acquired.

Whilst the analytic approach appreciates the pragmatic approach as important for learning *social* skills (negotiation, cooperation, tolerance, volunteering), it claims that this is not political education. But the pragmatists are convinced that children will acquire the skills needed to be active citizens through being involved and motivated to learn. Others explain this dichotomy as being between a discipline-oriented approach and issues-centred political learning. Learning strategies in an issues-led approach include controversial issues, problem-solving experiential learning, case studies and active learning.

One of the dangers of the current approach is that topical and controversial issues are often used as 'openers' to gain the attention and interest of the class. After having initiated a lesson this way, e.g. a ten minutes' discussion about legalisation of drugs, the issue 'disappears' as the teacher then directs the pupils to the 'proper' topic, be it the legislative role of the parliament or the governance of the law. We would argue that controversial issues should not be used as 'lesson openers', but as real opportunities for children to make up their minds about issues of concern.

Finland



In Finland education for citizenship is often synonymous with social education, civic education and/or ethical education. The teaching of politics is usually left to secondary schools while primary schools focus on human rights, equality issues and values education.

For example, in religion and ethics children discuss issues of justice, fairness, rights and obligations to each other. Global issues such as the war in Iraq would not be the focus of a specific lesson but would be discussed if the topic arose, as teachers have an obligation to answer children's questions openly and honestly.

Such principles and guidelines are found in 'The Teacher's Professional Ethics' (Trade Union of Education in Finland) which outlines the values to which teachers should adhere. Indeed the trainee teachers mentioned in the research below on parents found these guidelines to be helpful and felt that in the end a strong sense of professional ethics was one of their most important resources.

England



Education for citizenship is now statutory for secondary schools and recommended for primary schools. Whilst much of the emphasis is on social and moral education in the latter, there is for the first time explicit mention of political literacy and teaching about topical issues. Pupils from ages 5 - 7 should be taught to 'take part in simple debates about topical issues' and consider 'simple political issues' (DFEE/QCA 1999 p137-8). Pupils aged 7 - 11 should be taught 'to research, discuss and debate topical issues, problems and events' and 'what democracy is, and about the basic institutions that support it locally and nationally' (p139, *op cit*). At secondary level there is increased emphasis on understanding democracy and the institutions that support it, together with an understanding of topical, political and controversial issues. Education for citizenship may be either taught as a discrete subject area or be incorporated into existing areas of the curriculum. Evidence to date suggests that most schools are working with a combination of the two approaches.

This new area of the curriculum has arisen because of concerns about young people's disengagement with democratic processes and an acknowledgement that a healthy democracy requires informed active citizens. There is a determination that the teaching of citizenship should not revert to what used to be taught as civics, i.e. a curriculum subject with a narrow focus on the British constitution. Instead, there is an acknowledgement that young people *are* interested in particular political issues (e.g. animal rights, environmental issues, improving their local community) and that we therefore need to equip students with 'the political skills needed to change laws in a peaceful and responsible manner' (p10) with regard to both local and national issues.

Central to such an approach is the recommendation that controversial issues be included for discussion:

Controversial issues are important in themselves and to omit informing about and discussing them is to leave a wide and significant gap in the educational experience of young people.

QCA (1998:56)

This approach reflects some of the principles endorsed by Huckle, a long-standing advocate of the need for political education which includes discussion of controversial issues (1996). He cites protests over road construction and live animal exports as examples of 'the appeal of cultural politics amongst the young and its power to build new alliances in changed times' (p34). The discussion of cultural politics, he argues, is a necessary aspect of citizenship education and may be the key to gaining students' interest. Through this we can link an understanding of the theory of democracy to everyday life and can look to expanded models of democracy.

There are two particular challenges facing effective citizenship education. One concerns the nature of its introduction if it is to be incorporated into existing curriculum subjects. Within the teaching of English, for example, the teacher may introduce a lesson on fox hunting – a controversial issue - but as the purpose of English is to teach about understanding texts and the acquisition of written skills, the main focus of the lesson will not be about helping pupils to come to an informed opinion about fox hunting but to improve their English skills. A second challenge is the current model of schools in the UK where teaching is performance led, and governed by exam results and subsequent league tables. Pring (1999) argues that

The exploration of social justice and political values – of the sort of society worth striving for - is difficult to pursue in depth... where the curriculum is defined in terms of pre-specified outcomes.

There are thus issues for teachers in the UK about how to deliver the essence of the new citizenship curriculum – whether within existing curriculum areas or a separate subject - and how to allow sufficient time for worthwhile discussions of controversial issues in the face of continuous pressure to achieve particular examination targets and outcomes.

What about the parents?

Recent research with a group of Erasmus and Finnish student teachers indicates that they have a real concern about the teacher's role in terms of co-operating with parents in the co-education of their children in this important and fundamental area of values education. The student teachers saw parents as active partners in the education of the child and were anxious to develop closer links between home and school than currently exist. They were particularly concerned to know how to form good relationships with parents and children from different races or cultures and were also aware of the difficulty of helping children where there were alcohol/drug problems. Should they intervene immediately or wait? If so, for how long? Others wanted guidance on how best to form a good relationship with the child whose parents have been or are in prison. If student teachers are to feel confident to broach these difficult and controversial issues, their concerns need to be addressed.

Similar research in the UK indicates that many teachers are wary of teaching about controversial issues because they fear criticism from parents. There is thus a real need for teachers to feel secure in their pedagogy, knowing that the methods they use to teach controversial issues are fair, democratic and supported by school policy. Such policies or methods need to be conveyed to parents. Furthermore there is a need to hear more from the parents themselves. Recent research indicates that they may in fact welcome the teaching of controversial issues and political literacy and that, in the main, they support the values of their children's school (Holden, forthcoming).

Why teach controversial issues?

If citizenship and political education is to be more than learning facts about legal and political processes and is to embrace controversial issues as central, then we need to understand why this should be. Our rationale is based on the following:

The link between politics and controversial issues

Politics deals with real situations and by its very nature deals with controversial issues. To teach political education or citizenship education and neglect controversies would be as useless as teaching arithmetic but ignoring connections like plus and minus.

Citizenship and democracy

Although elections are the process by which the decision-making body is constituted, the political process goes on all the time, as people's opinions are registered through opinion polls. It is thus important that there is ongoing discussion on controversial political issues between elections and that young people are involved.

Multiple perspectives

People have different points of view, according to their particular interests, about how to define a situation, how to judge an action, how to solve a problem. Multiple perspectives exist in many areas – e.g. within literature (interpretation of a novel), in sciences (light can be investigated as corpuscles or waves alternatively), or in daily life (the decision of a referee in a soccer stadium). That there are multiple views of reality can be brought home to pupils in the classroom through the discussion of controversial issues. A central focus is understanding the complexity of such issues and the importance of compromise in finding solutions.

Rational thinking

With the discussion of controversial issues, claims have to be reasoned, with judgements based on knowledge, opinions based on evidence and basic assumptions revealed. Thus the discussion of controversial issues provides opportunities for pupils to learn the skills of rational thinking, realising the importance of presenting decisions as 'reasonable' on the grounds of fairness, evidence and compromise. The aim is to move away from 'winning' arguments and to find creative resolutions to apparent conflicts.

Participation

Controversial issues are an invitation to everybody to participate in the discussion. Where the atmosphere in the classroom is positive and controversies are welcomed, there is an opportunity for all pupils, regardless of ability, to express their own point of view and to feel able to contribute. Such classroom conditions should be reflected in the school at large, with decision-making being open and transparent, involving those affected.

Skills

Communication in schools is often dominated by teachers. Where pupils are required to argue or give evidence, this is often a paper based task where they repeat what they think are the 'correct' answers. Including discussion of controversial issues, however, allows for open-ended debate where the objective is not to find the 'right' solution, but to let pupils debate, listening to each other and trying to find a solution which is closest to the common good.

How should we teach controversial issues?

The role of the teacher

The teaching of controversial issues requires the school to provide opportunities for truthful and honest discussions about points of conflict and agreement that are found in the real world. This means that schools must do more than provide a 'safe haven', as such an ethos may deny children the opportunities to explore relevant topical and political issues. Issues which frequently arise with children relate to the use of drugs, racist incidents, bullying and acts of violence or vandalism in the community. It follows that there will be an increased role for the child to express opinion, discuss, debate and develop ideas during lessons. However this can bring its own problems. Teachers are rightly concerned that their own contributions or those of pupils in their class may be biased and reflect strongly-held opinions which may be difficult to manage.

For this reason the report which underpinned the introduction of Citizenship Education in England (QCA 1998) includes clear guidance to teachers on different strategies for managing debate in classrooms. It recognises the need for balanced and careful measures of neutrality on the part of the teacher, whilst acknowledging that there may be some occasions when the teacher needs to assert a commitment to a value position. At other times the teacher may need to intervene if class discussion has not been sufficient to counter the expression of an anti-social viewpoint (for example a racist opinion) with the effect that individuals in the class are left exposed and vulnerable. The three approaches recommended are:

- the neutral chair approach
- the balanced approach
- the stated commitment approach

Teachers may use a combination of these approaches as the need arises. They may remain neutral, letting children put the various viewpoints, they may give a view (not necessarily their own) to ensure a balance of opinions is heard, or they may give their own view as a means of encouraging pupils to agree or disagree. What is important is that pupils are 'offered the experience of a genuinely free consideration of difficult issues' (p60) and that issues are analysed 'according to an established set of criteria, which are open to scrutiny and publicly defensible' (p61). In other words, teachers should use a combination of these three approaches with confidence, and should establish with their class guidelines for working on controversial issues.

Such guidelines include the establishment of 'ground rules' - for example that no-one will have to answer a personal question and that no-one will be forced to take part in a discussion. The aim is to enable a free flow of ideas in a safe, non-threatening environment where

pupils can think about and question their assumptions and listen to others. Pupils should be encouraged to 'cultivate tentativeness' and explore the many sides to any one argument as 'often the goal of teaching a topic is not 'clearer ideas' but 'greater confusion'. This has to be tolerated as a stage in moving towards an independent opinion.' (Stradling, Noctor and Baines, 1984).

It is important that such established sets of criteria are in place and that discussions on controversial issues are part of the everyday life of the classroom. Thus when 'tricky' issues surface (such as the aftermath of September 11th) both teachers and children know how to listen, to explore, to debate and to deliberate.

Strategies for the classroom

Freire (1972) and Rogers (1983) argue that in order to educate children to think and to participate, one must use interactive participatory methods of teaching. It follows that discussions on topical and controversial issues must be done through active learning and within authentic contexts, and that in teaching about democracy schools must model democratic processes. Thus we need approaches which enable children to:

- develop the confidence to voice their own opinions
- develop skills in recognising the views and experience of others
- develop skills in critical thinking and in forming arguments
- develop skills of co-operation and conflict resolution
- develop skills of democratic participation
- gain experience of taking action for change.

These deliberations must take place within a context. Some approaches might include:

- small group discussions followed by plenary sessions to develop and synthesise arguments
- open-ended collaborative enquiries on topical and controversial issues
- role play, simulations and debates that reflect events in society
- participating in democratic processes of change.

With all these approaches, many students will need help to move from dualistic thinking (right/wrong) to a more deliberative approach.

Clarke (2001) suggests a framework for discussion which can be used in a variety of learning contexts. He refers to it as a 'demystification strategy', a way of making sense of a complex issue, considering the merits of an argument and forming an opinion on the basis of critical analysis. He suggests the following framework:

1. What is the issue about?

The point here is to identify the key question about which there is controversy. Is it to do with values (what is best?) or information (what is the truth here?) or concepts (what does this mean?). Such an initial question allows the students a chance to analyse the case dispassionately before deciding on its merits.

2. What are the arguments?

This question encourages pupils to consider the various positions on the issue. What are the values stated? What criteria are being used to make a judgement? Are the claims in the information accurate? Are the arguments clear? Are they consistent? Such questions will help students judge the validity of certain claims.

3. What is assumed?

Once students have considered the arguments in an issue, the critical questions centre around the assumptions behind these. 'It is not true' says Clarke, 'that any opinion, position or point of view is acceptable or legitimate. If assumptions taken to justify an argument are based in prejudice, if attitudes behind argument are ethnocentric, racist or parochial, then those assumptions are grounds for criticism and reduce the legitimacy of an argument'. Thus students need to ask, are the assumptions based on prejudice or some other attitude contrary to universally-held human rights? They can ask: Who is saying this? Is it an informed opinion from someone with knowledge of the situation or is it an outsider, with little first-hand experience?

4. How are the arguments manipulated?

This question helps students judge the quality of the information they are receiving. It is particularly important as it can help them understand how information can be used to influence opinion. Questions which can help are: Who is involved? What are their particular interests in this issue? What are their reasons for taking this particular stance? Such questions can help students to see how information can be selected, emphasised or ignored according to its value to various positions on an issue.

Topics and examples

Obviously topical, controversial issues appear and disappear as time goes by and they may be different in various European countries, regions and communities. There are, however, two important aspects which have to do with the particular character of controversial issues in democracy.

First, issues which are currently discussed everywhere have been successfully introduced into the public debate by political parties or lobbies, but need not be the most important issues for everybody. Thus we need to ensure that issues which we feel are important (and controversial) are discussed. This might involve raising non-mainstream issues or initiating discussion about something thought of as 'indisputable', i.e. one can create a controversial issue.

Second, controversial issues are learning opportunities and so we should encourage young people to raise for discussion issues that are relevant to them, about which they want to know more. As well as encouraging pupils to bring their own controversial issues for discussion, the teacher also has a role to play in selecting issues for debate which are related to young people's lives and which concern society as a whole and its future development.

In Germany there are a number of issues which are the subject of public debate at the moment and relate to young people. These would all serve as useful topics for the classroom. For example:

- Should schools reduce the number of school years from 13 to 12?
- In order to cope with problems of discipline should schools exclude pupils who do not behave correctly from lessons?
- In many schools courses in skiing used to be obligatory. Should skiing continue to be promoted in the face of increasing damage to the Alps?
- Should the obligatory military service (nine months) be replaced by professional specialists?

In the UK some current issues for discussion might be:

- Should Britain join the euro?
- Should the government give permission for a new airport to cope with the growth in low-cost travel, despite the effects on the countryside and resulting pollution?
- How should we best educate refugee children?
- Should national tests at 7, 11 and 14 be scrapped? Should the publishing of league tables of schools' results be scrapped?

In Finland some key issues which involve the future of young people are:

- Parents work very long hours. Should there be after-school clubs or should the school day be lengthened? Should this provision be free?
- How should schools best educate children with special needs?
- How can we prevent young people from feeling marginalised, disaffected and dropping out of school? What can be done to make the curriculum more relevant to the lives of young people?
- How can we encourage young people to be active citizens, e.g. by voting?

We are claiming that young people, though they may initially seem to be overwhelmed by such issues, do appreciate being involved in serious questions as they are crucial for their future. In involving the young, adults also signal to them that they are serious partners in a dialogue, and that their contributions are valued.

Curriculum opportunities to address controversial issues

Whilst any of the above issues can provide authentic contexts for discussion with older primary or secondary children, there are also ways of introducing young children to controversial issues.

Clough and Holden (2002) indicate how an activity such as 'The Great Divide' (where children have to position themselves along a line according to their point of view), can be used with children as young as five. They also show how a current controversial issue, such as the building of a new road by-pass, can also provide an authentic context for speaking and listening or persuasive writing in language lessons, or can be part of a local study in geography.

Environmental issues in science and geography provide opportunities for a discussion on controversial decisions (e.g. the use of wind farms, GM crops, pollution) and any children studying ancient Greece can debate the origins of democracy (including who could and could not vote) and compare this with our present systems.

Once teachers start to look, there are endless opportunities for incorporating controversial issues into the curriculum and the strategies suggested earlier can provide a framework for their discussion.

Stories about values have a particular place in providing a context for discussion. Koehnecke (2001) makes the point that when discussing moral and ethical issues - e.g. drug abuse - it is not enough to have a classroom discussion which has as its aim the message 'don't do it'. She advocates using books to provide quality and in-depth information about difficult issues to allow children to make up their own minds. For example *The House that Crack Built* allows children to read about the problems of others in an authentic context and helps them to see the economic, social and physical implications of a drug industry that kills people. Thus stories can provide real-life contexts for the discussion of controversial issues.

Conclusion

Children who take part in informed discussions on social and moral issues will be better able to understand the values of others and to respect those who may have opinions different from their own. Children used to looking at current events from a number of points of view, or indeed to exploring different versions of events in the past, are learning how to weigh evidence and make informed judgements.

Children whose geography or science lessons (for example) go beyond facts and figures to look at current topical issues are learning about the nature of controversy in authentic contexts. Indeed the inclusion of controversial issues as a central part of values education and the teaching of democracy brings the curriculum into the 21st century and prepares young people for the adult world.

If we are to have teachers who feel confident to teach about controversial issues, then we must educate our trainee teachers, giving them sufficient time to get to grips with their own knowledge, concerns and appropriate teaching strategies. This is perhaps our biggest challenge.

As Tutiaux-Guillon (2001) points out, the introduction of innovative material in schools must be matched by appropriate training in teacher education, or the innovation will fail. We must also provide in-service education for the teachers currently in our schools who wish to develop their practice. It is only then that we will be able to meet our aim of creating a generation of informed, politically literate and active young people, who relish the challenge of learning about topical and controversial issues.

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The Children's Identity and Citizenship in Europe (CiCe) Thematic Network links 28 European states and some 80 universities and college departments which are engaged in educating students about how children and young people learn about and understand their society, their identity and citizenship.

A cross-disciplinary group, we include lecturers in social psychology, pedagogy, psychology, sociology and curriculum studies, and those who educate various professions such as teachers, social pedagogues, psychologists, early childhood workers and youth workers.

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