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Teaching about democracy, democratic processes and controversial issues: dilemmas and possibilities

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Teaching about democracy, democratic processes and controversial issues has consistently been a difficult area for teachers. Some teachers feel that 'politics' has no place in the classroom, others worry that their own understanding is not sufficient.

Yet citizenship education, including the teaching of political literacy and controversial issues, becomes statutory in English schools from September 2002. The national curriculum in England has focused on traditional subjects and, until the current time, ignored the teaching of political literacy. However, concerns about the young people's disengagement with democratic processes and an acknowledgement that a healthy democracy requires informed active citizens has ensured that teaching political literacy together with the teaching of controversial, topical issues has become a key focus in this new citizenship curriculum.

Background

Previous attempts to teach political literacy to children in the 8-13 age range have met with resistance from teachers. Harwood, researching into teachers' practice for the World Studies 8-13 project, found that they ignored this aspect of the work and consistently rated political skills as unimportant (1984). Yet Stevens's research (1982) with primary school children indicates that from the age of seven onwards, they are 'able to take part intelligently in discussion about politics' and from nine, can discuss 'concepts of democracy, leadership and accountability of government' (p168). Similarly, Hicks and Holden (1995) demonstrated the extent to which children of all ages are interested in issues of justice and fairness with reference to both their own lives and the lives of others. The landmark Crick Report (QCA, 1998) which underpins the new curriculum for citizenship education, endorses the importance of teaching children about such issues and about democratic processes.

This report draws on a number of recent surveys. It cites Crewe's research (1996) which reveals the disengagement of British pupils from discussion of public and political issues, and Wilkinson and Mulgan (1995) who give evidence of pupil ignorance and an increased 'disrespect for the way parliament works' (p16). The low turn-out in both the 1997 and 2001 UK general elections among the 18-25 age range is further evidence of the disengagement of the young from mainstream politics. But the report warns against a narrow focus on the British constitution. It suggests that young people *are* interested in particular political issues (e.g. animal rights and environmental issues) and in improving their local community, and recommends that we 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.

This approach reflects some of the principles endorsed by Huckle, a long-standing advocate of the need for political education (1996). He cites protests over road constructions 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). 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 abstract rights to everyday life and can look to expanded models of democracy.

The current context: views of teachers and parents

In a bid to establish the extent to which primary schools were already covering these areas, a case study of two contrasting primary schools was undertaken (Holden 2000). Findings endorse previous research: many teachers supported the social and moral dimension of citizenship education but were concerned about teaching topical issues and political literacy. Some were anxious about their own role in mediating discussions, others felt both areas should be left to secondary school. One argued explicitly that school was not the place for discussing contentious or 'distressing issues' as it should provide a 'safe haven' from the outside world and its problems. A newly qualified Year 4 teacher said she would not discuss anything which could be considered controversial as she worried that this 'would be contentious and ... you worry about parents and whatever' (p122). Most teachers said they did not plan any teaching on topical issues but would deal with questions from the children if they arose. The evidence from both schools points to a need for clear guidelines on the teachers' role and a framework for teaching about topical, controversial and political issues.

Many of the teachers in these two schools were concerned not only about their role but also about the reactions of parents. For this reason a sample of parents in the two schools was interviewed, as were parents in a feeder secondary school. Most of the parents in the primary schools were in favour of children learning about topical and controversial issues, but some wished to protect their children or thought they would not be interested. Fewer parents were in favour of teaching primary school children about democratic institutions, with most feeling it should happen in secondary school, if at all. Opinions reflected social class: middle class parents were more likely to support such teaching whilst some parents from lower socio-economic groups who did not vote themselves and were not interested in current issues did not see the value of this for their children. Parents of secondary school pupils were more in favour of these areas being taught but some voiced concerns about the neutrality of the teacher and space in the timetable. The majority of parents said they would welcome more information on this area and reassurance about how controversial issues would be addressed.

Ways forward

We appear to have a climate where policy makers are stressing the importance of political literacy and the teaching of controversial issues, and a teaching profession (at least in primary schools) which is wary and lacking in confidence in this new area. Parents too, appear to need reassurance. Drawing on recent curriculum guidance (Clough and Holden, 2002), this paper suggests that there are three key areas where teachers need support, if we are to address what appear to be long-standing problems with this aspect of education for citizenship. These are:

- the teacher's role in handling controversial issues
- appropriate teaching strategies and approaches
- opportunities in the primary curriculum for addressing controversial issues and political literacy.

Handling controversial issues: the role of the teacher

A basic tenet of citizenship education is that children should debate topical and controversial issues in the classroom.

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)

However teachers are rightly concerned that their own contributions or those of children in their class may be biased and reflect strongly held opinions which may be difficult to manage. They are concerned that they may offend the beliefs and values of children and their parents. For this reason the Crick Report (QCA 1998) includes clear guidance to teachers on different strategies for managing debate in classrooms. It recognises the need for balance and careful measures of neutrality on the part of the teacher, whilst acknowledging that there may be some occasions when the teacher may need 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 may now use a combination of these three approaches with confidence, and may establish with their class a way of working on controversial issues.

The difficulty for many teachers is that if children are not used to debating topical or controversial issues then when something does arise (e.g. the aftermath of September 11th) both they and the children are unsure how to proceed. A key tenet of this paper is that if an established set of criteria are in place, if such discussions are part of the everyday life of the classroom, then when 'tricky' issues surface both teachers and children know how to listen, to debate and discuss. Parents, too, will know that such discussions are an every day part of classroom life. This leads on to the second key area about appropriate teaching strategies for addressing topical, controversial and political issues.

Teaching strategies and approaches

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 the teaching of political literacy and topical, 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 / experience of others
- Develop skills in critical thinking and in forming arguments
- Develop skills of democratic participation

One way of providing the opportunity to develop such skills is the use of a 'thinking circle', as described by Fisher (2001). The thinking circle enables the teacher to present a story or moral issue, after which children reflect individually on a number of key questions, discuss in small groups and then as a class. Children are taught to look for evidence to back up their statements, to question others and to review their thinking. If teachers introduce their pupils to this framework with stories from the past or contemporary moral dilemmas, then when an event happens in the news or a controversial issue arises, the children (and the teacher) will know how to approach the discussion. Children can also be encouraged to bring their own concerns to the thinking circle, to discuss and to formulate their own questions. The skills learnt in a thinking circle can then be transferred to role play and more formal debates. This approach is currently more common in primary schools but works equally well with younger secondary pupils.

Whilst the thinking circle provides a structured opportunity for children to develop the skills identified above, there are many other such opportunities. Language and drama lessons where speaking and listening are encouraged offer the chance for the teacher to model a framework for dealing with emotional, sensitive and controversial issues, demonstrating how children must listen, take turns, reflect critically and formulate their own opinions based on evidence. This approach can also be used in other subjects - for example to weigh up evidence in history.

Opportunities in the curriculum to address controversial issues and political literacy

Teachers may feel they can teach how to debate, to listen, to reflect and to formulate an opinion but may still be worried about the content of citizenship education. When, they may say, are we to teach about democracy and democratic institutions in our already over-crowded curriculum? When are we to teach about topical issues? It is argued here that indeed we should not be teaching political literacy as a separate topic, isolated from its relevance to current issues. Instead we should search for opportunities to link both controversial issues and politics to the current curriculum. A debate on fox hunting, the legalizing of cannabis or a new by-pass may be a topical, controversial issue: it is also an opportunity for teaching children how people may make their opinions heard, how bills are passed in parliament, the role of local government etc. Such issues need not be an 'add-on' to the curriculum; they can provide an authentic context for speaking and listening or persuasive writing in English, or part of a local study in geography. There are environmental issues in science and geography where there are opportunities for a discussion on controversial decisions (e.g. the use of wind farms, pollution) and any children studying ancient Greece can debate the origins of democracy (including those not allowed to vote) and compare this with our present system (see Brown 1996, for exemplification of this).

Conclusion

Children who feel they can bring their own concerns into a thinking circle, or who are used to formulating opinions based on careful listening and evidence, will be developing the critical skills needed of active citizens. 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 also learning how to become better informed. They are learning about the nature of debate and the nature of democracy. For both teachers and children there can exist a community of enquiry where the teaching of democratic processes and political literacy becomes not an area to fear, but one to embrace as it brings the curriculum into the 21st century and prepares young people for the adult world.

Exemplar

The following activity illustrates the above arguments. It is for secondary pupils and is taken from Clough, N and Holden, C (2002) *Education for Citizenship: Ideas into Action*. Routledge/Falmer. This book contains further ideas for work with both secondary and primary pupils on controversial, topical and political issues.

Activity: Europe and the environment - countries without borders

Purpose

- To help students understand the political map of Europe
- To help students understand that economic activity in one country affects the environment of another
- To increase the knowledge base of students about specific environmental risks within European borders
- To understand the role of pan European co-operation and legislation in matters of the environment

Preparation

You will need resources and information on one or more of the following:

- acid rain (origins and effects of sulphur emissions)
- the accident in 1986 in a chemical factory near Basle, Switzerland which polluted the river Rhine through different countries and into the North Sea
- Chernobyl
- the outbreak of foot and mouth in the UK in 2001.

A good starting point is the internet, for example www.planet.com.

You will also need:

A political map of Europe, copies of this for students' use and coloured pencils

Procedure

Whole class: briefly introduce the problems associated with each of these cases, including key background information.

Groupwork: the students research their chosen topic from the different sources of information.

They should consider the following questions:

- What was the cause of this disaster?
- What happened?
- Where were the effects felt?
- Which communities suffered?
- What was done to resolve the problems?

Students should plot the course of the events on their maps. Each group should agree a short statement about the need for local, national and European policies to solve the problems caused. These statements are read out and/or put on display.

Plenary

How does environmental activity in one country affect another?

How did countries co-operate to try and resolve the problems?

What more should governments do?

What could we do?

Are political borders important? What for?

What does it mean: "we share a common environment"?

Possibilities

Students can do further research related to the effects of acid rain. They can investigate 'Europe's sulphur budget', looking at the balance of sulphur emissions and depositions. On their maps of Europe they can indicate with coloured pencils those countries which emit more sulphur than is deposited in them, and in a different colour indicate those that receive more pollution than they emit. Sweden is a good example: they can note all the countries that contribute to the pollution of Swedish forests and lakes.

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