

Paper 16: Teaching about controversial issues

This paper

1. This paper draws on a range of recent publications in order to suggest guidelines for handling controversial issues in schools, both in the classroom and in informal conversations between teachers and learners. It has in mind topics to do with cultural and religious diversity, ethnicity, prejudice, race and racism.
2. Children and young people make comments and ask questions about such topics not only explicitly but also through their behaviour. By the same token, the answers which teachers make are communicated through behaviour, tone and attitude as well as directly.
3. Often, responses have to be given on the spur of the moment, taking into account the uniqueness of the present situation, awareness of previous occasions and discussions, and sensitivity to the personality and circumstances of the learner(s) involved, and of whoever may be listening or watching. A piece of writing such as this cannot lay down what exactly the 'correct' answer should be in all circumstances. It can, however, suggest a number of general principles such as the following. Some at least of these may give helpful guidance in any one situation.

Fostering understanding

4. The fundamental educational task is to help learners think for themselves, and to sort out and clarify their emotions and values. They therefore need skills in weighing up evidence, choosing between alternatives, thinking about pros and cons, listening and reflecting before coming to a conclusion, developing empathy for people with whom they disagree, and abiding by rules and conventions of mutual respect and civil argument.
5. So it is often appropriate to turn pupils' questions round – 'What do *you* think?', 'Why?', 'Have you always thought that?', 'Are there other ways of seeing this?', 'What would count as evidence for or against your point of view?', 'What do you think might cause you to change your mind?'

Honesty about disagreements

6. It is miseducation or even indoctrination to say or imply there is consensus around certain issues when in fact there is not. In national society, as also of course across world society as a whole, there are substantial differences of values and policies. It can in fact be reassuring to children and young people, as distinct from merely alarming or depressing, to be reminded that their elders are in disagreement with each other about important matters. It may be more important for them to live with differences and uncertainties rather than to settle for over-simple solutions.
7. Controversy, not only about current issues but also about how to interpret the past, is the lifeblood of democracy. It is important that learners should recognise and welcome this, as distinct from being afraid of it.

A safe environment

8. Fears of ridicule or of being isolated may lead learners to be wary about expressing their own views, or about asking questions, or thinking aloud – classroom discussions can be ‘under-heated’ rather than too lively. So it is frequently necessary, before hard and conflictual issues are broached and discussed, to establish an atmosphere of mutual trust. This may sometimes involve the use of various activities and exercises which are not immediately or directly relevant to the subject-matter under consideration.
9. One well-known way of providing a sense of security is to arrange for learners to work with things which are tangible and which they can handle and arrange. Moving their hands seems to loosen their tongues and their minds. For example, provide phrases, statements and quotations, representing between them a wide range of opinion and outlook, on separate slips of paper or cards. Also, of course, it is valuable to use visual material in such activities, and three-dimensional objects.
10. It is often effective, before there is any discussion, to require each learner to do or decide or write or choose something on their own. Then have them talk in pairs about what they have written or done. Then form fours or sixes, and share further.
11. Other activities likely to generate and sustain mutual respect and trust include brainstorming, oral cloze and jigsawing, and the kinds of collaborative exercise used in the teaching of English as a foreign language (TEFL) – see, for example, www.onestopenglish.com/tefl_skills/writing.htm.

Freedom of expression and freedom from threat

12. Freedom of thought and expression is an important value and should be protected in schools as in wider society. It is not, however, an absolute value. For it can conflict with the equally important right not to be threatened or abused. In practice, the law of the land often puts the right of a person to live in peace and security higher than the right of another person to express their views in insulting and threatening ways.
13. This is usually appropriate in schools as well. Particularly schools have a duty to protect pupils who are especially vulnerable to hate crimes on the streets, and to racist taunts and bullying within the school’s own sphere of influence. In recent years, for example, as a consequence of international, national or local tensions, many learners of Muslim background have had reason to be fearful for their safety. It is essential that schools should be sensitive and alert to their concerns.

Fundamental moral principles

14. There are certain fundamental moral principles enshrined in national law and international human rights standards. It is entirely appropriate for teachers and other adults to assert and stress the values in, for example, the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, or in UK and European anti-discrimination legislation. That said, there are legitimate disagreements sometimes about what the rights and laws involve in practice, and how competing rights and priorities are to be balanced. If children and young people are to understand the spirit of the law, not just the letter, they need to be initiated into the debates that the adult world has conducted over the decades and centuries, not merely be told historical or legal facts.

Open and closed views

15. Differences of opinion with regard to religion are paradigm examples of many other disputes. On certain points it cannot be the case that all religions are correct or true, and it may be, as atheists and humanists contend, that none are. So the first priority is to establish a *modus vivendi* – or peaceful coexistence – for civil debate and reasoned disagreement, and to distinguish between respectful and disrespectful ways of talking and thinking.
16. The Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia has proposed that distinctions should be drawn between 'open' and 'closed' views of Islam. The educational aim should be to foster 'open' views amongst non-Muslims, and also similarly open views amongst Muslims towards religions and worldviews other than their own. The distinctions between open and closed views are relevant to all images and views of 'the other', not just to interaction between 'the West' and 'Islam'.
17. Also, the guidelines on inter-faith dialogue developed by the Inter Faith Network are relevant to a wide range of controversial issues in modern society, not just to religious controversies.

Multiple identities

18. No culture, no community, is just one thing. All communities are changing and all are complex, with internal diversity and disagreements. Neither 'minority' communities nor 'majority' communities are static. They change in response to their own internal dynamics and also as a result of the interactions and overlaps which they have with each other.
19. By the same token, no individual can be reduced to a single category and therefore the individuality of any one person is all too easily neglected when large categories are being used – categories such as 'Muslim', 'non-Muslim', 'Christian', 'agnostic', and so on. People's sense of cultural and personal identity develops over time, and is different in different surrounding contexts. It is important to recall that all or most pupils have a range of affiliations and loyalties – school, home, community, peer culture and street culture – and that some of these may be in competition or even conflict with each other. The educational task is often to help young people navigate their way rather than to declare exactly where they should end up.

Pastoral concern

20. 'The conflicts and controversies of adult life,' notes the Citizenship Foundation, 'can leave young people feeling confused. Why are these things happening? Where do they stand on the issues? Where ought they to stand? It can also leave them feeling fearful and concerned. This is especially so in cases where violence – potential or actual – is involved, and where members of their family and community are directly or indirectly affected.'
21. A key task for adults is to provide reassurance, and to help children and young people cope, and develop resilience. After 9/11 counsellors and experienced teachers throughout the world offered advice on various websites. Some of the simplest and wisest of these documents were written by Dr Judy Myers-Walls at Purdue University in Indiana. 'Hope,' she says, 'is one of the most valuable gifts we can give children

and ourselves'. The pastoral task is to listen and sympathise, and to nurture hope and resilience even at times of great distress.

The teacher's own views

22. Teachers' own views should not be presented as inherently correct. They may well, however, be a useful resource for learners as they seek to make sense for themselves of troubling events. Children and young people do reasonably wish to know how adults see, feel and judge.
23. In particular it is valuable for young people to know how their teachers and other adults came to the views they now hold. Anecdotes and recollections, in this respect, are often as appropriate as intellectual arguments.
24. The Citizenship Foundation points out that it is important for teachers to distinguish between their role as private citizens and their role as public educators. Teachers are forbidden by law from promoting partisan political views in the teaching of any subject in schools. The Education Act 1996 (sections 406 and 407) requires governing bodies, headteachers and local education authorities to take all reasonably practical steps to ensure that, where political or controversial issues are brought to learners' attention, they are offered a balanced presentation of opposing views.
25. In practice, the Foundation says, this means:
 - giving equal importance to conflicting views and opinions
 - presenting all information and opinion as open to interpretation, qualification and contradiction
 - establishing a classroom climate in which all pupils are free to express sincerely held views without fear.
26. The DfES recommends that teachers can avoid unintentional bias by:
 - not highlighting a particular selection of facts or items of evidence in a way that gives it a greater importance than other equally relevant information
 - actively encouraging learners to offer alternative or contradictory interpretations of information (for example of facial expressions, or with regard to conventions of deference or politeness)
 - making clear that they themselves are not the sole authority on matters of fact or of opinion
 - helping learners to distinguish opinions and value judgments from facts
 - opening up opportunities for all learners to contribute their views to a discussion, and not giving more favourable attention to some than to others
 - challenging any consensus of opinion that emerges too easily.

Sources

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