




Site Links

 [Home](#)

 [Search for ERIC Digests](#)

 [About This Site and Copyright](#)

 [Privacy Policy](#)

 [Resources for Library Instruction](#)

 [Information Literacy Blog](#)

ERIC Identifier: ED253465

Publication Date: 1984-06-00

Author: Cook, Kay K.

Source: ERIC Clearinghouse for Social Studies/Social Science Education
Boulder CO.

Controversial Issues: Concerns for Policy Makers. ERIC Digest No. 14.

Information about the teaching of controversial topics in the public schools is of growing importance to educational policymakers because of increased public concern. While most educators agree that openly examining controversial issues "can promote positive, democratic political attitudes" (VanSickle 1983), some people suggest that controversy has no place in public education.

WHAT ISSUES/CURRICULAR AREAS ARE CONSIDERED CONTROVERSIAL?

Generally speaking, an issue which tends to create polarized viewpoints may be considered controversial.

Controversial topics usually center on values and beliefs often considered private rather than public. Thus, those ideas which either confirm or question deeply held values will become controversial. They are usually issues of social significance and have national and international implications. However, issues which do not extend beyond local concerns can be equally significant.

Specific topics which currently concern local communities and national "watchdog" agencies include:

--sex and sexuality: specifically, birth control, abortion, homosexuality, and "permissive" attitudes toward sexual behavior

--nuclear issues: nuclear power, nuclear weapons, national defense, nuclear disarmament, peace

--religion/science conflicts: scientific creationism, genetic engineering

--challenges to the U.S. foreign policy ethics vis-a-vis intervention in the politics of developing nations, especially Central America

Curricular areas most likely to contain controversial subject matter are literature, social studies/social sciences, and science. Literature courses in particular must deal with problems of objectionable language and alternative

life styles and values presented in fiction. Social studies courses by nature deal with highly visible and debated issues of social import. Even science educators must respond to demands for the introduction of "scientific creationism" in their courses.

Finally, the approach to instruction known as "secular humanism," involving ethical and values instruction, has become controversial because the Moral Majority believes it undermines "traditional family values" (Lines 1983).

WHY SHOULD EDUCATORS BECOME INVOLVED IN TEACHING ABOUT CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES?

Teaching about controversial issues can have positive effects on students, school climate, and, subsequently, society at large.

Students are motivated to learn and apply decision-making and problem-solving skills when discussing topics of importance to them. More specifically, research suggests that discussing controversial issues in elementary and secondary schools will counteract the apathy that has characterized persons of voting age for the last decade.

Two studies (Ehman 1969, 1977) reveal that focusing course content on controversial topics positively affected "students' attitudes toward citizen duty, political participation, and political efficacy as well as their political trust, social integration, and political interest--if the teacher allowed open expression and promoted an open classroom climate" (Hepburn 1983).

The implications for society seem clear. When approached correctly, the introduction of controversial issues can help students develop into citizens who will be more likely to deal intelligently and decisively with such issues.

In 1951, the Committee on Academic Freedom, National Council for the Social Studies, took the position that free discussion of current issues is at the heart of the democratic process and, therefore, education for citizenship must emphasize and teach the skills needed for the study and discussion of controversial issues (Cox 1977).

HOW HAVE THE COURTS TREATED CASES DEALING WITH CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES?

The Supreme Court and lower courts tend to uphold the rights of teachers and of students to engage in controversial topics both in curricular and extracurricular activities.

Supreme Court Decisions

Epperson v. Arkansas (1968): The court addressed the Arkansas law prohibiting instruction in evolutionary theory and decided that "states may not use the public school curriculum to promote a religious view, although states normally have full authority to set curriculum requirements."

Tinker v. Des Moines School District (1969): The Court upheld the right of the Tinkers (brother and sister students) to wear armbands in protest of the Vietnam war and the right of students, in general, to express their views on

controversial subjects "in the right place and manner." The Court envisioned the public high school as "a place for free and open discussion of ideas among teachers and students."

Papish v. Board of Curators (1973): "The Court extended protection under the free speech clause to student editors of a university newspaper."

Board of Education, Island Trees Union Free District No. 26 v. Pico (1982): The Court ruled that the school board must go to trial to show that it had a valid purpose in withdrawing books from its school libraries.

Lower Court Decisions

Recently, lower courts have ruled that a school board could not remove a film, "The Lottery," from its curriculum; ordered a school committee in Maine to lift its ban on Glasser's book about Vietnam, *365 DAYS*; voided a 1981 Arkansas law requiring equal time for instruction in creationism; and approved sex education programs in New Jersey with the limitation that individual children could be excused where the family raised objections based on "sincerely held moral and religious beliefs" (Lines 1983).

However, Hirsh and Kemerer argue that because "the 11 federal courts of appeals have not been consistent, the legal status of academic freedom in the classroom varies geographically" (1982). They categorize the individual federal circuits as liberal or conservative.

HOW CAN EDUCATORS PREPARE FOR COMMUNITY RESPONSE OR COMPLAINTS?

Cox (1977) reminds educators that "curricular decisions have a political dimension" and emphasizes that:

Schools can prepare ahead of time for the handling of specific pressures by forming a school/community council on educational practice created for the purpose of advising the board on curriculum matters of interest to the community.

School boards should present to teachers in writing any limitations they have set upon classroom materials and methods.

School districts should provide for and require teacher training in the correct/effective approaches to introduce controversial issues in the classroom.

WHAT QUESTIONS SHOULD EDUCATORS CONSIDER BEFORE MAKING CURRICULAR DECISIONS?

Curricular decisions are generally made at the state and local levels. States broadly specify subjects to teach, while local districts add detail and course descriptions. When developing or modifying a curriculum, educational decisionmakers should consider:

--What promotes creative critical thought in children?

--What are the educational implications of narrowing the range of available

materials?

--To what extent should the child's age affect decisions about curricula content?

--Which classes are so value-laden that they should be elective (Lines 1983)?

--When are students and teachers protected by First Amendment Rights, and what actions could be defined as exceeding those rights?

Philosophical questions for educational policymakers to consider include:

--Who determines and monitors public school standards?

--Should cultural, religious, political, or philosophical differences be encouraged and incorporated in the public school curriculum?

--Does the state's right to have an educated citizenry supercede parents' rights to educate their children as they see fit (Kincheloe 1983)?

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Cox, C. Benjamin. *THE CENSORSHIP GAME AND HOW TO PLAY IT*. National Council for the Social Studies Bulletin 50. Arlington, VA: NCSS, 1977. ED 143 570.

Hardin, Garrett. *STALKING THE WILD TABOO*. Los Altos, CA: William Kaufmann, 1978.

Hepburn, Mary A. "Can Schools, Teachers, and Administrators Make a Difference? The Research Evidence." In *DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION IN SCHOOLS AND CLASSROOMS*, edited by Mary A. Hepburn. National Council for the Social Studies Bulletin 70. Washington, D.C.: NCSS, 1983. ED 238 769.

Hirsh, Stephanie Abraham, and Frank R. Kemerer. "Academic Freedom in the Classroom." *EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP* 39 (February 1982):375-377.

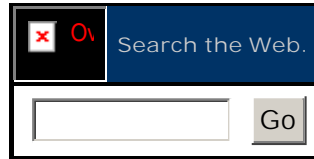
Kincheloe, Joe L. *UNDERSTANDING THE NEW RIGHT AND ITS IMPACT ON EDUCATION*. Fastback 195. Bloomington, IN: Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation, 1983. ED 236 082.

Central America: A Case of Educational Failure." *USA TODAY* 112 (July 1983):30-32.

Lines, Patricia M. *CURRICULUM AND THE CONSTITUTION*. Issuegram 34. Denver, CO: Education Commission of the States, 1983. ED 234 515.

Stelzer, Leigh, and Joanna Banthin. *TEACHERS HAVE RIGHTS, TOO: WHAT EDUCATORS SHOULD KNOW ABOUT SCHOOL LAW*. Boulder, CO: Social Science Education Consortium, ERIC Clearinghouse for Social Studies/Social Science Education, and ERIC Clearinghouse on

VanSickle, Ronald. "Practicing What We Teach: Promoting Democratic Experiences in the Classroom." In DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION IN SCHOOLS AND CLASSROOMS, edited by Mary A. Hepburn. National Council for the Social Studies Bulletin 70. Washington, D.C.: NCSS, 1983. ED 238 769.



[Library Reference Search](#)

Please note that this site is privately owned and is in no way related to any Federal agency or ERIC unit. Further, this site is using a privately owned and located server. This is NOT a government sponsored or government sanctioned site. ERIC is a Service Mark of the U.S. Government. This site exists to provide the text of the public domain ERIC Documents previously produced by ERIC. No new content will ever appear here that would in any way challenge the ERIC Service Mark of the U.S. Government.

[Satellite TV](#)
[DVD Rental](#)
[DVD Rentals](#)