



## **The Evidence Base for Social Studies: Controversial Issues**

### **What We Know**

Any issue which tends to create polarized viewpoints may be considered controversial (Teclhaimanot and Lamb 2004). Evans, Avery and Pederson identify some controversial issues as taboos: beliefs that constrain actions by making certain behaviors and discussion of certain topics forbidden (2000). How do controversial issues affect society in general? Healthy democracies require citizens to engage in high quality public talk (Hess and Posselt 2002, p. 287). They note a Kettering Foundation study which concluded, "Citizens want to participate in public talk and, when they do, they 'enlarge rather than narrow, the way they see and act on public concerns'" (Hess and Posselt 2002, p. 288). John Hibbing and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse note that, while Americans generally like conflict and controversy, they generally dislike contentious disputes about politics, policy and governance (Hess 2004). A positive relationship exists between discussion of complex issues and the development of tolerant attitudes and knowledge of the need for tolerance in democracies (Hess 2004).

Harwood and Hahn define discussion of controversial issues as reflective dialogue among students, or between students and teachers, about an issue on which there is disagreement (1999). The discussion allows for presentation of supportive evidence, comments and the expression of differing points of view. To achieve this, a climate which is conducive to free expression of ideas is necessary.

### **What role do controversial issues play in student learning?**

Jeong and VanSickle report that developing a balanced and healthy personality requires an understanding of the complexities of a global world (2003, p. 234). Audrey Osler and Hugh Starkey concur with this position and further suggest that not only are all human lives increasingly influenced by events in the global world, but students' own communities (neighborhoods and cities) are more diverse (socially, culturally, ideologically) as a result of these events (2003, p. 246).

Schools are communities in which young people learn to interact, argue and work together with others, an important foundation for democracy (Carnegie Corporation of New York and The Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning & Engagement, CIRCLE, 2003, p. 3). Joel Westheimer and Joseph Kahne state that a "good citizen" in a democratic society should be adverse to "either/or solutions, tolerant of ambiguity, skeptical of demagoguery and attentive to the tensions between individual and group and between liberty and order" (2003, p.14). All of these are attributes associated with the discussion of controversial issues. Often, students see political issues as "either/or", when in reality, there are multiple options that could be chosen or implemented, each with its own societal costs and benefits. As a result, they begin to develop a tolerance for

ambiguity. In short, schools/classrooms are where students learn about how to become "good citizens" by discussing controversial issues.

Amy Gutmann identifies the classroom as a powerful place to promote rational deliberations of competing conceptions of the good life and the good society (Hess 2004). Hess and Posselt describe the positive effects of democracy education which includes an open climate for discussion and self-expression in the classroom (2002, p. 288). In another report, Hess finds that schools are best suited for discussion of controversial issues when they contain more ideological diversity than anywhere else in students' lives (2004). Weighing in on this issue, Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, call for a revamping of what students in elementary and secondary schools are taught about the nature of democracy and democratic participation (Hess 2004). Hibbing and Theiss-Morse wish to promote a curriculum with hotly debated political issues in order to teach students that controversy is not an unfortunate by product of democracy but one of its core and vital elements. As a result of discussing controversial issues in the classroom, students score higher on measures of political efficacy and show positive correlations with following current events in media and discussing political matters with family and friends (Harwood and Hahn 1999).

### **How does the use of controversial issues impact the social studies classroom?**

When approached correctly, teaching controversial issues in the classroom can help develop students into citizens who will be more likely to deal intelligently and decisively with complex issues (Cook 1984). Osler and Starkey believe it is a responsibility of educators to help students develop a broad understanding of national identity, and that the identity of the United States is experienced differently by different people (2003, p. 252). They add that to be a citizen, individuals need to establish a sense of solidarity with others in their community. Teaching using controversial issues will equip students with the knowledge, skills and attitudes to make a difference in their communities (Osler and Starkey 2003, p. 252).

Recent observational data from research suggests that few students seriously study controversial issues, and that group discussions appear not to be prominent instructional modes (Hess and Posselt 2002, p. 287). In the 135 observed classes, students simply identified and offered opinions on the issues. No indications were present of students analyzing evidence or theories regarding causes and solutions to the identified problems. Textbooks rarely present various sides of controversies and almost never reveal to students the evidence on which each side bases its position (Loewen 1995, p. 265). One set of textbook authors, as quoted by Loewen, said "we have not avoided controversial issues; instead, we have tried to offer reasoned judgments on them" (1995, p. 5). As a result, students find difficulty in analyzing controversial issues when textbooks present problems as already having been solved or about to be solved (Loewen 1995, p. 2). Therefore, it is important to provide students opportunities to investigate issues that require them to seek intellectual balance by discussing the multiple perspectives held by individuals or groups associated with the issue.

Elementary school teachers can deal with controversial issues by helping students become decision-makers. William Kreidler ("Teaching Elementary Children") offers seven ways to assist elementary students in this process. He suggests the following strategies: (1) make classrooms a safe place to ask questions and discuss ideas by modeling respect for others (2) listen to concerns students have by giving them the opportunity to express their point of view (3) correct misinformation about a fact stated, not a position held (4) reassure students by listening to their concerns (5) help students find answers to their questions by providing balanced, age-appropriate materials (6) try not to instill adult fears or burden students with adult concerns (7) emphasize that conflicts are opportunities for learning and growth.

"The Civic Mission of Schools" report notes that by the time students reach middle school and high school, their discussions of current and historical events could be monitored, so that students feel welcome to speak from a variety of perspectives, with mutual respect and civility. The report also indicates that social studies courses that engage students in active learning, and other forms of civic education, can improve students' civic knowledge, skills and intentions to vote and volunteer. It further states that active learning about controversial issues engages students in activities with "real life" perspectives such as debates, panel discussions, round tables and editorials (2003, p. 14).

Suzanne Cherrin proposes the concept of "freedom with structure" to achieve open discussion of controversial issues. "Freedom with structure" is a balance of free expression of each student's opinions and respect for other students and their opinions (2004). Preparing students for participation in such discussions involves an investment of time to train students in discussion techniques (Harwood and Hahn). It is important in the early and middle grades for students and teachers to cooperatively determine discussion guidelines. Cherrin offers several ideas for teachers to address when developing discussion guidelines:

- Make a humanitarian appeal to students by reminding them that prejudicial remarks made in class may offend or embarrass others
- Establish ground rules for disagreement by requiring a student who wishes to make an opposing opinion to restate the position of the other student in a way which is satisfactory to that person before the student can voice a new opinion (2004).

Harwood and Hahn stress that teachers should involve students in selecting which controversial issues to discuss, while considering students' experiences and expertise regarding the issue, relevance of the issue to students' lives, students' maturity level and significance of the issue to society. The scope of controversial issues may be quite broad, but the educational rewards will prepare students for their roles as citizens in a pluralistic democracy and develop and improve their critical thinking skills as adults.

## What This Means for Instruction

After a review of the research, a number of classroom techniques or applications have been found to be successful with students. Below are some general guidelines to help educators plan and implement the instruction of Controversial Issues:

- Establish an open discussion climate where students feel free to disagree without being disagreeable (Harwood and Hahn)
- Express personal perspectives when appropriate without promoting that position to the students (Harwood and Hahn)
- In elementary grades, begin with teacher-centered whole group discussions (Jeong and VanSickle 2003)
- Maintain focus and direction of discussions and model thoughtfulness when listening and responding to others (Harwood and Hahn)
- Be aware of vocabulary when referring to members of disadvantaged groups; ask "Am I presenting the issue in such a way that students will be inspired to explore them further rather than reinforcing biases?" (Cherrin 2004)
- Introduce fewer topics and examine them more thoroughly (Loewen 1995)
- Ask challenging questions and provide challenging tasks which require opportunities for multiple answers and means of presentation (Jeong and VanSickle 2003)
- Provide students the opportunity to delve into historical controversies (Loewen 1995)
- Respond to all student remarks with respect and dignity (does not mean rubber stamping the statement) (Cherrin 2004)
- Identify statements related to cultural myths or fallacies (Cherrin 2004)
- Challenge students to produce valid evidence for their positions (Cherrin 2004)
- Maintain intellectual balance by promoting freedom for expressing alternative points of view (Harwood and Hahn)
- Provide the resources necessary for students to determine the validity of a position or to become aware of weaknesses in a position (Evans et al. 2000)
- Encourage students to participate in discussions, school governance, and local/state/national political action without advocating a particular position or party ("The Civic Mission of Schools" 2003)
- Equip students with decision-making, problem solving skills that enable them to make a difference through open discussions, position papers and debates dealing with current or controversial topics (Osler and Starkey 2003)

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