INDIVIDUALS ENGAGING IN SOCIETY

Citizenship Foundation

Teaching about controversial issues: guidance for schools

Conflict and controversy is a fact of life

In an age of mass media and electronic communication, children and young people are regularly exposed to the conflicts and controversies of adult life.

Children are alert to information and images they see in the media. These may graphically influence their world-view, not always positively. Television images can fan anxieties and aggressive behaviour. In times of war there are often increases in war games and toy gunfights. Groups denigrated in tabloid newspapers provide young people with the terms of abuse they apply to their peers in the playground or on the street. Hence the derogatory use by children of terms like 'asylum-seeker', or 'gay'.

Young people's fear and concerns

The conflicts and controversies of adult life can leave young people feeling confused, as the war in Iraq clearly shows. 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

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violence – potential or actual – is involved, and where members of their family and community are directly or indirectly affected.

In other cases, young people may feel so strongly about an issue that they wish to take some form of action. How can they make their voice heard? What forms of political action are open to young people? How far should they go? What support, if any, can they expect from their school? Many schools actively endorse pupil participation in school and community issues – letters to MPs, discussions with local councillors, etc. How far does this support extend?

Not all young people react to events in the same way, of course. They can be as divided over an issue as adults. How do they cope when peers express strong views diametrically opposed to their own?

How should schools respond?

At times of public conflict and controversy, e.g., the war in Iraq, schools will naturally want to respond to the fears and concerns of their pupils. This raises questions like:

- What sort of response is appropriate?
- How far should schools go?

To a certain extent, opportunities to respond already exist in the school curriculum. The citizenship curriculum includes teaching on legal and human rights, questions of identity, government, conflict resolution, the significance of the media in society and the role of organisations like the EU and UN. Controversial issues arise in other subjects, too, e.g., the concept of the 'just war' and *jihad* in RE. These provide excellent opportunities for pupils to explore current conflicts and controversies in greater depth. They can help pupils to access factual information from a range of sources, and become more aware of the types of argument that characterise alternative viewpoints.

Capitalising on existing curriculum opportunities to address current issues will not always be the answer, however. For one thing, it means having to

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adjust schemes of work at short notice, with very little time to locate or develop appropriate teaching resources. For another, it only applies to certain pupils – those in a particular year or key stage. Also, at times of crisis it may not go far enough to address the emotional needs of the school population. It is important to remember that talk can be cathartic in itself. There will be occasions, therefore, where schools might need to provide opportunities for pupils to express their fears and concerns, e.g., through circle time, assemblies or discussions promoted on a whole school basis.

Some school settings provide greater challenges than others for the discussion of controversial issues – especially, where pupils come from communities that are themselves in conflict, or have family links with parties involved in conflict. In such cases, schools may be the only forums where pupils are able to encounter a balance of views in a safe environment. Schools need to be able to defend this provision against accusations that they are undermining parental or community views. All positions should be able to be discussed, and it does young people no favours to shield them from views they are likely to encounter in society. Developing the capacity to talk with those of opposing views can be the best way of avoiding situations of conflict from escalating into violence.

Clearly, then, there is a range of responses a school might adopt. What is appropriate is likely to vary from school to school, and from situation to situation. The sort of key questions a school will need to address in determining its approach include:

- Where does the demand for a response come from? Is it from the pupils themselves?
- To what extent are pupils, their families or communities, personally involved or affected by an issue?
- Is the issue something all pupils ought to know about, regardless of whether it is in the curriculum?

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What can teachers do to avoid unfairly influencing pupils?

The very nature of controversial issues means that people hold strong opinions about them. In this respect, teachers are no different from other citizens. There is always a risk of bias, whether unwitting or otherwise, creeping into teaching and discussions with pupils. What counts as bias? How can it be avoided? What sort of influence is legitimate, and what sort is illegitimate, for teachers to exercise over their pupils?

To begin with, it is important for teachers to distinguish their role as *private citizens* from 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 requires school governing bodies, head teachers and local education authorities to take all reasonably practical steps to ensure that, where political or controversial issues such as the situation in Iraq are brought to pupil's attention, they are offered a balanced presentation of opposing views.

In practice, 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.

It also means teachers seeking to avoid unintentional bias by:

- not presenting opinions as if they are facts;
- not setting themselves up as the sole authority on a subject;
- as far as possible, not giving their own accounts of the views of others, but, rather, letting the actual claims and assertions of protagonists speak for themselves;
- not revealing their own preferences in unconscious ways, e.g., facial expressions, gestures or tone of voice;

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- not implying a correct opinion through their choice of respondents in a discussion;
- not failing to challenge a one-sided consensus that emerges too quickly in the classroom.

In cases of international conflict, such as that of Iraq, teachers should be aware that the range of opinion is often far wider than that which is represented in the western media. Wherever possible, it is important to make pupils aware of the sorts of views and arguments that are found in non-western media as well. Similarly, teachers should resist the inclination to promote attitudes that apparently reflect prevailing public opinion to the detriment of minority views. Where public opinion on an issue is particularly vocal, this can be difficult to achieve. Nevertheless, it is not the job of the teacher to side with majority opinion, but to subject *all* views to rational criticism.

What kind of values may legitimately be taught in school?

Just as it is important for teachers to distinguish their role as private citizens from their role as public educators, so it is important for them to distinguish between *private* and *public* values.

There are many different communities in society, each with its own set of values. But a distinction is to be made between 'non-public' communities, membership of which is voluntary, and the larger 'public' or 'civic' community, to which all citizens belong simply by virtue of common citizenship. The civic community has its own set of values. The form these take differs from society to society. The kind of values that characterise a pluralist democracy, such as ours, include: social justice; political equality; tolerance; human rights; respect for the rule of law; and a commitment to negotiation and debate as the ideal way of resolving public conflict.

This difference allows a distinction to be made between the values that may legitimately be taught in schools – indeed, which schools have a duty to

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teach – and those that are more properly the province of the home, particular interests groups and religious or political parties. Thus, although teachers have no legal right to promote their own personal opinions in school, they may quite legitimately condemn and prohibit injustices which contravene our community values, such as racism and human rights abuse – wherever they take place.

To what extent is it legitimate for teachers to take part in protest?

Some teachers may feel pressure from their head teacher or school governors not to be seen supporting partisan views outside school, e.g., by leafleting, going on marches, etc. School managers have no right to exert this kind of pressure on teachers. Teachers are citizens, too. They have a right to hold opinions on matters of public policy, and a right to have their opinions heard. They are perfectly free to go on political demonstrations or take part in campaigns – so long as it is in their spare time.

Teacher action during contracted time is a different matter. As has already been noted, the promotion of partisan political views within school is against the law. This may include the wearing of anti- (or pro-) war badges, and is likely to include encouraging pupils to take part (or not take part) in externally organised demonstrations. The impact of the recent Human Rights Act in this area has not been tested. The prohibition on promoting partisan political views will have to be balanced against the right of freedom of expression.

Teachers who, regardless of the law, feel they have a *moral* obligation to promote their personal views in school must be prepared to take the consequences. Where someone finds the moral stance they take on an issue is incompatible with their obligations as a teacher, they may wish to consider resignation. In any case, such a state of affairs could lead to disciplinary action.

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What attitude should schools take to pupil involvement in protest and campaigns?

Young people are citizens, too. They have a right to hold opinions on matters of public policy, and a right to make their opinions heard. They are perfectly free to go on political demonstrations or take part in campaigns – so long as it is in their own free time.

Public action during school hours is a different matter. Schools cannot condone pupil participation in public demonstrations outside school during school hours – however worthy the cause or just the motive. Head teachers simply do not have the power to authorise such absences – whether or not parents give their permission. Parents have a legal duty to ensure attendance of their school age children at school (unless they have legitimately withdrawn them from the school system) and schools have a legal duty of care for their students. The duty of care carries on if a student is absent with the implicit of explicit permission of the school. So if anything happens to a student in these circumstances, the school could be responsible. Permitting absences for protest action, and certainly facilitating them, could also be in breach of the law forbidding the promotion of partisan views in school.

Where pupils leave school without permission, schools are perfectly entitled to impose sanctions. They should also inform pupils' parents as a matter of course. Sanctions do need to be proportionate, however. In deciding the appropriate sanctions to impose on a student who walks out of school to take part in political protest, the school may wish to take account of the motivation of the student involved, e.g., was it an act of conscience, or was it done for some other reason? It is also important that, where possible, pupils (and parents) are made aware in advance of what they are letting themselves in for by leaving school without authorisation. Only then are they in a position to make an informed moral judgement about taking the 'law' into their own hands and assess the legal and other consequences of doing so.

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Campaigning within school is slightly different. The Education Act 1996 forbids the pursuit of partisan political activities by pupils under the age of 12 while in school. Pupils over the age of 12 are allowed to organize and take part in voluntary political activities in school – with certain provisos. Walking out of lessons cannot be condoned, for example. This is a kind of 'internal truancy' and seriously compromises the duty of care laid on the school. Teachers also need to take care that they are not in breach of the law forbidding the promotion of partisan views in school.

Where these provisos are met, however, there is no good reason why young people should not be allowed – or even encouraged – to participate in the political process themselves on the school premises. Commentators sometimes complain about the apparent apathy of young people about politics. Where pupils do feel strongly about issues, therefore, that strength of feeling should be harnessed to educational advantage, e.g., through the analysis of media reports, role play, or reflective discussion.

The importance of citizenship education

A consideration of the issues surrounding the teaching of controversial issues serves only to underline the importance of good citizenship education from an early age. If children become accustomed to discussing their differences in a rational way in the primary years, they are more likely to accept it as normal in their adolescence.

Citizenship education helps to equip young people to deal with situations of conflict and controversy knowledgeably and tolerantly. It helps to equip them to understand the consequences of their actions, and those of the adults around them. Pupils learn how to recognize bias, evaluate argument, weigh evidence, look for alternative interpretations, viewpoints and sources of evidence; above all to give good reasons for the things they say and do, and to expect good reasons to be given by others.

Ted Huddleston, Citizenship Foundation

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