

Unsettled Issues in the High School

LAWRENCE ELLIOTT

Teaching of controversial issues becomes an imperative in schools of a democracy, according to Lawrence Elliott, social studies teacher, DeKalb Township High School, DeKalb, Illinois.

"I DO NOT agree with a word you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it." Voltaire in the eighteenth century thus expressed a ringing challenge to any who would seek to prevent or to stifle the discussion of unsettled contemporary issues. Many of us are aware that most communities have their articulate minority groups which foster particular economic, political and racial viewpoints. In many instances, these views are the fashionable ones which are accepted by citizens. Under these circumstances the teacher's security may be threatened if he attempts to provide for discussion of live controversial issues. But must the teacher always question whether he can afford to "let sleeping dogs lie," by steering clear of highly controversial issues in which students actually are, and need to be, vitally concerned?

Perhaps some attempt should be made to define what is meant by a "controversial issue." Controversy permeates the structure of the democratic society. This results as both individuals and groups struggle for position and recognition in that society. Every issue suggests some controversy, since there is seldom final agreement on a point of social policy. It is when these differences of opinions on, or varying interpretations of, social policy vitally affect, either emotionally or intellectually, a

large proportion of the people on either the local, state, national or international level that they become significant controversial issues. Though the purpose here is not to outline specifically what those issues might be, one might regard treatment of minority groups, control of monopolies, labor-management relations, government economic controls, and the acceptance and fulfillment of international commitments in Western Europe and the Far East as fruitful areas of exploration. Some issues, such as those which deal with religious denominational belief, are controversial; however, since they are probably not matters for social decision, it may be wise to rule them out. Also, if the discussion of an issue represents a real danger to the security of our nation, then the well-being of the nation must be put first. However, we must not consider the "witch-hunting" tactics of a few pressure groups as being completely indicative that the discussion of an issue is both a clear and present danger to national security.

Why Teach Controversial Issues?

We must face the fact that the students we have in school today are the citizens who will tomorrow shape and execute social policy on the community, state, national and international levels. How can a school which aims solely at

the perpetuation of existing conditions, whatever they may be, meet its responsibility in helping youth to adjust to a changing democratic society? An affirmative answer to the latter question would ignore both the administrative structure of education in this country and the implications of the democratic process. The school's function, then, in bringing about social change is to foster the objective frame of mind which welcomes change as it improves, or is needed to improve, our democratic way of life, to develop the skills required for social problem-solving, and to preserve the democratic tradition and process which provides for orderly change based upon truth openly arrived at.

If we subscribe to this function of the school, the teaching of controversial issues becomes imperative. If the school pursues a policy of refusing to deal with these issues, both the high school graduates and non-graduates will go out into a confusing world ill-prepared to face these controversies. They will be able to discern fewer of the half-truths, spread so convincingly by various propagandists. As adult citizens, these products of the high schools will, under such conditions, be less proficient in fusing the different elements of truth into a mental image that will most nearly approximate the truth.

REQUISITES IN DEALING WITH CONTROVERSIAL QUESTIONS

What are some of the requisites which may be suggested as essential in dealing successfully with controversial questions in the classroom? First, there should be adequate support by the board of education and by the community.

In a local situation with which the writer is familiar, the schools have adopted a written statement to the effect that "teachers should continually strive to present all views of controversial issues to the extent that the age group in which they are being discussed is able to comprehend these issues." This policy statement, accepted by school and civic groups in the community, serves a twofold purpose: (1) it entitles the student to learn in an environment which is comparatively free from bias, and (2) it serves to protect teachers from any pressure group which might insist on imposing its particular views upon the students.

A second important requisite is that the teacher should determine his proper role in the discussion of controversial issues and attempt to fulfill it. Certainly, the teacher has no right to pass on to the class a series of fixed conclusions as the final word in the settlement of controversial questions. Nor is it desirable for a teacher to become emotionally involved over a contemporary issue, particularly since it is his duty to encourage students to discount excessive emotionalism in dealing with such issues.

The teacher should be, first of all, fairly well-informed on the issues, and should achieve an understanding which sees the issue in its historical setting and which suggests some implications for the future. Since he may be accused of indoctrination if he omits those aspects of the question or problem which ultimately help to determine the tentative conclusion, the teacher should make certain that all aspects of the problem are considered. In further defining the role of the teacher, it is his

obligation to establish good rapport between teacher and pupil. This rapport involves a mutual feeling of open-mindedness toward one another's opinions, the freedom to discuss issues pro and con, and the desire to work with one another on any problem which the group agrees to undertake.

Third, the teacher should help students to cultivate those skills which are used in the problem-solving approach. This technique requires such skills as the ability to see possible difficulties, to define the problem, to collect, analyze and organize pertinent data, to draw tentative conclusions and, where possible, to test the conclusions. If this approach is followed consistently, students are less likely to plunge immediately into a discussion of solutions which might bring discredit to both teacher and pupil. Teachers should also have a knowledge of group discussion techniques, particularly in clarifying student thinking and in getting pooled insight from the members of the group analyzing the issue.

Teaching Materials Needed

In addition to adequate support from the board of education and the community, and to a clear definition of the role of the teacher, adequate teaching materials should be available for use in making a study of controversial issues. A single textbook is not sufficient; news periodicals, reference books and partisan materials which often flow rather freely in the community are also needed. Some persons may criticize the use of publications of the special interest groups. However, if these are the kinds of materials which students face in the world of controversy, then it be-

comes imperative that they know how to deal intelligently with them.

Controversial Issues Emphasized

In the senior social studies classes at the local high school, increased emphasis is being given to the discussion of controversial issues. This high school is situated in a community of 12,000 people located in the heart of a rich farming belt. The community is an important trading center, engages in some industrial enterprise, and has the facilities of a teacher-education institution. There is some evidence to indicate a conservative trend in the community. For example, during the past few years a proposal for a community unit school district has been voted down consistently, even though several other communities in the county have taken this step in what now appears to be a statewide trend. The editorial views of the metropolitan newspaper which has wider circulation than others seem to be accepted without question by most members of the community.

Even though our school philosophy encourages discussion of controversial issues, emphasis in many of the social studies classes still centers around the assign-study-recite method. Thus, a teacher who focuses attention on controversial issues in such a situation cannot expect a very sudden improvement when a class has developed the feeling that the teacher or the textbook, or both, is always right and neither is to be questioned.

NATIONAL HEALTH INSURANCE STUDIES

One controversial issue dealt with recently in a senior social studies class arose during a study of "Propaganda."

During the month of October, students had observed in a local paper a series of locally sponsored ads which bore some of the following captions: "Do You Want Socialized Medicine?", "Something for Nothing," "Keep Politics Out of This Picture," and "The Voluntary Way Is the American Way." Some of the students expressed a desire to find out what was behind these ads. The class had reached a generalization in their study of "Propaganda" that when the majority of a community is passive or inert, an articulate minority can sometimes succeed in making its point of view seem to be the voice of all the people.

Four students showed a deep interest in the study. After some investigation, these students posed the following problem for study, analysis and group discussion: "Should we adopt a program of national health insurance?"

A selected bibliography of current magazine articles containing highly divergent viewpoints was prepared. Both the public and college libraries were of great assistance to students in locating these references. Much partisan literature was investigated. The AMA material, for example, was weighed against the publications of the Committee for the Nation's Health. Conditions that have led to the differences in viewpoint were analyzed, and attention was given, insofar as possible, to the motives of the groups which published the literature.

A questionnaire, drawn and circulated by students, sampled opinions of local doctors to determine what points of view they held on the subject. Some of the questions asked were: (1) Do you think our present voluntary health insurance plans are adequate? Why or

why not? (2) Do you think national health insurance would slow down our present progress in medicine? Why or why not?

One member of the group became particularly interested in the national health insurance program as it has operated in European countries. She not only did considerable reading on this topic, but also had a lengthy interview with a visiting science professor from Czechoslovakia to find out from a first-hand source the relative success of the program in that country.

After rather intensive study, the four panel members reported their findings to the class. Several points of agreement were reached by the group:

- Many people do not have a clear-cut idea of the national health insurance program.
- Health is essential to our well-being; but we have not as yet devised a plan whereby medical care can be extended to all those who need it most.
- If need for medical care is somewhat symptomatic of the ills in our society, a national health insurance program which provides medical prepayment will not in itself insure a continuously improved health program.

Many questions were raised in the discussion which could not be answered conclusively. However, according to most of the students, deeper insights into the issues had been gained in the exchange of ideas. Class members drew their own tentative conclusions upon the issue involved.

In evaluating the panel presentation, there seemed to be consensus that the group coordinating this activity had succeeded in focusing less attention on the "fight" and in placing more em-

phasis on a sincere attempt to resolve the differences in thinking represented. Those particularly who worked on the panel were quite overwhelmed by the magnitude of the issues involved. The group agreed that it was impossible to determine in a few days of class discussion the final decision which should be reached regarding the controversial national health program. They were ready to maintain, however, that a satisfac-

tory answer is not so simple as partisan groups would have us believe.

Teachers need fully to recognize the need for teaching controversial issues, to understand the essential elements in a workable program, and then to devote their utmost efforts toward developing still better methods and procedures for encouraging the discussion of these issues. The challenge is ours. Will we meet it?

Fundamentals of Citizenship Education

CHESTER D. BABCOCK

What fundamental objectives do we seek in the teaching of contemporary problems? This question is treated by Chester D. Babcock, Director of Curriculum, Public Schools, Seattle, Washington.

THERE are some who question the wisdom of encouraging youth in our secondary schools to study the problems of contemporary life. Their objections take many forms. Some say that high school students are too young, too immature, to deal with such problems. Others contend that the schools had better "stick to the fundamentals." And some, unfortunately, hide behind this concern about the fundamental skills as they attempt to limit free inquiry and freedom of thought.

But what are the basic and fundamental skills that we seek to develop through the study of current problems? Analysis of courses of study for the classes in contemporary problems in our high schools would probably show that there is general agreement on the following:

- Skill in recognizing, analyzing and defining current problems.
- Skill in locating, collecting, organizing and interpreting data.
- Skill in recognizing bias and in determining the reliability and validity of data.
- Skill in arriving at conclusions on the basis of an objective study of all the facts available.

Certainly there is nothing subversive in these goals. They are truly the "fundamentals" of the educated citizen in a democracy.

For the beginnings of the teaching of contemporary problems and the placing of emphasis upon current materials in the schools we must go far back into educational history. Even in ancient Greece and Rome young citizens, in their preparation for full citizenship,

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