

# Fair Trade in Ideas

HUBERT H. HUMPHREY

The task of democratic education is that of "preparing ourselves and our children for self-leadership," according to United States Senator Hubert H. Humphrey of Minnesota.

THE problem of whether controversial issues should be taught in our public schools is one in which all citizens in our democracy have an interest. It is not the exclusive concern of teachers and educational administrators. My own interest in the subject is not only as a former teacher, but also as a parent of four children, and as an active participant in political life.

We can all agree on the premise that education is, and must be, directly related to the welfare of society and its government. It is, therefore, impossible to separate the methods and objectives of education from the objectives of our society and its government. This is true of any government and any society, but particularly true in a democracy.

The survival of our democratic ideals depends upon the success of our educational system, and its ability to prepare for mature and intelligent citizenship. In this respect, the objectives of education in a democracy are quite different from the objectives of education within a totalitarian society. Our emphasis is on intelligent and mature decision making, and not on conformity. Our objective is to prepare a citizenry which is free and capable of debating and ultimately deciding its own destiny. We do not believe that there exists any elite in our society so wise that its wisdom should be substituted for that of

the majority of the people. We therefore have the task of preparing ourselves and our children for self-leadership.

## PREPARING CITIZENS FOR MATURE DECISIONS

This need is particularly crucial today, as the United States debates the dimensions of its new world role. The international responsibilities of our nation are great, and whether we can assume them effectively will depend upon whether our citizens are prepared and willing to do so. To fail in this role could well mean our destruction. No policy can be successfully pursued by a government without the support of willing citizens. Woodrow Wilson ultimately failed because the American people did not share his conviction as to America's international responsibilities. If we are to avoid the errors of the past, we must seek full citizen participation in national policy making.

The task of education in a democracy is thus intimately related to the objective of strengthening and preserving that democracy. It is a task which must be carried on to meet the needs of all our citizens, from the child through the adult level. Our teachers therefore must come to understand that the responsibility is on them if democracy is to succeed.

The subject which has been assigned to me for this article, and to which I address myself primarily, is whether "controversial issues" should be an integral part of the public school curriculum. I have already stated my conviction that one important objective of education is to prepare citizens to make intelligent and mature decisions. My answer to the question assigned to me, therefore, is this: controversial issues should be included in the public school curriculum if their use will help students gain in the art of decision making. This leads me to several thoughts.

### Training in Decision Making

First, it is necessary that we define what we mean by "controversial issues." I would define a controversial issue as an arguable question of fairly wide interest, about which a decision has to be made. The term "arguable" in this definition is important, because I know from my own teaching experience how much heat is expended in classrooms when the debate rages over a fact as if its existence were a matter of opinion. Many questions should be solved by appealing to the dictionary or the expert, or by conducting further laboratory research. To debate these questions might well provide an exercise for the lungs, but not an exercise in decision making. The intelligent citizen—and the student training to become a citizen—must learn to utilize the expert services of the physical and social scientists and the facts they can supply, and reserve for himself the most vital area of policy making.

Second, we must remember that our objective is not to help high school students make a decision about any spe-

cific controversial issue. It is rather to provide them with training in the *process* of decision making, so they can develop the ability to cope with controversial issues in their adult world.

In this connection, perhaps one of the most valuable lessons for the student to learn is that he is as yet incapable of formulating an intelligent decision on the basis of the few experiences and facts available to him. To withhold judgment is frequently the test of a critical mind. To learn that questions of public policy are complex is the beginning of wisdom. To learn that labels, slogans and epithets, such as "appeaser," "reactionary," "visionary," "isolationist," and even "liberal," can confuse rather than clarify, is to make significant strides toward mature understanding and decision making.

The study of controversial issues, therefore, must be considered as a tool, and a tool alone. The particular controversial issue studied is in a sense quite secondary, and certainly not to be pursued for its own end. The purpose of education in a high school is to teach children with objectivity how to think and not what to think.

### Awareness of the 'Moment of Decision'

Third, our teaching of controversial issues must also bring awareness of the existence of what I will call "the moment of decision." In the historical development of any problem, a point is reached after which it is impossible to make a choice because time has eliminated the alternatives. If democratic, intelligent decision making is to be effective, the decision must be made at the right time, or it is meaningless. The time to decide, for example, in which

direction to head, is when the train is at the station and not after it has left.

Fourth, it might be appropriate to choose controversial issues from the pages of history, and not restrict them to current events alone. With a historical perspective, issues frequently become clearer. The use of historical illustrations might demonstrate the importance of rejecting prejudice, highly-charged emotional reaction, and folklore as considerations. Such an experience should also demonstrate to the students that men of integrity and conscience are frequently found on all sides of controversial issues. The differences cannot be explained in terms of "good men" and "bad men."

The use of the "great books" is thus indispensable to democratic education. They allow us to select issues for study which represent basic and abiding problems as well as temporary ones.

#### STUDENTS MUST BE INTRODUCED TO REALITY

Citizens must learn to master the democratic way of life, and can only learn to do this by meeting live issues head-on. The school is the laboratory in which to prepare our young people to assume that role of citizenship. Dr. John Dewey has said: "It is naively assumed that we can teach, by some hocus pocus, *how* to think, without permitting our pupils to think *about* anything." Students must be introduced to reality if we are to teach them to prepare for reality.

I realize that it is becoming increasingly difficult for teachers today to follow the course I am outlining. They fear that to utilize "controversial issues" in education exposes them to

criticism from extremists of the community who prefer that only "truths" be taught—which they define as beliefs approved by them. This has produced a nagging insecurity which in turn has forced many teachers to abandon valid educational techniques.

#### Education Essential to Democratic Survival

The teacher must gain sustenance, however, from the knowledge that the courageous pursuit of his calling is essential to the preservation of free American institutions. Professor Chafee has said:

The only way to preserve the existence of free American institutions is to make free institutions a living force. To ignore them in the very process of purporting to defend them, as frightened men now urge, will leave us little worth defending. We must choose, and choose very soon, between freedom and fear. We cannot have both. If (we) persist much longer in being afraid, the real rulers of this country will be fanatics fired with a zeal to save men from objectionable ideas. . . . Freedom is not safety, but opportunity.

The community must realize that democratic education is essential for democratic survival. The role of education should be enhanced. Those teachers and administrators who give their talents, their energies, and their lives, to the difficult task of teaching others, must be respected as the true leaders and public servants of the community. Their responsibilities are as vital to the welfare of society as those of any other profession, bar none, and they should be given the dignity and the remunera-

tion that their station and contributions deserve. Only by such a program can we produce powerful defenders of de-

mocracy. Upon such a program does the humanity and freedom of the world depend.

---

## *Place of Controversial Issues in Teacher Education*

AGNES SNYDER

Questions as to the what, when and how of controversial issues are discussed by Agnes Snyder, chairman, Department of Education, Adelphi College, Garden City, New York.

THERE is no escaping controversial issues. Great and small, major and minor, they fill all our days. To attempt to keep the controversial out of the classroom would be nothing more than a weak surrender to the ivory tower. This is particularly true in the education of teachers. The school can play its role in influencing social change only as teachers are not merely aware of the currents and cross-currents of their culture but have thought through clearly their own position where controversy exists and are prepared to act in accordance with their convictions. Any sound teacher education program must accordingly be deeply imbedded in the problems of society. These are by their very nature, always controversial.

Innumerable questions cluster around the treatment of controversial issues in the classroom—questions of what, when and how. The following brief answers to these questions state the position to be developed in this paper:

- *What:* All issues which are or can become real to the learner and for which he has the maturity to deal

with such adequacy as is satisfying to him.

- *When:* Continuously in the context of the total program.
- *How:* With the utmost skill possible, considering the maturity level of the student, in the use of the scientific method; with application of the principle of the integration of thought, feeling and action as basic to sound behavior.

The discussion that follows will be limited to the above questions as they pertain to the education of teachers.

### ALL ISSUES THAT ARE REAL TO THE LEARNER

*What?* Assuming the usual college age of from approximately seventeen to twenty-two for most students preparing to be teachers, the normal developmental tasks of this age are natural stepping stones to consideration of the most profound of the many controversial issues of today. The urge to realize themselves as individuals in their own right, to establish their independence, to find a mate, to develop their own personal

Copyright © 1951 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.