

Controversial Issues and Materials Can Minimize Conflict

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IN THE past decade, American education has been the focal point of intense public criticism. The schools have been the target of student protesters, disenchanted parents, irate taxpayers, and frustrated politicians. The debate rages on about philosophic issues regarding what the school ought to teach. One can easily identify numerous factors which are the source of protest and conflict in the schools. Certainly the rapid change in technology and society has forced the schools to depart from traditional curriculums and programs. Indeed, the civil rights movement of the sixties has been influential. Obviously, the mass media's depiction of violence and tragedy among youth with drugs and other social diseases has been catalytic. The purpose of this article, however, is not to deal with the causes and effects of the conflict in the public school, but rests with the single item of minimizing conflict and protest over the utilization of controversial issues and materials in the classroom.

The battle over controversial issues is not a new one; nor does there appear to be an end in sight. However, in the age of conflict and protest, educators must strive for a sophisticated means of coping with controversial issues and materials for classroom use. Generally, the conflict that emerges stems from a variance of value judgments around two basic issues, process and content.

Process

Educators and behavioral scientists tend to encourage the utilization of processes and materials in the classroom which will promote student inquiry, self-expression, and understanding; the ultimate goal for students being the development of an effective decision-making mechanism.

Those who protest tend to view the methods and processes of role playing, the "magic circle group discussion," and inductive teaching methods as invasions of privacy for the student and family. The protesters tend to support more traditional methods which reflect a lecturing process in which the teacher is the transmitter of cognitive information and the student the receiver.

Content

Most educators and behavioral scientists point to the need for expansion of the educational program to include materials regarding the affective domain. Professional educators feel that it is essential to include in public education the development of student attitudes and values about issues of self

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and the relationship with others. The educators claim that the combination of the cognitive and affective domains leads to the development of the whole child. Protesters claim that the school has little right to include the latter domain. They express strong feelings that the proper place for dealing with the affective domain is in the home and in the church.

The professional educators support the need for student activities and assignments which require skill development of self-analysis and self-understanding. Most educators believe that student communication with peers and teachers is an essential ingredient in the learning process. Written assignments are given by the teacher to provoke thought and develop decision-making skills on critical issues; the objective being the analysis of varying points of view and the making of judgments based on total exploration of facts and positions. Opponents, on the other hand, tend to perceive written assignments which probe the personal beliefs and feelings of the child and/or his family relationships as an invasion of privacy beyond the realm of the schools.

The protest over the schools' utilization of controversial issues and materials generally centers upon the following deep-seated values:

1. *Political.* Protesters generally view a study which includes a variety of political points of view as a Communist plot to brainwash the American youth. They protest that the expansions of the school curriculum to include a wide range of views are a part of a grand Communist design to weaken the political pillars of our republic. They tend to perceive the analysis of political propaganda and other political systems as seeds for anarchy.

2. *Religious.* The major objection in this category arises over a conflict of religious beliefs which are counter to the exploration of many ideas and issues as provided by the public schools. As a specific example, the protesters argue that the public school has no right to teach about birth control and abortion because these practices are counter

to the religious teachings of their religious sects. Objections raised regarding these two topics are generally made on the basis of morality and ethics. There are also those who believe that the teaching of controversial religious issues in the public school is linked to a Communist conspiracy to erode the moral and political foundations of the U.S.

3. *Pornographic.* Drawings, diagrams, paintings, sketches, and other art work and/or illustrations are viewed by some conservative elements as being pornographic and obscene. Protest movements to rid the public school libraries of popular current magazines, such as *Newsweek*, *Time*, *Life*, and *Vogue*, are not uncommon.

Guidelines

Against the background delineated here, it is necessary for teachers to be provided with a means for determining the suitability of materials and issues for classroom utilization. Guidelines follow which include a checklist of questions as a yardstick for determining the appropriateness of questionable materials and issues for classroom use. The guidelines are to be construed as a mechanism for teachers in making a prudent judgment about sensitive issues.

1. SIZE OF CLASS

Does the size of the class lend itself well to a thorough discussion and complete understanding of the materials in question?

Will the class size permit the teacher to guide the discussion and activities by lending a balance to the remarks made about sensitive issues?

2. BACKGROUND OF AUDIENCE

What is the political, economic, and religious background of the students who will utilize the controversial material?

Are there students in the class who will be offended or humiliated by the material or discussion?

What plans can you generate to protect such students from being overly sensitive or from reacting negatively to the material?

3. SEX

What is the composition of the class according to sex?

Would the materials in question cause embarrassment to students in a sexually integrated group?

4. AGE

What is the age of the students?

What legal rights do they have by virtue of their age?

5. MATURATION LEVEL

What previous experiences have members of the group under consideration had that provide a point of entry for the materials in question?

How necessary and immediate is it for the students to acquire the information in question?

Will the students be mature enough to sort out in their own minds that the material is only a point of view?

Are the students capable of weighing the materials under consideration against other points of view in making an intelligent decision which will affect their future?

Will the material help students to foster their own decision-making mechanism?

6. DEGREE OF FIT INTO CURRICULUM

Is the topic being considered a proper item for inclusion in the existing program?

Is the topic significantly related to the general outline of the curriculum guide?

What optional materials are available?

Is there any less controversial material which could accomplish the same objective?

This checklist suggests that there exists

a wider range of consideration which must be made in addition to student interest or demand for relevancy.

Educators would be well advised to seek the counsel of their building administrator or immediate supervisor prior to making a final judgment about the utilization of questionable material and issues.

To achieve success in dealing with materials and issues that are questionable, an educator ought to include a well-planned presentation and an appropriate culminating activity. A host of community resource personnel representing a balanced presentation of views relative to the issue would be helpful.

This article has focused on a preventative approach to help teachers minimize conflict over the use of controversial materials and issues. However, the board of education and administration should also establish a preplanned strategy for coping with the outbreak of community protest after the questionable materials or issues have been presented. A controversial issue has the potential for fragmenting or solidifying an entire school community. The critical risk of the former necessitates an all-out effort to minimize emotional turbulence from protesters and convert their zeal to greater support of the educational program. □

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