

The Roots of Controversy

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*What are the educative uses of controversy?
Basic principles govern the examination
and resolution of contested issues in the
school setting.*

WHAT is social controversy? Why does social controversy exist? How does it originate? Who participates in it? What forms does it take? What are the results of controversy? Educators need constantly to reflect upon such questions in order to function as agents of constructive social change.

A controversial social issue is a recognizable aspect of a larger social problem in which real and meaningful alternatives are presented for critical analysis, decision, and possible action. Individuals must feel that their personal values are under attack if they are to become involved in such controversy. A social issue, unless it somehow involves the individual, may not be considered controversial. The problems created by millions of people who are undernourished and near starvation in many countries are not, in and of themselves, controversial for Americans. These problems become controversial for Americans only when their own general well-being and basic value ori-

entations toward their environment are touched. An issue cannot be controversial in the abstract.

Individuals involved in a social controversy may disagree over the events or conditions of the real world, the short or long term consequences that these events have on society and its members, or the proposed solutions to problems connected with these world events.

The delegates to the World Population Conference in Bucharest in the summer of 1974 strongly disagreed among themselves over the description of the conditions under which the majority of the world's population live—conditions in the physical, political, social, and economic realms. There was even some disagreement as to the caloric intake that individuals need to have on a day-to-day basis in order to survive. Disagreements became stronger and stronger as policy considerations were discussed and alternatives were proposed for group action. The Western bloc, for instance, saw the major problem as being one of an overpopulated earth. The solution being offered was to reduce population growth to levels commensurate with available resources.

The Third World nations, on the other hand, did not perceive the problem as being that of an overpopulated world. For them, it

was a problem of resource distribution. The developed nations, the argument went, were not only unwilling to share their know-how and wealth with their less well-to-do neighbors, but they also kept strangulating them by extracting all of the raw materials from their land at an unfair price. In the heated debates that followed, all persons took part not so much as delegates but as individuals representing different cultures, viewpoints, and temperaments.

Social Issues Through Inquiry

The basic disagreements and the form in which they appeared at the Bucharest Conference have an extremely useful message to convey to educators. The conference demonstrated that social controversy can bring people closer together. The World Plan of Action which grew out of all the disagreements and debates of the conference did produce a meaningful direction for the future. The Plan is demonstrable evidence that disagreements over basic values can be discussed rationally by people who are willing to take the first step; that is, to listen to each other. Thus, the legitimization of controversy by an international agency, a government, a business establishment, or a school district is a prerequisite for the educative use of controversy.

In a pluralistic and culturally diverse society, such as that of America, there are bound to be conflicts between groups and between individuals. Social conditions which we call "war," "crime," "pollution," "divorce," and "ethnic and racial segregation," may be thought of as both the causes as well as the results of social controversy. Social controversies are inescapably reflected in the schools and involve students, teachers, administrators, and parents. The controversy may be over the use of a new textbook, the idea that schools provide unequal facilities for the people who inhabit them, or decisions made arbitrarily in the principal's office.

In the past, there has been a tendency for the schools to ignore the existence of social controversy. This condition can no longer be accepted. Schools should encour-

age and provide systematically for the critical examination and resolution of social controversy. All members of the school community should be in a position, as a part of their natural rights, to express openly their point of view and listen to the views of others on a topic that concerns them.

In order to use controversy in an educative manner, there is need to observe certain guidelines. Some of these are the following: (a) Controversial issues should constitute the heart of schooling, both in its formal and nonformal programs. Social issues should be discussed systematically, not only in social studies and humanities classes, but in math and science classes, in homerooms, in athletic and other activities, in social clubs, in student-teacher meetings. (b) Written policies regarding the treatment of controversial issues should be developed. These policies should protect the rights of all participants. (c) Controversy should be approached in the context of social inquiry where students and other principal participants bring their positions out in the open; positions are clarified and examined in terms of the grounds that support them; ends-in-view are articulated and linked to the positions; social action which is the result of democratic participation follows the examination of alternative positions (assuming that some consensus has been reached).

When controversy is dealt with in the true spirit of inquiry, students begin to understand how the world functions. They develop confidence that they can influence change through group or individual action. The effective citizen has learned to make reflective choices in a society which presents an ever-increasing number of alternatives. Thus, the school accomplishes its basic *raison d'être*; that is, it establishes the conditions necessary to produce an individual capable of functioning as a social inquirer—to challenge established institutions, to create new ideas, and to seek viable alternatives for the society in which we live.

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