

Old Friends: Controversy and the Public Schools

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While schools cannot—should not—attempt to provide answers to controversial questions, they do need to teach children to pose those questions themselves and to examine them objectively.

Since the "Contemporary Issues" feature first appeared in the April 1983 *Educational Leadership* we have examined a number of topics: environmental pollution, nuclear disarmament, school integration, world hunger, and the trend toward the privatization of social services. These issues and others like them are often difficult for educators to deal with because they are controversial and because there are few clear-cut guidelines for what exactly educators should do with them. It is an underlying premise of the "Contemporary Issues" feature that social issues, uncomfortable and controversial as they often are, are important for educators to consider critically. They reflect important aspects of the social context in which schools are expected to function, and they often turn into a claim for something to be excluded or included in the school curriculum. Each social issue, therefore, represents a potential policy and curriculum and instruction problem for educators.

This month, "Contemporary Issues" considers the nature of the challenge social issues pose and reports on how some educators have responded to that challenge.

Early Controversial Issues

Controversy is not new to U.S. schools. The American public school system is, in many respects, a child of social and political controversy and struggle. Many of the leading political figures of the revolutionary period, for example, identified public education as a principal mechanism for ensuring the continuation and security of the new republic. The U.S. was to be, at least in the minds of political leaders, a self-consciously constructed society in which the evils and corruption of Europe would be eliminated. As Benjamin Rush wrote in 1786:

Most of the distresses of our country, and of the mistakes which Europeans have formed of us, have arisen from a belief that the American revolution is over. This is so far from being the case that we have only finished the first act of a great drama. We have changed our forms of government, but it remains yet to effect a revolution in our principles, opinions, and manners so as to accommodate them to the forms of government we have adopted. This is the most difficult part of the business of the patriots and legislators of our country.¹

The notion that schools should educate for citizenship helped support the push for tax-supported schools and increased state control and regulation of schools—two highly controversial propositions. To many Americans of the period the idea that the state should to a large extent regulate and control what their children would be taught was undemocratic and a threat to religious freedom, local control, and ethnic identity. In part for these reasons, questions such as who should control the schools, whether or not teaching should be professionalized and state regulated, how schools should be financed, the degree of desired standardization among schools, and whether schooling should be mandatory were hotly contested

throughout a good part of the 19th century.

An important consensus about public education emerged from those debates. First, tax-supported public schools were to provide the education deemed necessary if the republic was to endure, but they were to be politically neutral; that is, their allegiance was to be to the political system, not to a particular political position within that system. Second, with regard to religion, the schools were to be neutral. (Nevertheless, throughout the period many Catholics continued to complain that the text material used in the public schools presented articles of Protestant belief as fact).

The Issues of Neutrality

This consensus is still a cornerstone of U.S. education policy. However, the meaning of the political and religious neutrality of schools, in concrete instances, has been and remains a source of controversy. For example, should schools, in the name of neutrality, teach creationism as well as the theory of evolution? Or should schools, in the name of neutrality, prohibit the use of the free educational materials produced by corporations and trade associations that advertise their products or convey their world view? How does the concept of neutrality help a principal or teacher respond when confronted with angry parents demanding to know why "anti-religious" or "pro-communist" books and materials are available or assigned to their children. In such instances, what exactly does neutrality mean?

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accept as fact, as in the case of creationism vs. evolution. In other instances the answer rests not on the facts themselves but what should be made of them; that is, how they should be interpreted. This is often the case with such issues as nuclear disarmament and world hunger. Although few seriously question the fact that the world can be destroyed many times over by existing nuclear weapons or the reality that children all over the world are dying of hunger, the appropriate social and political response to these facts is hotly disputed. Both problems are intensified when systematic investigations of such issues lead to conclusions that do not support the political views of at least a sizable minority of the population. Given such disagreements it is not surprising that schools, despite their proclaimed formal neutrality, are regularly accused of seeking to indoctrinate their students.

To a certain extent, the recurring challenge of social issues is inevitable. On one hand, educators are expected to help their students develop the capacity for democratic self-governance, for which it is widely accepted that students should acquire such desirable traits as inquisitiveness and the ability to reason and critically analyze information. On the other hand, the historical charge to schools has been to create loyalty to a particular set of political ideas that are themselves not to be the subject of critical analysis. Consider two more quotes from Benjamin Rush:

In the education of youth, let the authority of our masters be as absolute as possible. . . . By this mode of education we prepare our youth for the subordination of laws and thereby qualify them for becoming good citizens of the republic. I am satisfied that the most useful citizens have been formed from those youth who have never known or felt their own wills till they were one and twenty years of age.

“What neutrality means is partly determined by what one is willing to accept as fact.”

I consider it as possible to convert men into Republican machines. This must be done if we expect them to perform their parts properly in the great machine of state.²

Surely Rush is flamboyant in his language and represents a somewhat extreme expression of the republican stance in the revolutionary and post-revolutionary period. Nevertheless, the controversy that social issues often create is a symptom of the hidden conflict between the “republican” and the “machine” in Rush’s statement.

Recognizing that a fundamental contradiction between obedience and inquiry is part of the nature of public education in the United States is not sufficient; educators have a responsibility to learn how to respond appropriately and effectively to such situations as this: a student shows up with the June 10, 1983, issue of *USA Today*; reads the following quote from an interview with Helen Caldicott, president of Physicians for Social Responsibility; and asks that the quote be discussed in class:

Caldicott. The United States can overkill every Russian person 40 times. The Soviet Union can overkill every American person 20 times. To talk about negotiating from a position of strength from that position is obscene. We are so strong that we are the strongest nation the earth has ever known. We can literally blow up the world.

USA Today: Haven’t you talked about that with the President?

Caldicott. I spent more than an hour with President Reagan, along with his daughter, and I tell you that he doesn’t understand much of this. We argued about all these strategies and almost every single thing he said to me was incorrect. He stood for unilateral disarmament, and he said that the Russians are totally evil. I said, “Have you ever met one?” He answered, “No.” We talked about strategic systems, and almost everything he said to me was wrong.

Perhaps the tension between the historic charge to the schools, the professional judgment and responsibility of educators, the public’s right to control its schools, and the students’ need to understand can never be perfectly accommodated. This does not, however, mean that educators cannot act affirmatively in the area of social issues. One possibility is for schools to regularly sponsor forums in which various social issues are analyzed and discussed from a variety of viewpoints. Teachers could take the lead in such forums by demonstrating to students how to pose critical questions. Such forums, by their existence, would underscore the commitment of the schools to the free and open expression of ideas. Other possibilities are suggested in the contributions to this month’s “Contemporary Issues” feature.

It’s probably a good idea for educators not to pretend to have all the answers when it comes to social issues. The important thing is that they accept the responsibility for helping their students learn to ask uncomfortable questions. □

¹David B. Tyack, *Turning Points in American Educational History* (Waltham, Mass.: Blaisdell, 1967), p. 83.

²Carl F. Kaestle, *Pillars of the Republic: Common Schools and American Society, 1780–1860* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983), p. 7.

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