

CAN CONTROVERSIAL TOPICS BE TAUGHT IN THE EARLY GRADES?

The Answer Is Yes!

ROBIN HASKELL McBEE

Should controversial issues become a regular part of the elementary curriculum? Does content that generates polarized points of view have a proper place in the instructional experiences of seven, eight, nine, and ten year-olds?

I am convinced the answer to these questions is yes, and my work in the field of law-related education focuses on developing the capability of teachers to do so. I know that many teachers, principals, curriculum designers, and text book authors (Risinger 1992) would say no to these questions. In their view, controversy is unsettling and requires a sophisticated reasoning ability, which young children do not possess. They believe that students in the early grades need the structure, consistency, and assurance offered by teachers who know the facts and answers, and who provide lessons and textbooks designed to impart these to students. Young students, the argument goes, should concentrate on committing these facts to memory and mastering basic skills in reading, writing, and numerical manipulations that are safely free of political agendas.

Having worked closely with hundreds of elementary school teachers, both in and out of the classroom, I've found that the above philosophy typifies many of their views. My experience and the literature indicate that the intentional introduction of controversy into elementary instructional programs is practically non-existent (Risinger 1992; McAulay 1967). Lower grade teachers often do not feel properly trained or prepared to address such issues, and they are reluctant to engage in teaching subjects that, they feel, will take up valuable instructional time and lead to loss of control over classroom

behavior. Some are afraid of repercussions from parents or their administrators while others question their ability to present controversial material from a neutral perspective.

Real-Life and Curricular Connections

The paradox of this controversy-avoidance syndrome, it seems to me, is the reality that controversy and conflict are everywhere in the lives of young children. Conflicts regularly take place at school among students and between students and teachers over possessions, academic work and performance, put-downs, taking turns, physical aggression (Johnson, Johnson, Dudley, and Burnett 1992), and behavior. They erupt at home between spouses, siblings, or parents and their children over belongings, clothes, money, discipline, child care, chores, competition for attention, and a host of other issues.

Outside of the immediate home and school environments, civil and criminal conflicts and geopolitical controversies are waged regularly in our city streets, town halls, around the world, and on our living room television sets. We are constantly surrounded by and confronted with controversy or conflict of some form or another—regardless of our ages. To pretend this is not so or to avoid dealing with it is to deny students the opportunity to work with relevant, meaningful, high-interest content—a recipe for boredom and lack of motivation (Brophy 1987; Cook 1984).

Beyond the real-life relevance of controversial issues is their curricular relevance. Clearly, students need to acquire the skills of peaceful conflict resolution (Townley 1995; Johnson, Johnson, Dudley, and Burnett 1992). They also need appropriate academic instruction designed to promote the development of

what Parker and Kaltsounis (1991) describe as the informed, skilled, and committed "democratic citizen." If the promise of public schools as citizenship training grounds is to be realized, then students—from the very earliest ages—must acquire and practice the following:

1. Skills in interpersonal communication;
2. Tolerance for diverse perspectives;
3. The critical and constructive thinking processes needed to analyze actions and practices in the context of democratic ideals; and
4. The ability to engage in civil public discourse in the face of legitimately diverse claims and interests (Parker and Kaltsounis 1991; Berman 1990; Boyer 1990; Parker 1990).

The very nature and content of history and the social sciences are replete with controversial issues. Every major historic and contemporary encounter between individuals, cultures, peoples, nations, and governments; every human struggle with the land and environment; and every conflict over production, distribution, and consumption of resources is a study in controversy. Downplaying or ignoring controversial topics in the curriculum may be common, but it is illogical and unwise, even at the elementary level:

[It] is not only a barrier to developing important critical-thinking skills, it also eliminates much of the drama and excitement of studying history and the contemporary human condition. (Risinger 1992, 13)

What's more, it is contrary to the defined purpose of and prescribed curricular approach to social studies by National Council for the Social Studies (1994).

The primary purpose of social studies is to help young people

develop the ability to make informed and reasoned decisions for the public good as citizens of a culturally diverse, democratic society in an interdependent world. (Ibid., vii)

A well-designed social studies curriculum will help each learner construct a blend of personal, academic, pluralist, and global views of the human condition ... within the framework of civic responsibility ... (Ibid., 6-7)

I contend that students will not learn civic responsibility or the skill of informed, reasoned decision making unless they are regularly exposed to diverse viewpoints and the pluralism that characterizes this nation.

Introducing Controversial Topics into the Elementary Curriculum

Given my arguments for introducing controversial topics into the elementary curriculum, the rest of this article is devoted to outlining ways to do it. Luckily, the use of controversial topics in the lower grades is not virgin territory. For example, numerous law-related education (LRE) lessons and activities have been developed for kindergarten through fifth grade classrooms. By law-related education, I mean highly interactive instruction whose content is tied to rules, laws, and the legal system and to rights, roles, and responsibilities in that system—a content that constantly elicits conflicts over what is fundamentally fair to individuals and to society as a whole.

My classroom teacher colleagues, who are experienced in the content and techniques of law-related education, believe that LRE fits logically into their existing curricula and that such typical strategies as “Take A Stand,” role-plays, and simulations (e.g., city council hearings, small claims trials, and mediation sessions) provide structured but creative open-ended vehicles for expressing and developing a defense for personal perspectives, for hearing and developing tolerance for diverse viewpoints, and for understanding other, differing views. In other words, law-related education enables these young students to begin to develop the democratic citizen’s ability

to engage in civil public discourse amidst legitimately diverse claims and interests.

The following brief descriptions of four LRE strategies are easily adaptable to different social studies content at the elementary level. They are accompanied by a more detailed description of a unit on violence that I have taught in part or full to third, fourth, and fifth graders in urban and suburban schools. In the final section, I conclude with advice from experienced practitioners about the best conditions for including controversial topics in the elementary curriculum.

Some General LRE Strategies¹

Role-Play

Students act out loosely defined roles of individuals in law-related scenarios (e.g., contract negotiations, consumer fraud, police arrests, conflict resolution). Scenarios can come from teachers, students, or LRE resource materials, but actual scenes should be improvised rather than scripted. Each session should conclude with a debriefing in which students engage in an open-ended discussion of knowledge gained, procedure, and reactions to the activity.

Elementary teachers frequently mention using this strategy to play the roles of Native Americans and Europeans when they first encounter each other. Other possible applications include exploring conflicts over land use, over resources in early colonial life, between federalists and anti-federalists, and between a husband and wife who have differing views on women’s suffrage.

Simulated Small Claims Court

LRE simulations are more sophisticated role-plays in which the players and events are intended to model a simplified version of a particular legal proceeding. In this mini-mock trial, students work in triads as they alternate playing the roles of plaintiff, defendant, and judge. After reading a brief scenario, the plaintiff briefly explains to the judge what has happened and what relief or correction is being sought. The defendant then does the same. The judge may ask clarifying questions before giving a decision.

Teachers are encouraged to have judges share and compare their decisions and reasons for them with the whole class, and to have students briefly discuss how they felt playing their different roles. Repeat the process twice more, using different scenarios and having triad members change roles. Appropriate early grade issues for small claims court simulations include a borrowed item that is returned broken; disagreement over what monetary amount is due for raking leaves, shoveling snow, or baby-sitting; or a promised act or service that is only partially delivered.² The activity should be debriefed at its conclusion as described above.

Elementary teachers use this strategy to model actual small claims court hearings over such typical disagreements as borrowed, exchanged, or sold property or services. They also find the triad structure excellent for illuminating opposing views and decision-making dilemmas in history (e.g., colonists and the king, patriots and Tories, slave owners and abolitionists, confederate and union sympathizers, immigrants and nationalists). Some have also made use of the procedure to resolve minor classroom rules infractions or student disagreements.

Simulated City Council Hearing

The original version of this simulation, called “No Vehicles in the Park,” has students play the roles of city council members listening to the testimony of various citizens seeking exceptions to the newly passed law reflected in the title. The law’s expressed purpose is to preserve beauty and safety; however, different interest groups want their vehicles exempted (e.g., commuters’ automobiles, emergency vehicles, garbage trucks, baby carriages, bicycles, wagons, wheelchairs, parade floats). Teachers often have students work in small cooperative groups to rate these requests prior to actually conducting the simulated hearing. As in the other strategies, the activity should be debriefed at its conclusion.

Hearings could be held over any major current or historic issue. Typical changes include “no hats in school” (Is a yarmulke, religious turban or scarf, or

large bow considered a hat?); “no weapons in school” (Is a boy scout knife, piece of piping, rope, or toy gun considered a weapon?); and “no prayers in school” (Does this include a moment of silence, an after-school Bible study group’s prayer, saying grace at lunch, and the coach’s prayer before the game?). Debriefing should follow the activity, as in the above examples.

Take a Stand

In this strategy, teachers ask students to show their reactions to emotionally charged statements (usually related to an issue being studied) by literally taking a stand. Teachers make the statement; students decide how they feel and why; then students stand on the agree side of the room, the disagree side of the room, or in the middle if they are undecided. Teachers instruct students not to interrupt, speak out of turn, or make disparaging comments or actions regarding others’ opinions. The teacher then begins going back and forth between the “agrees” and “disagrees” asking reasons why students believe as they do or have an opposing response to a previous student’s reason. (Note that students are allowed to move to another side of the room if they change their minds, but they must do so without causing disruption.) After going back and forth between the agrees and disagrees several times, the teacher then asks for reasons from those who feel undecided. Original statements can then be modified based on student feedback, and students can then be asked to take a new stand.

Elementary teachers frequently use this strategy to encourage students to develop opinions on issues in current events as well as major political controversies in American history. Some teachers have made this a daily or weekly debriefing activity in which students are encouraged to share reactions to what has transpired that day or week.

Unit on Violence

Overview

This five-day unit uses several interactive strategies to help students begin to sort out and discuss the violent events they hear, read, watch (on television or

in real life), or experience. It also presents possible legal and personal remedies to violence. Note that the unit is not intended to get students to divulge highly personal and identifiable information (and caution should be taken not to do so). The purpose is to provide a safe environment for students to explore the violence we all experience and possible alternatives to those acts.

Day One

Introduce the unit with a “Hangman” activity in which the mystery word is v-i-o-l-e-n-c-e. I find that third, fourth, and fifth graders particularly enjoy playing this letter-guessing game as a team or cooperative group competition in which points are earned by teams when a letter is guessed correctly. Once the students have guessed the word, explain the purpose of this unit and the objective for this lesson (to begin exploring individual perspectives on violence).

Have students write down all the single words that come to their minds when they think of violence. Remind them to keep their lists private. Allow at least five minutes to complete lists, and help students having difficulty getting started by coaching them to think of verbs, adverbs, or adjectives that describe what someone does or says when they get violent. Then go around the room, one by one, asking students to share one word from their list and write it on the board. Go around a second time if needed. If a word signifies violence to a child, it should be included regardless of other student or teacher interpretation. Also, students should be allowed to say “Pass” if they prefer not to share a word.

Repeat this whole process a second time, this time instructing students to write down brief sentences or phrases that tell of violent acts that the student has seen or knows have happened to people he or she knows (e.g., a man punching a woman, a woman pulling a little boy by his ear, a street fight between two drunks). Instruct students not to use names or descriptors that tell exactly who was involved (e.g., me, my father, my neighbor’s youngest daughter).

Follow up with an assignment to write an imaginary story describing what

happened before, during, and after one of the violent acts listed on the board.

Day Two

Begin by asking students whether or not they were able to come up with any good stories. Invite volunteers to share which of the violent acts became the subject of their story. Explain that the objective of today’s lesson is to get students to work cooperatively in small groups (or pairs) to come up with a few really good, detailed stories about one of the acts from their earlier list. Using an overhead transparency created with the list of violent phrases from Day One, project it onto a screen. Have students read the list, and conduct a class vote to see which entry the students would most like to have as the focus of their group writing experience. Review the elements of a good story, arrange students into their groups, and instruct them to begin. Have groups exchange completed stories, offer comments on how other groups’ stories could be improved stylistically and grammatically, and revise their own stories accordingly. Have one volunteer from each group read the group’s finished story to the whole class before handing it in.

Day Three

Using one of the stories as the focal point, ask a local attorney to assist you in identifying possible legal responses to the violent act.³ Introduce the lesson by explaining its focus on possible punishments for committing violent acts and the lawyer’s role in explaining possible sentences for breaking the law.

Read the story aloud, again, to students. Ask if they feel that people who commit that kind of act should be punished and how. Conduct an open-ended discussion encouraging students to share their views and the reasons for their views. Conduct a Take A Stand using a statement that calls for people who commit that kind of violent act to get a particular punishment (one you feel will generate different reactions based on the preceding discussion). Follow this by presenting information to students (or have the attorney present it) on legal remedies for this type of violence.³ (A

possible follow-up might be conducting a mock trial of the civil or criminal case with assistance from the attorney.)

Day Four

Introduce the lesson by asking students if they've ever lived in an apartment, if they've ever experienced noise coming from another apartment or nearby home, and if the noise has ever been so much that they couldn't sleep. Explain that today they will work with a story in which the main character is having that problem and the objective is to have students learn about and role-play an alternative dispute resolution procedure known as mediation.

Tell students the story of the "Tap Dancer" (Gallagher n.d.). Harry's good friend, Bill, who lives in the apartment above Harry, has recently taken up tap dancing and practices late at night so that he can get good enough to perform. Both Harry and Bill work during the day, so Bill practices at night, which is frustrating Harry, who cannot get to sleep because of it. Harry is angry at Bill for being so inconsiderate, and Bill is hurt that Harry is not more supportive of his tap dancing. Both are sad because their friendship is falling apart.

Have students brainstorm and list on the board what Harry and Bill might do to solve their problem. Tell them that Bill and Harry have agreed to take their problem to a mediator, whose job it is to help Bill and Harry figure out a reasonable "win/win" solution so that both can be happy. Divide students into triads, and have them role-play this mediation session. Debrief the role-plays by discussing the solutions agreed to and the experience of playing the roles of the mediator, Harry, and Bill. Discuss how students might use this type of dispute resolution to avoid violence.

Day Five

Have students write a one- to three-paragraph essay that answers the question, What do you think we should do to end all the violence in our community?

Conclusion

The above strategies and lessons are easy to use without acquiring major expertise. However, a few cautionary

notes are in order. Elementary teachers who regularly work with controversial issues urge teachers to know their students, parents, and community. It is wise to understand which issues are so sensitive that introducing them into instruction will cause more headaches and bad feelings from parents and the community than benefits to students. Establishing and maintaining a good rapport with parents helps them to understand the approach and to be confident in the teacher's objectivity.

The same holds true for teacher relationships with principals. It is equally important to know what the students are capable of understanding, what interests them, and how much open-ended discussion they can handle constructively. Teachers themselves should keep abreast of current issues and diverse perspectives on them by reading at least one major newspaper and news magazine other than the local journal.

Finally, teachers should avoid getting into their personal opinions with students. The teaching role is to facilitate open discussion and to develop student recognition of varying perspectives, not to promote any one point of view. While it is legitimate to have a viewpoint and to share it occasionally with students, care should be taken to do so after students have had a chance to voice their own views and explore those of others. In this way, students will begin to develop the habits of critically thinking, well-informed, active democratic citizens. ■

Notes

- 1 The descriptions of LRE activities offered in this article, as well as additional activity descriptions, can be found in the resource *Living the Law: By Learning the Law, A K-12 Law-Related Education Curriculum Guide*, published by the Virginia Institute for Law and Citizenship Studies, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond (1994).
- 2 For actual scenario descriptions, see the above referenced guide and *Living Together Under the Law*, by Arlene Gallagher, published by the New York State Bar Association's Law, Youth and Citizenship Program, Albany (n.d.). This elementary literature and law-related education guide is also a good resource for more LRE activities and for an annotated bibliography of literature connections.
- 3 Many violent acts violate various state criminal codes and are punishable by fines, incarceration, or mandated community service or victim restitution. Even if there are no criminal

codes involved, there may be civil actions (e.g., restraining orders, liability torts) that can be initiated by the victim against the perpetrator or, if the victim is a minor, by the state against the perpetrator (e.g., temporary or permanent removal from custody). A general practice attorney with a few years of experience often has the most versatile experience in this area and can serve as a good out-of-class or in-class resource. Many attorneys are interested in serving as outside resource people to elementary and secondary teachers and students. Contact local bar associations and LRE organizations for help locating attorneys.

References

- Berman, Sheldon. "Educating for Social Responsibility." *Educational Leadership* 48, no. 3 (November 1990): 75-80.
- Boyer, Ernest L. "Civic Education for Responsible Citizens." *Educational Leadership* 48, no. 3 (November 1990): 4-7.
- Brophy, Jere. "Synthesis of Research on Strategies for Motivating Students to Learn." *Educational Leadership* 45, no. 2 (October 1987): 40-48.
- Cook, Kay K. *Controversial Issues: Concerns for Policy Makers*. Boulder: Eric Digest No. 14, EDRS Document # ED253465 (June 1984).
- Gallagher, Arlene. *Living Together Under the Law*. Albany: New York State Bar Association; Law, Youth and Citizenship Program (n.d.).
- Johnson, David W., Roger T. Johnson, Bruce Dudley, and Robert Burnett. "Teaching Students to Be Peer Mediators." *Educational Leadership* 50, no. 1 (September 1992): 10-13.
- McAulay, J. D. "Controversial Issues in the Social Studies." In *Current Research in Elementary School Social Studies*, edited by Wayne L. Herman, Jr. Toronto: The Macmillan Company, 1967.
- National Council for Social Studies. *Expectations of Excellence: Curriculum Standards for Social Studies*. Bulletin 89. Washington, D.C.: National Council for the Social Studies, 1994.
- Parker, Walter C. "Assessing Citizenship." *Educational Leadership* 48, no. 3 (November 1990): 17-22.
- Parker, Walter C., and Theodore Kaltsounis. "Citizenship and Law-Related Education." In *Elementary School Social Studies: Research as a Guide to Practice*, edited by Virginia A. Atwood. Washington, D.C.: National Council for the Social Studies, 1991.
- Risinger, C. Frederick. *Current Directions in Social Studies*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1992.
- Townley, Annette. "Changing School Culture." *Educational Leadership* 52, no. 8 (May 1995): 80.
- Virginia Institute for Law and Citizenship Studies. *Living the Law: By Learning the Law, A K-12 Law-Related Education Curriculum Guide*. Richmond: Virginia Institute for Law and Citizenship Studies, 1994.

Robin Haskell McBee is director of the Virginia Institute for Law and Citizenship Studies at Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond. The author wishes to thank Joanne Funk, second grade teacher and elementary social studies specialist, Norfolk, Virginia; Carolyn Jolly, fifth grade teacher, Charlotte, Virginia; and Bob Wright, fourth grade teacher, Staunton, Virginia, for their contributions to information offered in this article.