

Should Controversial Topics Be Addressed in Schools?

Samantha Ho

University of Calgary – EDUC 201

Dr. Dianne Gereluk

10171865

December 8, 2015

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Controversial topics should be addressed in schools in order to foster dispositions of respect and tolerance among students who may hold different beliefs and values. In this paper, I argue three key issues. First, discussing controversial issues in class encourages the development of ethical citizens, which is arguably a fundamental aim of education. Second, when discussing current controversial issues, students are encouraged to engage in the democratic process. Finally, teaching students about controversial topics develops their critical thinking skills, allowing them to learn the foundations needed to create well-structured and reasoned arguments. I conclude that discussing contested issues in schools is essential to developing students into active and ethical members of a pluralistic society.

Contested issues should be addressed in classrooms to develop students into moral and ethical citizens which is considered an essential aim of education (Kubota, 2014). Part of being a morally responsible citizen includes having the ability to reconcile with others despite having strong personal beliefs which may conflict with the views of others. Another aspect of acting as an ethical citizen includes treating others equally and fairly, regardless of whether they share the same perspective (Gregory, 2014). Due to the nature of a pluralistic society, students will encounter situations where their personal values are in conflict with others (Fournier-Sylvester, 2013). Therefore, ethical citizenship is especially important in Canada where pluralism is widely embraced (Richmond, 1969). In addition, discussion of the inherent complexities of controversial issues can increase understanding and acknowledgment of alternate or conflicting points of view (Fournier-Sylvester, 2013). For example, when deliberating the merits of abortion, a student might struggle at a fundamental level with the conflicting view. However, as an ethical citizen,

the student would recognize that conflicting perspectives are in the nature of contested issues. This acknowledgment of other viewpoints allows the student to engage attentively and open-mindedly in the conversation, rather than taking offense to opposing views, which demonstrates ethical citizenship (Hand & Levinson, 2012). Some may also argue that contested issues should not be discussed in class due to the emotional responses that could be elicited from students. However, such discussions are considered crucial in encouraging students to acknowledge diverse viewpoints in order to coexist with others in a pluralistic society (Fournier-Sylvester, 2013). In sum, controversial topics should be addressed in schools to facilitate the development of moral and conscientious members of society which can lead to becoming democratically active citizens as well.

Discussing controversial issues also encourages students to become more engaged in the democratic process. Hess (2009) states that democracy and contested topics go hand-in-hand as a result of the multiple diametric viewpoints that citizens perceive as the public good. One of the key methods to navigate conflicting viewpoints in the democratic process is constant negotiation and discussion (Tamir, 2015). Therefore, by addressing contested issues, students can gain practice in key democratic skills such as “open-mindedness, dissent, skepticism, ... embracing diversity” (Misco, 2014, p. 48), and a heightened appreciation for negotiation (Gregory, 2006). Gregory (2006) also states that these values can increase student participation in school and classroom affairs, which leads to future engagement in democratic processes. Furthermore, discussions about contested topics can increase student interest in current events and social issues, which facilitates the development of a globalized and ethical member of society (Misco, 2014). For instance, in a discussion about the current contested issue of lesbian, bisexual, gay, transgender, and queer (LBGTQ) rights, students may hold a strong personal view on the topic,

but by using democratic skills such as openness and embracing diverse perspectives, they can negotiate with fellow students to try to work towards a policy that is best for the public interest. Students can compare their own beliefs to the mock policy they created and LGBTQ policies currently held by political parties in their area. Consequently, this conversation may heighten interest in current political issues, increase the relevance and meaningfulness of the issue, and encourage voting in the future (Fournier-Sylvester, 2013; Misco, 2012). To conclude, addressing controversial issues in classrooms encourages students to become democratically active citizens of a pluralistic society. The skills learned from democratic processes can also assist students in becoming critical thinkers.

During the discussion of contested topics, students' critical thinking skills can be developed through the formation of reasoned arguments. Engaging students in controversial issues allows them to explore multiple perspectives in order to analyze and critique their own beliefs, therefore developing critical thinking skills (Fournier-Sylvester, 2013). The discussion of these topics encourage students to "make sound inferences, avoid fallacies, weigh evidence, ask critical questions, look for missing points of view, [and] consider practical consequences" (Gregory, 2014, p. 637). These critical dispositions are considered key to addressing contested topics in a reasonable manner because students can negotiate the conflict rather than letting personal beliefs become a superficial and ideological stance. Instead, critical thinking skills evolve controversial issues into the basis for a thoughtful and rational conversation (Hand, 2008). In addition, the critical dispositions acquired from discussions of contested issues can improve students' persuasive writing skills as a result of learning to identify the structure of a well-reasoned argument (Fournier-Sylvester, 2013; Misco & Lee, 2014). To illustrate, in a discussion about the epistemic controversy of climate change, a student may deploy critical

thinking skills that evaluate the student's personal belief, considers both sides of the issue, and analyzes the evidence presented to finally form a well-informed and supported argument. As a result, the diversity of perspectives presented in the discussion allows the student to explore all viewpoints before deciding their stance on the issue (Hand, 2008). Moreover, the student's perspective may have changed during the course of the conversation as a result of their open-mindedness and critical analysis of opposing views.

However, some believe that the discussion of controversial issues is not worth the valuable classroom time needed to cover the large curriculum (Gereluk, Martin, Norris, & Maxwell, 2016), but these conversations encompass a broad range of critical thinking competencies. By examining controversial issues, students learn to think logically and rationally which is needed for science and mathematics (Misco & Lee, 2014), build arguments supported by evidence for language arts (Fournier-Sylvester, 2013), and consider many diverse viewpoints for social studies (Gregory, 2014). In summary, addressing contested issues should be allowed in schools because the formation of logical arguments during discussions can significantly increase critical thinking competencies and create ethical citizens.

In conclusion, controversial issues should be discussed in schools to cultivate qualities of tolerance and respect among students with conflicting beliefs. To support this, I have addressed three main arguments in this paper, the first being that morally responsible citizens can be developed from discussing these issues. Specifically, students learn to acknowledge and understand other conflicting viewpoints through such conversations, rather than simply rejecting them. Second, civil participation can increase as a result of addressing current contested issues. Through this process, students gain democratic skills that promote embracing diversity and

negotiation. Lastly, students become more familiarized with the format of a well-informed and rational argument which in turn develops their critical thinking skills. The dispositions learned through these conversations will allow students to create thoughtful and well-informed stances on contested topics. The three factors explored in this paper encourage students to become active and ethical contributors to a pluralistic society. The arguments raised above demonstrate the clear benefits to addressing controversial issues in schools.

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