

Chapter 5

Teaching controversial issues

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Many of the issues that young people need to learn about today are controversial in nature. This does not mean that they should be avoided in the curriculum for, as this chapter explains, there is a range of appropriate procedures that can be used when discussing such issues in the classroom.

Introduction

I do circle time, I covered it in my training, but I wouldn't discuss anything controversial, partly because I think it would be contentious and ... you worry about parents.

(Year 4 newly qualified teacher)

We've looked at the Anne Frank story, we made ID cards, and discussed arguments for and against them and considered which people might feel most vulnerable and threatened by such a system. This led to a discussion about Britain's refugees. We tried to consider what it would be like to be a refugee, being displaced and disempowered and often the focus of people's hatred. We've also discussed Damilola Taylor and Stephen Lawrence – looking at prejudice, policing, fear, trust and the courage it takes to speak up.

(Year 4 teacher)

Controversial issues are part and parcel of everyday life. Whilst some would argue that the school's role is to protect children from encountering issues which might be sensitive or difficult, others would argue that learning how to handle controversy is an essential element of life in a democratic society. Young people themselves tend towards the latter view. The young people in Chapter 3 wanted to know more about global issues. They realised these were complex and controversial and wished to be better informed so they could make up their own minds about such issues. The student teachers in Chapter 4 also acknowledged that learning about such issues was important but they were concerned about how best to approach them and about what was appropriate in the classroom.

The student teachers' concerns echo those of serving teachers. Research into primary teachers' views about the teaching of citizenship found some teachers argued explicitly that school was not the place for discussing contentious or 'distressing issues' as it should provide children with a 'safe haven' from the outside world and its problems. Newly qualified teachers felt particularly vulnerable and were concerned about what parents might say. Other teachers acknowledged the importance of teaching about topical and controversial issues and said they dealt with questions from children as and when they arose. While few planned any teaching specifically on such issues, there were some who took sensitive matters in their stride. The two teachers talking at the beginning of this chapter exemplify these two perspectives (Holden 2000: 122).

Whilst much of the early work on teaching about controversial issues dates from the 1980s (Stradling *et al.* 1984; Carrington and Troyna 1988) a renewed interest in how to teach about such issues is marked by the work of Wellington (2003), Oulton *et al.* (2004a, 2004b) and Fiehn (2005). This chapter thus argues that controversial issues are too important to be left to chance questions that might arise at any time or perhaps not at all. Operating a 'safe haven' approach may deny children the opportunities to explore relevant topical and political issues and leave them unprepared to cope with controversial issues that they see on the television or meet in the community. Instead, what is required is an approach where controversial issues are planned for and taught about within a structured framework, so that when difficult matters arise both children and teachers are equipped to deal with them.

The chapter looks first at definitions of controversial issues and then in more depth at why they should be taught. It then discusses the role of the teacher, strategies for the classroom and examples of good practice.

What are controversial issues?

There is, unsurprisingly, no one definition of 'controversial issue' although that offered by Wellington (1986: 3) is still widely used. He states that a controversial issue is one which a) is considered important by an appreciable number of people and b) involves value judgements, so that the issue cannot be settled by facts, evidence or experiment alone. Similarly, Stradling *et al.* (1984:2) point out that whilst some issues are controversial because there is not enough evidence on which to make a judgement, others are:

controversial precisely because they are not capable of being settled by appeal to the evidence. These are issues where the disagreement centres on matters of value judgement. The major political, social and economic issues of our time or of any previous era tend to be of this type.

Richardson (1986: 27) elaborates on this in more detail when he writes:

... controversy is not to do with but with different opinions, values with different material interests. ... society is divided. The difference and the naming of the problem to in society, in human nature; and/or to remove or manage the problem the ideal situation, state or society.

This kind of account of controversy envisages that the definition of controversy arising only from differences of knowledge – an empirical question – 'people agree on reality, however, is that certain is no controversy, no difference of all one happy family; conversely recognition that such and such is agenda.

Controversial issues are thus those conflicting explanations and solutions (Stradling *et al.* 1984). They might be local issues, facilities or global issues such as damage. Teachers on an MEd module on Citizenship that for them the most sensitive and local, e.g. the arrival of asylum seekers. European Union feelings amongst local for a post-16 audience, gives 'war, in Union' as examples of relevant controversy.

It is important to recall, as Richardson's perspectives derive from deep-seated ideas in economics, society and environment. Blatchford (2003: 186) explain, thus beliefs about the world held by a group behaviour and conversation to various act as the lens for a group to make sense. way of explaining why things are as very different from a technocentric or Islamic worldview. In exploring controversy that it is not just about weighing up differing belief systems.

In general terms a controversial issue

- the subject/area is of topical
- there are conflicting values

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... controversy is not to do with different levels of knowledge and information but with different opinions, values and priorities, and, basically and essentially, with different material interests. A controversial issue, in brief, is one on which society is divided. The difference of opinion may be about the very definition and the naming of the problem to be solved; and/or about its causes in history, in society, in human nature; and/or about the actions which should be taken, ... to remove or manage the problem; and/or about the structure and contours of the ideal situation, state or society towards which action is taken ...

This kind of account of controversy is not unproblematic however. It envisages that the definition of an issue as controversial, as distinct from one arising only from differences of knowledge and information, is a straightforward empirical question – 'people agree or they don't, society is divided or it isn't'. The reality, however, is that certain interests are served by maintaining that there is no controversy, no difference of opinion, no protest or discontent, that we're all one happy family; conversely certain other interests are served through the recognition that such and such an issue should be debated, should be on the agenda.

Controversial issues are thus those that deeply divide a society and that generate conflicting explanations and solutions based on alternative value systems (Stradling *et al.* 1984). They might be local issues, e.g. decisions made about youth and leisure facilities or global issues such as damage to the environment or international conflict. Teachers on an MEd module on Citizenship Education (at Exeter University) said that for them the most sensitive and difficult topics were where the global became local, e.g. the arrival of asylum seekers, the rise of the British National Party or anti-European Union feelings amongst local farming children. Fiehn (2005: 11), writing for a post-16 audience, gives 'war, immigration, abortion, gay rights, the European Union' as examples of relevant controversial issues.

It is important to recall, as Richardson indicates above, that people's value perspectives derive from deep-seated ideological beliefs or worldviews about politics, economics, society and environment. The term ideology, as Meighan and Siraj-Blatchford (2003: 186) explain, thus refers to a 'broad interlocked set of ideas and beliefs about the world held by a group of people that they demonstrate in both behaviour and conversation to various audiences'. Such belief systems or worldviews act as the lens for a group to make sense of the world, becoming the taken-for-granted way of explaining why things are as they are. Thus an ecocentric view of society is very different from a technocentric one. Western ideology is very different from an Islamic worldview. In exploring controversial issues it is thus important to remember that it is not just about weighing up facts or evidence but about understanding differing belief systems.

In general terms a controversial issue is therefore one in which:

- the subject/area is of topical interest
- there are conflicting values and opinions

- there are conflicting priorities and material interests
- emotions may become strongly aroused
- the subject/area is complex.

(Adapted from Perry 1999)

Not all controversial issues are global but one could argue that all global issues are controversial. If we take long-standing global issues to do with human rights, the environment, peace and conflict, equality and social justice, they meet all the above criteria; they are complex, of topical interest and involve competing values and interests. Of course it would be possible to teach about such issues in a way that denies their controversial nature. One could deal simply with the 'facts' without acknowledging that such facts will be interpreted differently by different parties. But such an approach denies children the opportunity to learn how to deal with topical, controversial issues in a structured classroom environment.

Why teach about controversial issues?

If we are to enable young people to think critically and work co-operatively with others to evaluate problems in the wider community then education must have at its core the open and democratic discussion of controversial, topical and political issues. Such discussion often has positive outcomes in terms of increased tolerance and understanding of democratic processes. Frazer (1999: 11) thus argues that 'the evidence for a link between a democratic, discussion and deliberation based classroom practice, and anti-authoritarian or pro-democratic attitudes and value commitments is strong'.

Bernard Crick, writing about the principles underpinning the introduction of education for citizenship in England, also put the case for such an approach. He argues that young people are interested in particular political and controversial issues (e.g. animal rights, environmental issues, improving their local community), and therefore we need to equip them with 'the political skills needed to change laws in a peaceful and responsible manner' (QCA 1998: 10). Teaching about controversial issues is at the heart of this:

Controversial issues are important in themselves and to omit informing about and discussing them is to leave a wide and significant gap in the educational experience of young people.

(QCA 1998: 56)

This approach is endorsed by Huckle, a long-standing advocate of the need for a political education that includes discussion of controversial issues. He cites protests over road constructions and live animal exports as examples of 'the appeal of cultural politics amongst the young and its power to build new alliances in changed times' (Huckle 1996: 34). Teaching about such matters may be the key to gaining pupils' interest in topical, political and global issues.

Teaching about controversial issues, however, is not just about the content of politics or global issues. It also provides a 'heart', and for teaching knowledge, critical thinking skills. There follow six further learning opportunities about controversial issues.

Multiple perspectives

People hold different views, according to their situation, judge an action or solve a problem from different human views. Humans view the world differently depending on class and culture. See, for example, Kawakami's Western and indigenous worldviews. The complexity of such issues brought home to pupils through discussion and understanding the complexity of such issues and value positions is not always possible.

Critical thinking

In the discussion of controversial issues claims need to be reasoned, with judgments based on evidence (Fisher 2001). Thus there are opportunities for pupils to learn the skill of presenting decisions as 'reasonable' compromise. The aim is to move away from resolutions to apparent conflicts.

Participation

Controversial issues are an invitation to participation. Where the atmosphere in the classroom is right there is an opportunity for all pupils, regardless of view and to feel able to contribute and

Speaking and listening

Classroom talk is still dominated by teachers. Out of ten pupil contributions to the lesson, only one is from a teacher. That teachers feel pressed to move through the lesson for deliberation. Discussion of controversial issues is an extended debate where the objective is not to win but to let pupils listen to each other and try to understand them.

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Teaching about controversial issues, however, is more than a way into the teaching of politics or global issues. It also provides opportunities for involving both 'head and heart', and for teaching knowledge, critical thinking skills and emotional literacy. There follow six further learning opportunities which can occur as a result of teaching about controversial issues.

Multiple perspectives

People hold different views, according to their value system, e.g. in how they define a situation, judge an action or solve a problem. Multiple perspectives exist because humans view the world differently depending on, for example, ethnicity, age, gender, class and culture. See, for example, Kawagley and Barnhardt's (1999) exploration of Western and indigenous worldviews. That there are multiple views of reality can be brought home to pupils through discussion of controversial issues. A central focus is understanding the complexity of such issues and that compromise between different value positions is not always possible.

Critical thinking

In the discussion of controversial issues, basic assumptions need to be revealed and claims need to be reasoned, with judgements based on knowledge and opinions based on evidence (Fisher 2001). Thus the discussion of controversial issues provides opportunities for pupils to learn the skills of critical thinking, realising the importance of presenting decisions as 'reasonable' on the grounds of fairness, evidence and compromise. The aim is to move away from 'winning' arguments and to find creative resolutions to apparent conflicts.

Participation

Controversial issues are an invitation to everybody to participate in the discussion. Where the atmosphere in the classroom is positive and controversies are welcomed, there is an opportunity for all pupils, regardless of ability, to express their own point of view and to feel able to contribute and find their voice (Antidote 2003).

Speaking and listening

Classroom talk is still dominated by teachers. English *et al.* (2002) report that nine out of ten pupil contributions to the literacy hour are of less than three words and that teachers feel pressed to move through materials at a pace which does not allow for deliberation. Discussion of controversial issues provides opportunities for open-ended debate where the objective is not necessarily to find the 'best' solution, but to let pupils listen to each other and try to find a solution which feels appropriate to them.

Communication skills

Children have to learn to deal with difference and controversy. They are not born knowing how to do this and need to practise skills of listening, stating their case and being prepared to change their minds or re-think their values if necessary. Learning how to deal with sensitive, controversial issues in a structured setting, i.e. through topics introduced into the classroom, can be a rehearsal for dealing with more immediate controversy in the playground, home or community.

Real-life contexts

One can teach about controversial issues using fictitious moral dilemmas, stories and myths, as Fisher (2001) has effectively demonstrated. However the same skills can be taught using current local and global issues as scenarios, thus providing children with authentic or 'real-life' learning contexts. These can, indeed should, include issues raised by young people themselves.

Teachers often express a concern about what parents may say if they introduce controversial issues into their teaching. Yet research into the views of parents of both primary and secondary children shows that parents are not opposed to such teaching if they know that teachers have clear guidelines and boundaries (Holden 2004). Indeed many parents welcome the support that teachers can give in helping children understand the complex issues seen on TV which they find difficult to explain. Parents of secondary pupils are well aware that getting teenagers to listen to each other and weigh up information dispassionately can be a difficult task, and thus welcome the teaching of these skills at school. However, they want to be better informed about what kind of topics will be covered and reassured about the role of the teacher in handling sensitive issues with their children.

The role of the teacher

The teaching of controversial issues requires that the school provides opportunities for open discussion about points of conflict and agreement that are found in the local and global community. It follows that there will be an increased role for the child to express opinions, discuss, debate and develop ideas during lessons. However, this can bring its own problems, and many teachers express concern that their own contributions or those of pupils in their class may be biased or reflect strongly held opinions which may be difficult to manage in the classroom.

For this reason the Crick Report (QCA 1998) includes clear guidance to teachers on strategies for managing controversial issues in classrooms. It recognises the need for balanced and careful measures of neutrality on the part of the teacher, whilst acknowledging that there may be some occasions when the teacher needs to assert a commitment to a value position. At other times the teacher may need to intervene if class discussion has not been sufficient to counter the expression of an anti-social

viewpoint (for example a racist opinion) are left exposed and vulnerable. The three

- *The neutral chair*
This requires the teacher not to express undue weight by pupils, but to act so that children hear only what they want to hear the teacher's views.
- *The balanced approach*
In this, teachers ensure that all as expresses his/her view in order to ensure that a range of opinions is heard. The teacher ensures that a range of opinions is heard, but not at the risk of giving equal weight to all arguments, but those of real merit.
- *Stated commitment approach*
In this the teacher openly expresses a commitment to a value position, but it can run the risk of

A fourth position, *Challenging consensus*, is that the teacher consciously and openly expresses a commitment to a value position by participants or resource materials.

Teachers may, of course, use a combination of these approaches. Whatever role the teacher adopts, it is important to have the experience of a genuinely free consideration of issues that are analysed 'according to a set of criteria that are open to scrutiny and publicly defensible' (Crick 1998: 116). There needs to be established with the class in which the teacher is encouraged to 'cultivate tentativeness' (Crick 1998: 116). 'often the goal of teaching a topic is not to have it to be tolerated as a stage in moving on' (Crick 1998: 116).

A good example of guidelines is given by the teachers in primary schools but would

- 1 *You may not be abusive, derogatory, and teacher.*
Encourage children to think carefully and not be prepared to say directly to the teacher. Encourage positive responses and for children with words like 'I have if you have considered ...'.

viewpoint (for example a racist opinion) with the effect that individuals in the class are left exposed and vulnerable. The three approaches recommended are:

- *The neutral chair*
This requires the teacher not to express any personal views, as these may be given undue weight by pupils, but to act only as a facilitator. It can mean, however, that children hear only what they want to hear and it denies pupils the opportunity to hear the teacher's views.
- *The balanced approach*
In this, teachers ensure that all aspects of an issue are covered. The teacher expresses his/her view in order to encourage the students to present theirs. The teacher ensures that a range of opinions is expressed. This approach can run the risk of giving equal weight to all arguments and leaving students confused as to those of real merit.
- *Stated commitment approach*
In this the teacher openly expresses his/her view as a means of encouraging discussion, but it can run the risk of indoctrinating students.

A fourth position, *Challenging consensus approach*, suggested by Fiehn (2005), is that the teacher consciously and openly takes up an opposite position to that expressed by participants or resource material.

Teachers may, of course, use a combination of these approaches as the need arises. Whatever role the teacher adopts, it is important that pupils are 'offered the experience of a genuinely free consideration of difficult issues' (QCA 1998: 60) and that issues are analysed 'according to an established set of criteria, which are open to scrutiny and publicly defensible' (QCA 1998: 61). These criteria or guidelines need to be established with the class in advance of any work on controversial issues. They should include the establishment of 'ground rules' (see below). Pupils should be encouraged to 'cultivate tentativeness' and explore the many sides to an argument as 'often the goal of teaching a topic is not "clearer ideas" but "greater confusion". This has to be tolerated as a stage in moving towards an independent opinion' (Stradling *et al.* 1984: 116).

A good example of guidelines is given by Claire (2004). These are written for teachers in primary schools but would work equally well at secondary level.

- 1 *You may not be abusive, derogatory or put people down – this includes both child and teacher.*
Encourage children to think carefully and not to say anything that they would not be prepared to say directly to someone for whom the issue was important. Encourage positive responses and politeness even in disagreements. Model this for children with words like 'I hear/understand what you're saying, but wonder if you have considered ...'.

- 2 *You must be able to back up statements with evidence which can be evaluated.*
Children will need help in distinguishing between opinion and evidence. 'My Dad says ...' is not evidence and one example is not sufficient to back up an argument. This may also require discussion of stereotyping and recognition of the fact that it is wrong to attribute the same characteristics to a whole group of people. You can help children decide on criteria for evaluating evidence and do this in a 'neutral space' so that you have already established what's acceptable and can call on earlier agreements.
- 3 *Help children to think tentatively and to problematise the issue.*
Help them reserve judgement and be prepared to wait to hear a variety of points of view before they articulate a definite position. They can learn to use words like 'it may be that, but I'm not sure till I've found out more, I need to think about this, or see what happens if ...'.
- 4 *Help children break free from 'closed' or 'black and white' thinking.*
Model different perspectives; invite them to think of and represent the position of someone who might feel differently. Acknowledge that you have changed your mind about something and encourage them to see changing your mind and open-mindedness as a strength, not a weakness.

(Adapted from Claire 2004)

Strategies and opportunities

In order to educate students to think and to participate one needs to use interactive participatory methods of teaching which model democratic processes. Fiehn acknowledges that, in discussing controversial issues, it is inevitable that there will be situations where differences of opinion and strong views are expressed, and that therefore, 'it is important that facilitators are armed with a number of strategies' (2005: 21). These approaches are offered for teachers of post-16 students but would work equally well with younger pupils.

Distancing procedures

When an issue is sensitive, students can look at an analogous situation, e.g. if looking at the situation in Palestine, an analogy could be Northern Ireland. The analogy can be examined and students then asked how similar or different one situation is from another.

Compensatory procedures

If students are expressing strongly held views based on ignorance, teachers can introduce more information through card sorts, games and 'for and against' lists, which require students to sift the information to make judgements. They can also be asked to use the information to make a strong case for an opinion other than their own (e.g. attitudes towards asylum seekers).

Empathetic procedures

If students do not have any experience, responses are fairly simplistic, perhaps to role play and simulations, in which viewpoints. Through this they can be exposed to issues (e.g. the criminal justice system).

Exploratory procedures

When the issue is not at all clear, using investigative skills, they can carry out research or research a topic on the internet. This can sharpen students' thinking on the key issues.

With all these approaches many students' thinking (right/wrong) to a more developed framework for discussion which can be seen as a 'demystification strategy', a way of exploring the merits of an argument and forming a judgement. He suggests the following framework:

- 1 *What is the issue about?*
The point here is to identify the issue. Is it to do with values (what is being valued)? Concepts (what does this mean?) to analyse the case dispassionately.
- 2 *What are the arguments?*
This question encourages pupils to consider the values stated. What are the claims in the information consistent? Such questions will help to clarify the arguments.
- 3 *What is assumed?*
Once pupils have considered the assumptions centre around the assumption acceptable as the assumptions are parochial. Thus pupils need to consider some other attitude contrary to this? Is it an informed opinion or is it an outsider, with little familiarity?
- 4 *How are the arguments manipulated?*
This question helps pupils judge and understand how information which can help are: Who is involved in the issue? What are their reasons for holding the view?

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(Adapted from Claire 2004)

anticipate one needs to use interactive model democratic processes. Fiehn says that on controversial issues, it is inevitable that there will be strong views expressed, and that teachers armed with a number of strategies' teachers of post-16 students but would

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Empathetic procedures

If students do not have any experience of the views under discussion and their responses are fairly simplistic, perhaps based on the media, they can be introduced to role play and simulations, in which they take on the role of people with different viewpoints. Through this they can be introduced to facts as well as people's responses to issues (e.g. the criminal justice system).

Exploratory procedures

When the issue is not at all clear and teachers would like to develop students' investigative skills, they can carry out fieldwork and interviews in the local community, or research a topic on the internet. Making a presentation of their findings can sharpen students' thinking on the key issues.

With all these approaches many students will still need help to move from dualistic thinking (right/wrong) to a more deliberative approach. Clarke (2001) suggests a framework for discussion which can be used in a variety of contexts. He refers to it as a 'demystification strategy', a way of making sense of a complex issue, considering the merits of an argument and forming an opinion on the basis of critical analysis. He suggests the following framework.

1 What is the issue about?

The point here is to identify the key question about which there is controversy. Is it to do with values (what is best?) or information (what is the truth here?) or concepts (what does this mean?). Such an initial question allows pupils a chance to analyse the case dispassionately before deciding on the merits of the case.

2 What are the arguments?

This question encourages pupils to consider the various positions on the issue. What are the values stated? What criteria are being used to make a judgement? Are the claims in the information accurate? Are the arguments clear? Are they consistent? Such questions will help pupils judge the validity of certain claims.

3 What is assumed?

Once pupils have considered the arguments in an issue, the critical questions centre around the assumptions behind these. Not every point of view is acceptable as the assumptions underpinning it may be ethnocentric, racist or parochial. Thus pupils need to ask, are the assumptions based on prejudice or some other attitude contrary to universally held human rights? Who is saying this? Is it an informed opinion from someone with knowledge of the situation or is it an outsider, with little first-hand experience?

4 How are the arguments manipulated?

This question helps pupils judge the quality of the information they are receiving and understand how information can be used to influence opinion. Questions which can help are: Who is involved? What are their particular interests in this issue? What are their reasons for taking this particular stance? Such questions

can help pupils to see how information can be selected, emphasised or ignored according to its value to various positions on an issue.

(Adapted from Clarke 2001)

The above framework will be suitable for older pupils. Teachers of younger children will find the same principles underpinning thinking skills programmes and may find the introduction of a thinking circle, as devised by Fisher (2001), useful. The thinking circle enables the teacher to present a story or moral issue, after which children reflect individually on a number of key questions, discuss in small groups and then as a class. Children are taught to look for evidence to back up their statements, to question others and to review their thinking. If teachers introduce their pupils to this framework with stories from the past or contemporary moral dilemmas, then when an event happens in the news or a controversial issue arises, the children (and the teacher) will know how to approach the discussion. Children can also be encouraged to bring to the thinking circle their own concerns to discuss and to formulate their own questions. The skills learnt in a thinking circle can then be transferred to role-play and to discussions in other curriculum areas.

Whilst the thinking circle provides an opportunity for teachers to introduce topical or controversial dilemmas, there are many other opportunities within the formal curriculum. Environmental issues in science and geography provide opportunities for such discussions (e.g. the use of wind farms, GM crops, pollution), and children studying the Romans, or Britain since the 1930s, can relate migration in the past to the issue of refugees today.

The example in Box 5.1, from a Devon primary school, is an interesting example of how one Year 4 teacher helped children to understand both the global and controversial nature of energy. In many ways this could be taken as an example of good practice: the teacher encouraged the class to explore many aspects of the debate and acted as a neutral chair. However, one could also argue that this was insufficient as it suggests that there are no 'right' or 'wrong' answers to such issues. The key issue in relation to energy futures is that some fuel sources cause climate change and others do not – some fuel sources are thus clearly more environmentally-friendly than others.

A number of starting points identified by secondary teachers at an in-service course (see Box 5.2) show how controversial issues can be explored in most subject

Box 5.1 Discussing energy issues

I wanted to teach about the many ways of generating power at the same time as helping children understand that methods of obtaining energy are controversial and that there are no 'right' answers. I also wanted them to understand the global dimension to the energy debate.

We did work on different sources of power and energy conservation: e.g. fossil fuels, hydroelectric, nuclear, geothermal, solar and wind powered

electricity. I then staged a 'great debate' with groups, with an energy source each. They were given time prior to the debate as many arguments for and against the source with a question or criticism of the source. They used visual aids to strengthen their case.

The children had quite firm preferences. There was some resistance to adopting a particular source. We discussed this and the advantages of each source equally was important as in the end they were able to make informed decisions.

The actual debate had a chairperson (chosen from the children) and followed a set format. Each group to make their case, tabled a question for discussion to allow for extra question time. After the debate we discussed the following questions:

- How did it feel having to defend your source?
- Were you persuaded by other groups?
- Which source of energy is most useful?
- Which sources of energy have the most disadvantages?
- Which sources of energy affect the environment?
- How can we conserve energy?

It emerged in the end that those who argued for nuclear to promote or defend were the best.

We followed up this work with a visit to a decommissioned nuclear power station. We used their questioning skills to the test. We discussed the outfall from Sellafield and heard about the objections to wind farms. We also visited a hydroelectric power station. We used the website to find out about their sources. We also visited a hydroelectric power station. We used the website to find out about their sources. We also visited a hydroelectric power station. We used the website to find out about their sources.

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(Adapted from Clarke 2001)

For older pupils. Teachers of younger children can use a 'pinning thinking skills' programme, such as the 'circle', as devised by Fisher (2001), to present a story or moral issue, after a series of key questions, discuss in small groups to look for evidence to back up their own thinking. If teachers introduce a story from the past or contemporary moral issues or a controversial issue arises, they can approach the discussion. Children can use their own concerns to discuss and learn in a thinking circle can then be used in other curriculum areas.

Opportunity for teachers to introduce topical issues and opportunities within the formal curriculum and geography provide opportunities to discuss (e.g. GM crops, pollution), and children can relate migration in the past to

primary school, is an interesting example to understand both the global and local context and this could be taken as an example of how to explore many aspects of the debate. It also argues that this was insufficient 'strong' answers to such issues. The key fuel sources cause climate change and are increasingly more environmentally-friendly

For secondary teachers at an in-service session, issues can be explored in most subject

of generating power at the same time. The methods of obtaining energy are different. I also wanted them to engage in a debate.

Power and energy conservation: fossil, thermal, solar and wind powered

electricity. I then staged a 'great debate' where the children were put in groups, with an energy source each, and had to argue the case for their source. They were given time prior to the actual debate (filmed) to prepare as many arguments for and against their source as they could and to come up with a question or criticism of the other sources. They also had to produce visual aids to strengthen their case.

The children had quite firm preferences at the start of the topic and there was some resistance to adopting and arguing for the obviously 'unpopular' options. We discussed this and emphasised that exploring all the energy sources equally was important as in their role as scientists they needed to be able to make informed decisions.

The actual debate had a chairperson, a camera person and reporter (drawn from the children) and followed a clear structure with three minutes for each group to make their case, tabled questions from other groups and an open session to allow for extra questioning and answers that has arisen during the debate. After the debate we discussed the following:

- How did it feel having to defend your particular energy source?
- Were you persuaded by others' arguments? Why or why not?
- Which source of energy is most expensive? Why?
- Which sources of energy have negative effects, e.g. cause pollution?
- Which sources of energy affect people in other countries?
- How can we conserve energy?

It emerged in the end that those with a source of energy that was 'difficult' to promote or defend were the best prepared.

We followed up this work with a residential trip to North Wales, visiting a decommissioned nuclear power station where the children were able to put their questioning skills to the test. They asked why Greenpeace objected to the outfall from Sellafield and heard the representative argue that there were also objections to wind farms. We had visited an anti-wind farm website earlier to understand the nature of their protest and had visited the Greenpeace website to find out about their support. The children were thus able to look at the various arguments, considering all points of view. While in Wales we also visited a hydroelectric power station and the Centre for Alternative Technology where the children began to understand how different power sources are useful in different circumstances: a useful lead in to the use of energy in different parts of the world.

areas and that these often provide the links between citizenship education and that subject. In identifying the controversial, one is often also identifying what is current, involves value judgements and has resource implications, either for the local or global communities.

Pupils who learn how to take part in discussions on controversial issues will be better able to understand the values of others and to respect those who may have

Box 5.2 Opportunities for teaching about controversial issues

Mathematics

Use and abuse of statistics

Interest rates, the role of the World Bank

Working with authentic data (e.g. about global health and demographics)

Dance

Appreciating dance from other cultures

Stereotyping and respect, e.g. gender and homophobic issues

Funding for the arts

Art and design

Responses of artists to controversial and political events

Dead white men or living artists as a focus? Gender and race issues

Issues around what and how art is valued

Design and technology

Gender issues

Co-operation and problem solving

Technology for sustainable development

ICT

Who has access? The North/South global internet divide

Moral, ethical and environmental impact of ICT

Legal and human rights issues of access to information

English

Use of texts which deal with controversial issues

Learning to campaign and be persuasive: are all topics OK?

Critically evaluating information in the media

Science

Controversial issues, e.g. cloning, GM crops

Environmental issues, e.g. energy

Experiments and the law, e.g. animal testing and protests

Modern foreign languages

Challenging stereotypes, e.g. understanding different cultures

English as a world language: is this right?

Texts from other countries about controversial issues

Geography

Global topical and environmental issues

Less economically developed countries

Involvement in local controversial issues

History

People who came, e.g. colonialism, racism

Conflicts in the past: what were they about? What was right?

Acquisition of artefacts: should they be returned?

Religious education

Different beliefs within Christianity, Islam, etc.

Challenging stereotypes about world religions

Church schools: should they be encouraged?

Physical education

Should everyone have to do PE in school?

Issues around football, e.g. racism, sexism

Gender issues: is there equality in sport?

opinions different from their own. Pupils, from a number of points of view, or indeed from the past, are learning how to weigh evidence, and whose geography or science lessons, and how they look at current topical issues are learning to do so in different contexts. Teaching about controversial issues helps people gain the knowledge and skills to live in a democratic society.

Geography

Global topical and environmental issues, e.g. budget airlines, global warming

Less economically developed countries: issues of justice and equality

Involvement in local controversial issues, e.g. new housing, new arrivals

History

People who came, e.g. colonialism, refugees

Conflicts in the past: what were the arguments for and against? Who was right?

Acquisition of artefacts: should they be returned? e.g. Elgin Marbles

Religious education

Different beliefs within Christianity, e.g. about creation

Challenging stereotypes about world religions, e.g. Islam

Church schools: should they be encouraged?

Physical education

Should everyone have to do PE in school? Rights versus health

Issues around football, e.g. racism, violence and nationalism

Gender issues: is there equality in sport?

opinions different from their own. Pupils used to looking at current events from a number of points of view, or indeed to exploring different versions of events in the past, are learning how to weigh evidence and make informed judgements. Pupils whose geography or science lessons, for example, go beyond facts and figures to look at current topical issues are learning about the nature of controversy in real-life contexts. Teaching about controversial issues, both local and global, helps young people gain the knowledge and skills that citizens need for effective participation in a democratic society.