Controversy for Beginners:
how to keep calm and maintain control while teaching about controversial issues.

Introduction

After three years of running a secondary citizenship PGCE, I’ve realised that the problem is not getting students interested in teaching controversial issues – most of them are very committed to this- but is rather giving them strategies for the classroom so that they feel confident to lead young people in discussions on topics which are sensitive and emotive. Many are afraid that they will lose control of their pupils if they allow heated debate, that some with ‘unacceptable’ views will call out, or that they won’t know how to respond to a pupil who makes a challenging statement. Some trainees are concerned about their lack of subject knowledge on current global issues and some find it difficult to avoid proselytising their own views. There are also challenges with assessing this kind of work.

This article aims to provide concrete advice on how to go about dealing with local and global controversial issues in the classroom. It is in five parts:

- defining controversial issues
- why we should teach about controversial issues
- the role of the teacher
- strategies for the classroom
- new resources available for teaching controversial issues

What are controversial issues?

It is important to establish with your students just what we mean by controversial issues. Giving a group five minutes to come up with their own definition and three issues which they might consider to be controversial is a good starting point. You can then present some definitions offered by others and see how they match. Wellington (1986) 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. 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) reminds us that

…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.

In other words, people’s value perspectives derive from deep-seated ideological beliefs or worldviews about politics, economics, society and environment. When we explore controversial issues we are not just weighing up facts or evidence but helping young people to explore differing belief systems.

Controversial issues are thus those that divide a society and generate conflicting explanations and solutions based on alternative value systems. 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. A group of eleven year old children cited the development of wind farms, wearing religious symbols at work, immigration, and the possibility of a new casino in their area as issues they felt were controversial and important to them (Thomson 2007).

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

Why teach about controversial issues?

Controversial issues are part and parcel of everyday life. Whilst some would argue that the school’s role is to teach a core of established knowledge (e.g. how parliament works, the criminal justice system) others would argue that learning about controversial issues and how to handle controversy is essential to understanding democracy and preparing young people as active citizens. If we are to enable young people to think critically about the ‘major political, social and economic issues of our time’ (Stradling op cit) then education must have at its core the open and democratic discussion of current controversial issues.
It appears that young people themselves would welcome a curriculum which includes the discussion of controversial issues. A recent study shows that pupils of eleven and fourteen care passionately about many key local and global issues. They hope for a future where there is less poverty and conflict and are very concerned about environmental issues. Within their local communities, they want less crime, graffiti, traffic, more things for young people to do and better job prospects (Holden, 2007). Davies et al. (2005), investigating pupils’ understanding of global citizenship education, found a desire to learn more about contemporary issues such as poverty, drought, famine, disease, environmental issues and about war and its causes.

Bernard Crick, writing about the principles underpinning the introduction of education for citizenship in England, also maintains that young people are interested in particular political and controversial issues (e.g. animal rights, environmental issues, community facilities). He maintains that we need to equip pupils with ‘the political skills needed to change laws in a peaceful and responsible manner’ (QCA 1998:10) and that 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)

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’, for teaching knowledge, critical thinking skills and emotional literacy.

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 pupils 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 and reflect strongly held opinions which may be difficult to manage in the classroom.

The first step is to look at the objectives for your lesson plan. Are they absolutely clear and impartial? One of my trainees was committed to the principle of fair trade and his objective was to get all of his year 10 pupils to ‘understand the need for fair trade’. He taught a carefully planned lesson with video clips illustrating the effects of unfair trading conditions and the pupils were engaged in a sometimes heated discussion. However, the trainee seemed completely stumped when some pupils asked what would happen to workers in factories which might be forced to close if fair trade factories took all of their business. Others said the fair trade was all very well but many products were too expensive. The trainee had, to his credit, introduced a controversial issue which engaged the pupils, but he was unprepared when pupils asked challenging questions. He did not
appreciate that his role was to help pupils understand the issue so that they could make up their own minds, rather than try to persuade them to believe what he thought was right. In another lesson a trainee was leading a discussion on HIV/AIDS: he disagreed passionately about the position of the Catholic Church on condoms and said so. This trainee needed help in distancing his own beliefs and respecting the views of others so that he could lead a fair and open discussion.

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 he or she needs to assert a commitment to a value position. At other times the teacher may need to intervene if the discussion has not been sufficient to counter any anti-social viewpoints so that individuals in the class are left exposed and vulnerable. The three approaches recommended are:

a) **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. However this denies pupils the opportunity to hear the teacher’s views and means the teacher cannot model how to give an opinion, backed up by evidence.

b) **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.

c) **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.

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

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’, a good example of which 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. **Everyone 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.

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. Encourage them 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 this and open mindedness as a strength, not a weakness.

   (Adapted from Claire 2004)

Teachers often express a concern about what parents may say if they introduce controversial issues into their teaching. Yet research shows 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 that there are clear guidelines for teachers who cover sensitive and controversial issues with their children (Holden, 2004).

**Strategies for the classroom**

The key to teaching controversial issues successfully in the secondary classroom is to give structured and focussed tasks so that the lesson does not become either a free-for-all ‘slanging match’ nor a series of aimless discussions, where there is danger that prejudices are reinforced and ignorance debates with ignorance. There must always be some kind of conclusion: this may be reaching agreement by consensus, an acceptance that there are different viewpoints or an acknowledgement that pupils need to find out more.
The following principles and pointers may help you plan your lessons:

1) try to provide opportunities for pupils to learn the skills of critical thinking so that they present decisions as ‘reasonable’ on the grounds of fairness, evidence and compromise and move away from ‘winning’ arguments. Help them through the use of writing frames or Venn diagrams to see both sides of the story and where there are areas of confusion.

2) provide opportunities for all to participate. All pupils, regardless of ability, should have the opportunity to express their own point of view and feel able to contribute. This will mean moving away from whole class discussions where only those sufficiently confident will participate. You will need to provide lots of paired and group tasks, where there are clear guidelines- e.g. give 3 reasons why you disagree (or agree) with this statement.

3) use authentic controversial issues. There are controversial issues in literature and in the past which can be used to help children develop critical thinking (Fisher 2001) but there are also many out there in today’s papers and on the news. These should include issues raised by young people themselves. What is it that they are concerned about? Why? What might be done?

4) if pupils do not have any experience of the topic being discussed and their responses are fairly simplistic, perhaps based on the media, introduce activities which encourage empathy, e.g. role play and simulations, in which they take on the role of people with different view points. This will help introduce them to key facts and how people feel about the issue.

5) give them a framework for approaching complex issues, with questions such as
   - What are the main features and probable causes of this issue?
   - What are the main groups involved?
   - What are their interests and values?
   - How can people be persuaded to act or change their minds?
   - How can the accuracy of the information be checked? Where could we find out more?
   - How does this issue affect us? How can we express our point of view and influence the outcome? (QCA 1998)

6) behaviour management is crucial: make sure pupils understand clearly the instructions, allocate a person to report back from each group task, keep to the time you have allocated for each task and make sure you allow time for feedback from each group so that all feel they have had their voice heard. If discussion becomes noisy, use a whistle or some other pre-arranged signal to stop them. Use worksheets that are clear and request a limited number of key points from each pair or group.
7) if a pupil raises a point of view which you feel is contentious, don’t feel you have to respond. Often others in the class will do this for you and do it better! Ask if anyone has a different point of view and what that might be. If no one responds, allow five minutes thinking time in groups. Explain that with controversial issues there are many viewpoints and that your role as teacher is to make sure they know enough to make up their own minds. If the point of view expressed by the child is racist, sexist etc, you may need to point out that such remarks aren’t acceptable, and explain why. If they are inaccurate, it’s up to you to provide sources of information, either in this lesson or in a follow-up one.

The following activities exemplify the pointers and principles above. They have all been used and developed by secondary teachers.

Activity One: Where do I stand?

This activity will help you introduce controversial issues in a controlled manner. It encourages pupils to listen to each other and weigh up what people have to say before coming to a conclusion. The use of statement slips focuses pupils’ attention and allows for a shared experience between all the pairs. The use of a large sheet of A1 paper gives pupils a physical task and allows less able children to see what is happening.

Purpose
• to introduce pupils to controversial issues in a structured learning environment
• to help pupils understand that others will have different points of view
• to encourage pupils to bring up their own issues for discussion

Procedure
You will need:
• large sheets of paper (A1 size) for each pair, with two overlapping circles drawn on each. One circle is labelled ‘agree’, the other ‘disagree’. The overlapping sector is labelled ‘not sure’.
• a set of statements (selected from those below), cut into strips
• ten blank slips of paper for each group

Put pupils in pairs. It is very important who is paired – it will depend on dynamics and your judgement about wisdom of putting friends together, or those who might in fact have a lively debate through disagreement! Give each pair a set of (cut up) statements from the ones below. Allow about 10 statements per group. Explain that each person must take it in turn to read a statement and place it in one of the three sections. They say whether they agreed or disagreed with it, giving their reasons. The pair then discuss the statement together and see if they can reach a consensus on where to place it or if they ‘agree to disagree’. They work up their arguments ready to present to a larger group.

The teacher stops the class and chooses an issue herself from the list they have worked with, and finds out how different pairs have responded to this issue. She then creates new groups of sixes to include a variety of opinions. In their new groups the pupils explain their positions and listen to the others.
If you have time you can give out blank slips of paper and ask pupils to come up with statements of their own. This allows them to raise issues which they feel are important. These can be used in the same way as the original statements so that each pupil then reads out his/her own statement, and explains where they think it should go on the sheet.

Groups who finish early can be asked to see if they can find a way to re-write any statements in the ‘not sure’ section so that they can be moved to the agree or disagree sections. This might be done by adding ‘usually…’ or ‘unless…’ to the statements.

**Plenary**
- Which of the statements did each pair agree with?
- Which did people find hardest to come to a consensus on? Why?
- Where there any statements which people could not agree on?
- Are there any of their own statements which people would like to share?
- Were some groups able to re-write statements so they agreed with them?

**Statements for cards:**
Children should be allowed to watch as much TV as they like.
Children should have to wear school uniform.
Children under 12 should be allowed to use MSN so that they can communicate with their friends.
Private schools should be abolished
It is OK to steal if you are homeless and hungry.
People should be fined if they don’t vote.
Muslim teachers should be allowed to wear the veil.
All drugs should be legalised.
The government should provide free accommodation for refugees.
Children from other countries who have no home should be able to come to our country and go to my school.
A dustman should be paid as much as a dentist.
People should be allowed to carry knives for self defence.
It is wrong to eat meat.
Parents should be able to smack their children.
People who enjoy smoking should be able to smoke wherever they like.
Short-haul flights should be banned because of climate change.

*These statements were written by PGCE students, tutors and year 6 children. The activity appears in a different format in Clough and Holden (2002) where the children physically move about the room according to their viewpoint.*

**Activity Two: Do we want a new hotel?**
This activity introduces pupils to writing frames. These writing frames encourage the development of empathy by getting pupils not only to think about the role they have been given but also the points of view of other groups. The danger of role play where pupils are asked to understand only one point of view is that the lesson can descend in a free-for-all where each group is convinced of their own arguments and does not listen to
others. This activity aims to help pupils understand that in order to reach a solution, they must take into consideration the views of others. As such this lesson is useful precursor to role play. Once pupils have internalised the message about considering others’ viewpoints, they are better prepared to move on to role play. This lesson links geography and citizenship.

Purpose
- to introduce pupils to a controversial issue, through the use of writing frames
- to help them understand that there are multiple perspectives on any issue
- to introduce discussion and compromise as a stage in conflict resolution
- to explore the conflicting interests involved in development and tourism
- to introduce issues of sustainability and the future

Preparation
You will need:
- the information sheet (below) about a new hotel to be built on Mombasa
- writing frames for each group (below)

Optional extras:
- a map of Mombasa, showing its proximity to the mainland and tourist areas (Tsavo national park, Shimba Hills animal reserve, the coast).
- tourist brochures promoting Kenya

Procedure
Ask pupils to discuss in pairs:
- Who has been a tourist?
- Where did they go?
- Where would they like to go and why?
- Can they think of three benefits to a country of having tourists?
- Can they think of three problems?

Share responses with the whole class.

Now introduce Kenya as a country which relies heavily on tourism for its income, (illustrating with tourist brochures if available). Then introduce the island of Mombasa, Kenya, where a new hotel is to be built.

Put the pupils in pairs or small groups and ask them to discuss the following and be prepared to feedback at least two points:
- What will tourists want to do if they come to this hotel?
- Who might benefit from the new hotel?
- What problems might arise from building a new hotel?

Give out the background information sheet and divide the class into 8 groups, giving each group a writing frame. Make sure the whole class knows who each group represents: as
you give out the writing frames ask each group to write their name (e.g market stall holders) on a piece of paper and put it in front of them.

Explain that each group will first of all have 10 minutes to consider their own case and complete the first section of the writing frame. They must then consider the concerns of two of the other groups so that they can decide what the best solution is. In order to do this they may ‘visit’ other groups to find out more about what they stand for.  *[If you feel this will be disruptive, give all groups information on each group beforehand]*

Having talked with people from two other groups to find out their viewpoints (or read the information sheet on the other groups) they then complete the next two sections where they show that they understand other people’s views. They then decide as a group on what they think is the best solution.

An extension task for a group who finishes early or for a more able group is to give them the role of the council as well. Their task is to weigh up the different positions and use the format of the writing frame to decide which point of view to support. This is a good opportunity to introduce the notion of respect for minority positions and also the possibility that there may be a failure to reach consensus.

**Plenary**

The teacher asks each group to read out its case and the case for two other groups. He/she can do this taking on the role of a reporter who has come to hear the different sides of the story and write it up for their paper, or can be the neutral chair, listening to all sides of the debate. If one group is acting as the council, they can be the group listening to the various arguments and can be asked to summarise these and suggest a solution drawing on what they have heard and what they discussed themselves.

Then discuss:

- Why was this a controversial issue?
- Which groups had strong arguments? Why?
- What made it easy or hard to consider the interests of others?
- What did they have to consider when trying to find a solution?
- What were the difficulties faced by the council?
- Are there similar dilemmas in the UK?
- What responsibilities do we have as tourists?

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**The proposal for building the Swahili Hotel: information sheet**

A new hotel is to be built on Mombasa, an island connected by road and rail to the mainland of Kenya.

It is to be built on land that is used regularly by market stall-holders.

The site is close to the beach, which is very popular with tourists.
It is a busy area with shops and craftspeople to be seen everywhere you go. There is an Islamic mosque (place of worship for Muslims) situated very close to the site. The hotel would be built very close to a major road, causing traffic diversions and disruption. The Shimba Hills Animal Reserve and the Tsavo National park are only a short distance away and very popular with tourists. There is a coral reef running the length of the Kenyan coast. Conservationists are worried about further damage to this natural resource from pleasure boats, divers and other tourist activities. 1 in 6 people in the area are unemployed and there is a high crime rate.

**Background information on tourism:**

Tourism is the world’s fastest growing industry. In 1950 25m people travelled abroad, in 1999 it was 670m. The World Tourism Organisation estimates that by 2020 some 1.6bn people will travel each year. The growth area is long haul travel, especially to developing countries.

Water shortage will be an increasing problem: WWF has calculated that a tourist in Spain uses 880 litres of water per day, compared with 250 litres by a local. By 2025 the number of people living in areas where renewable water is scarce will increase from 130m to more than 1bn.

(Source: The Guardian, 12.05.01)

**Writing frames**

Each group should have a writing frame with information specific to their group and then the common format, beginning ‘we would like to argue that…..’ (see Group 1 for an example).
**Group 1**
You represent the Swahili Hotel Corporation. You are responsible for putting forward the proposal for building the hotel. You want the hotel to be built. Why? What are the advantages of building a hotel in this location, not just for you but for the local community?

We would like to argue that……………………………

We understand that it will be difficult for ……………

We understand that it will also be difficult for ……………

Therefore we feel that the best solution would be to ….
You represent the Kenyan National Tourist Office. You want the hotel to be built. Why? Think of what the hotel would mean to this part of Kenya as a whole.

Group 5
You represent the conservationists concerned to preserve the ecology of the coral reef. You do not want the hotel to be built. Why?

Group 6
You represent the local transport police. The hotel will be built near a major road, causing short term disruption to traffic. You do not want the hotel to be built. Why?

Group 7
You represent the owners of the market stalls that use the land where the planned hotel is to be built. You do not want the hotel to be built. Why? Think of how it will affect your life generally.

Group 8
You represent the local unemployed poor people. You are finding it hard to survive. Each day is a case of looking for your next meal. You want the hotel to be built. Why?

Adapted from Clough and Holden (2002)

Activity Three: Controversy and the law
Teachers often find it hard to introduce pupils to basic aspects of the legal system. Some pupils think that the role of the law is purely to police them and fail to understand that we look to the law to help resolve difficult and controversial decisions. It links to work on human rights as the focus is on what we do when rights are in conflict. This activity allows pupils to engage with a real-life issue which involved two boys and which was much in the media at the time. It offers a structured framework for discussing an emotive case study and a judge’s decision. There are opportunities to make links with media education and with parallel case studies today.

Purpose
• to introduce pupils to the role of the legal system when the rights of people are in conflict
• to help pupils appreciate that there are often many points to an argument
• to help pupils look beyond media headlines and weigh up evidence
• to help pupils articulate their own informed views

Preparation
You will need:
• the case study (below)
• downloaded copies of newspaper articles from 2001 (if possible)
• copies of the views of eleven year olds (below)
**Procedure**

Put on the board for all to see as they come in:

*Do 10 year olds understand the difference between right and wrong?*

*Should people who have served their time in prison be allowed a new identity?*

Explain that they are going to look at a real dilemma which caused huge arguments at the time and which has changed the law. Read out the first paragraph of the case study (below) to the whole class. Ask if anyone has heard about this case. Ask pupils to discuss in pairs:

- Do they think that children aged 10 know right from wrong?
- Why might children have committed such a crime?
- Was it right to give them a life sentence?
- Who should decide about when or if they should be released?

Take feedback and draw together common threads.

Now explain that at 18, in 2001, the boys were up for release. There was a real dilemma as the rights of the boys (now young men) to rehabilitation and a private life were in conflict with the rights of the public to know where individuals who have committed an offence are living. Whose rights should have preference? The rights of the boys or the rights of the public? A top judge was called in to help decide.

Put pupils in groups of three or four.

If you have copies of newspaper articles from 2001, distribute these between groups of pupils and ask them to work out the point of view of their paper on the dilemma. What arguments is their particular newspaper article making? Whose rights does it support? *(You may want to go back to 1993 and give out newspaper articles from the time, asking the pupils to consider various papers’ viewpoints on whether or not the boys’ punishment was appropriate).*

Now tell the pupils they are now going to have the full case study in front of them with the judge’s decision. One person in the group should read this to the rest of the group and they should then discuss what the main dilemmas facing the judge were. To do this each group needs a sheet of A4 paper with two columns, one headed ‘the boys’ rights’, the other headed ‘the public’s rights’. They should try to find 5 arguments for each side. They should then decide as a group if they agree with the judge’s decision and why. Each group should select a spokesperson to report back on the main points of their discussion.

An alternative is to give out the views of a class of eleven year olds on this issue (below) who were asked to do the same task. Ask each group to rank the children’s arguments for and against. Which do they think were the best argued? Which do they agree with and which would they discard? Why? Get them to add three new arguments for each side. If they were the teacher, what do they think these year 6 children should go on to learn about?
Plenary
Ask each group to feedback in turn as to whether or not they support the judge’s decision. Then lead a whole class discussion:
- Why was this a controversial issue?
- Which newspaper articles helped them form a balanced view?
- What were the arguments for the boys’ rights and the rights of the public?
- What would happen if we did not have a legal system to make these decisions?
- Are there similar examples today (e.g. paedophiles or celebrities and anonymity)?

Case study
In 1993 two boys, aged 10, abducted Jamie Bulger (aged 2) from outside a shop, walked him through a shopping centre onto nearby wasteland and murdered him. The case caused widespread shock because of the age of the boys: people were surprised that children could commit such a terrible crime. There was much discussion about whether poor parenting, horror videos or a general lack of values in society was to blame or whether the boys were just ‘evil’. They were given a ‘life sentence’ which also caused a huge debate as some people thought they were too young to be punished in this way.

In early 2001 the boys, now young men, were due for release. Dame Butler-Sloss, Britain’s most senior family judge, granted them anonymity for life by issuing a permanent injunction referring to the new Human Rights Act (article 1: the right to life). This was done to protect the young men after threats of revenge attacks. This was the first time the media had been permanently prevented from publishing information about convicted young offenders and some newspapers felt this went against the principle of the freedom of the press and the public’s right to know about such people. The injunction was, however, welcomed by the detectives involved and others who wanted the young men to have a chance to live normal lives.

Eleven year olds speak out:

We think the judge should put the boys’ rights first because:
They have been through enough.
Because the family might seek revenge if they know where they are.
They should not be discriminated against if they have already been punished and regret the crime.
In the Rights of the Child you have a right to life.
They have already been in prison for 8 years.

We think the judge should put the public’s rights first because:
So people don’t have to move next to them
Why should they have the right to a new life if they’ve taken someone else’s?
They killed at age 10 so they have serious problems and could be a danger to others. It was their choice to kill that boy so they deserve it. They don’t have the right to a normal life because they destroyed a family by what they did.

Resources for teaching about controversial issues

There are many websites and resources now appearing. Recommended are:

Fiehn, J. (2005) Agree to Disagree. Citizenship and Controversial Issues, London: Learning and Skills Development Agency. This booklet is written for a post 16 audience but the activities work can easily be adapted for younger secondary students. They are also very useful for CPD work with teachers. There is an excellent clock card game about asylum seekers, an activity using a sentencing circle which draws on an experimental approach to sentencing and a decision making activity about pensions which looks at the provision for elderly people in different countries. It’s by far the best activity I’ve seen on what can seem an unattractive topic.

Oxfam (2006) Teaching Controversial Issues. Oxfam GB. This leaflet, in the Global Citizenship Guides series, looks at how education for global citizenship relates to the teaching of controversial issues and includes activities on social justice and equity (do boys deserve education more than girls?), sustainable development and using photographs. There is also a very useful description of how to foster a community of enquiry in your classroom.

Claire, H and Holden, C (2007) The Challenge of Teaching Controversial Issues. Stoke-on-Trent: Trentham. This new book draws on teachers from the UK and abroad. Each author dissects the nature of a specific controversy, and offers practical strategies for helping students work through possible solutions. Areas covered include:
- Educational policy and social justice
- Teaching about war and conflict
- Using teenage fiction and drama to explore controversial issues
- Teaching about climate change and sustainability
- Teaching about controversial issues with post 16 pupils

Conclusion

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 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.

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