

Teaching Controversial Issues: An Introduction

Diana E. Hess

On September 22, 2018, more than 200 Wisconsin K-12 teachers and teacher education students attended a conference organized by the University of Wisconsin-Madison's School of Education on "Teaching About the 2018 Elections: Preparing Students for Political Engagement." It was profoundly heartening to see how interested educators were about learning new approaches for teaching about electoral politics in a way that is engaging, respectful of different points of view, and based upon the best and most current pedagogical practices and materials. At the same time, it was sobering to hear a number of teachers express concerns that in their schools and communities, support for teaching young people about the very issues that are animating contemporary politics and governance is thin at best, and non-existent at worst.

When schools fail to teach students how to engage with controversial political and constitutional issues—or worse, suppress, ignore, or exclude such issues from the curriculum—they send a host of destructive and misguided messages. One is that it's not important for young people to examine and analyze the contemporary political realm, especially in comparison to other content on which schools have traditionally focused. Another is that controversial issues—ranging from access to health care, to voting rights to gun control to abortion and the death penalty—are simply too hot to handle in schools, and may even be harmful for students. Yet, we know that many teachers are quite successfully engaging their students in high quality and rigorous lessons, units, and in some cases, whole courses, that focus explicitly on learning about controversial issues. From the articles in this special section, you will learn about new pedagogical approaches, curriculum materials, research, and professional development about controversial issues teaching and learning.

I am grateful to each of the contributors for the considerable work they devoted to making these articles timely and accessible, and for the fresh and thought-provoking insights presented in each piece. While each of the authors who contributed to this issue recognizes that powerful challenges face those who seek to teach young people how to talk about contested political and constitutional issues, all are united in the belief that we would be making a serious mistake to abandon this enterprise now because the challenges we face are the very problems we should be seeking to allay. Their articles offer a broad range of strategies, recommendations, and classroom-tested techniques.

The section opens with an article by Dafney Blanca Dabach, Natasha Hakimali Merchant, and Aliza K. Fones who critique

the teaching of immigration from the framework of a political controversy, advocating classroom strategies that create space for immigrant-origin youth to act instead of being subjects of conversation. LaGarrett J. King, Amanda E. Vickery, and Genevieve Caffrey offer a detailed framework for developing a shared racial literacy aimed at moving beyond the silences and discomfort that often surround classroom discussions of racial issues. Kei Kawashima-Ginsberg and Rey Junco, of the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, survey the current state of controversial-issue discussions in schools and highlight the role that two sets of prospective allies—parents and principals—can play in expanding this practice. Jane C. Lo describes how the process of role-play can provide a pathway for students to engage meaningfully with controversial issues. Avner Segall, Margaret S. Crocco, Anne-Lise Halvorsen, and Rebecca Jacobsen reflect on lessons learned from a yearlong study of deliberations on immigration and Internet privacy that they conducted in four secondary social studies classrooms. Street Law's Cathy Ruffing and Lee Arbetman share seven methods for using Supreme Court cases to address important legal and constitutional issues. They argue that focusing on Supreme Court cases can remove the partisan nature and political personalities that often cloud discussion.

As social studies professionals, our advocacy for schools' role in preparing young people for meaningful participation in democratic life is more essential than ever before. It is critical that we not shy away from making this case clearly and convincingly to the public, to parents, to school leaders, and to policymakers. Given the central role that social studies teachers play in this effort, we must stand by our colleagues who are already engaging their students in learning about controversial political issues, while encouraging those who are not to embrace this practice. In the face of intense political polarization, rising levels of inequality, and a narrowing view of the mission of schools, we must recognize that giving up on teaching young people about controversial issues is an ill-advised and damaging option. The stakes, after all, are exceptionally high: empowering young Americans to become active participants—and to coexist peacefully—in a pluralistic society brimming with opposing views. 🌍

DIANA E. HESS is the Dean of the School of Education at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and the Karen A. Falk Distinguished Chair of Education.