New-Bridge Integrated College
Case Study: Teaching Controversial Issues
Developing a whole-school approach to teaching and learning about controversial issues
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Introduction

This case study illustrates how the Senior Leadership Team (SLT) and the Community Relations, Equality and Diversity (CRED) team in New-Bridge Integrated College worked collaboratively with teachers to plan and develop a whole-school policy and practice on teaching controversial issues.

School Aims

The school aimed to develop a whole-school policy and practice on teaching controversial issues, which would:

• encourage the teaching of controversial issues;
• ensure a consistent approach to teaching controversial issues across subjects;
• build staff confidence to teach controversial issues;
• encourage pupils to express their views;
• enable pupils to develop respect and a deeper understanding of their own and others’ views; and
• support the school ethos and, as part of this, promote diversity and inclusion.

This case study helped to inform the CCEA guidance document Teaching Controversial Issues at Key Stage 3 available at www.ccea.org.uk

You can visit the school website at www.newbridgeintegrated.org
Section 1: Background

The problem of dealing with controversial issues was highlighted by the English department when teachers were using the novel *The Bog Child*, by Siobhan Dowd, with Year 10 pupils. The novel is set against the backdrop of the ‘Troubles’ and the hunger strikes. The main character is a young boy called Fergus who is studying for his A levels in the 1980s and whose brother is one of the hunger strikers.

Although there are other themes in the novel, the sensitive nature of the portrayal of political prisoners drew attention from some parents and local politicians who questioned its appropriateness as a school text.

New-Bridge’s diverse school population was another reason for reviewing school policy and practice on teaching controversial issues. The school has pupils from the main Catholic and Protestant traditions. It also has pupils from ethnic minority groups. In recent years there has been an increase in Year 13 pupils from other schools who have no experience of the ethos of integrated education.

Therefore, pupils are likely to have a range of conflicting views about different issues that could lead to tension in classrooms, and the school in general, if ignored. The principal viewed teaching and learning about controversial issues as an important way of promoting respect for diversity and inclusion. Providing opportunities for pupils to discuss controversial issues in a supportive climate would enable pupils to better understand their own and others’ views. It would also enable them to develop their communication skills and learn to respectfully disagree with others.
Section 2:  
School self-evaluation and development planning

The principal and the Senior Leadership Team (SLT) identified teaching controversial issues as an area for whole-school development during the school evaluation and development planning process in 2013–14. This was part of a broader aim to promote diversity and inclusion. As part of the school’s self-evaluation and development planning process, the principal and the SLT planned to:

• assess policy and practice around teaching controversial issues;
• identify areas for development; and
• take actions for improvement.

The principal and members of the school CRED team planning a whole-school approach to teaching and learning about controversial issues.

Staff and pupil consultation

The first stage of the planning process was to gather information to address the above points. Initially, this involved meetings with the heads of English, History, Local and Global Citizenship and Religious Education as they have had experience of teaching controversial issues. At a later stage other teachers and pupils were consulted to obtain their views on teaching controversial issues.
CRED audit of policy and practice

While the SLT met with teachers and pupils, the newly formed school Community Relations, Equality and Diversity (CRED) team completed an audit of practice across all subjects. The audit identified opportunities for teaching and learning about controversial issues. It also highlighted how subjects contributed to meeting Section 75 equality legislation and to promoting diversity and inclusion.

Reviewing the school mission statement

The SLT reviewed the school's mission statement, aims and core values to explore how these relate to teaching controversial issues. The school's core values are:

• diversity;
• inclusion;
• respect;
• mutual understanding; and
• equality.

School self-evaluation: main outcomes

• There were significant areas of good practice on teaching controversial issues.
• There was a range of opportunities across all subjects for teaching and learning about controversial issues.
• There was a lack of common understanding about what makes an issue controversial.
• School policies did not explicitly refer to teaching controversial issues.
• There was no consistent approach to teaching controversial issues across subjects.
• Some teachers were uncomfortable or felt that they lacked the confidence and/or skills to teach certain issues.
Section 3: Areas for school development

Three main areas for school development on teaching controversial issues were identified:
• align school policies and procedures to support the teaching of controversial issues;
• develop a consistent whole-school approach to teaching controversial issues; and
• staff development.

1. Align school policies and procedures to support the teaching of controversial issues

The principal recognised that teachers may have to deal with strong emotional reactions from pupils or parents and that many were uncomfortable with teaching controversial issues. She also wanted to ensure teachers were supported and encouraged to teach controversial issues, rather than avoid them.

The principal and the SLT reviewed and revised school policies linked to teaching controversial issues, such as its pastoral care and CRED policies. The policies set out clear procedures and clarify teacher roles and responsibilities when teaching controversial issues. These school policies also include a process for teachers to voice their concerns about teaching certain issues without fear of recrimination.

2. Develop a consistent whole-school approach to teaching controversial issues

The principal, the SLT and the CRED team worked collaboratively with heads of department and teachers to develop a whole-school approach to teaching controversial issues, building on current good practice.

Creating a supportive classroom climate

A series of regular staff meetings were held. This was an opportunity for staff to discuss their views about teaching controversial issues. Teachers suggested ways to create an open climate within the classroom based on developing existing good practice. These included:
• establishing ground rules;
• promoting core values;
• using effective questioning to encourage open-ended discussion; and
• managing pupils’ emotional responses.
Developing school guidance on teaching controversial issues

The CRED team developed guidance for teachers, pupils, parents and members of the school Board of Governors. The guidance included:

- a rationale for teaching controversial issues in the school;
- an interpretation of what controversial issues are (see CCEA guidance document Teaching Controversial Issues at Key Stage 3);
- clarification of the roles and responsibilities of each department and teacher;
- curriculum links; and
- teaching approaches, such as:
  - facilitating discussion;
  - developing the competency to skilfully disagree with others;
  - developing communication and thinking skills;
  - emotional development;
  - managing emotional responses; and
  - developing attitudes and dispositions.

Teaching support materials: key cards

The CRED team created a list of attributes, qualities and skills for pupils that they believed would be important for a citizen living in a democratic society. These were based on the school mission statement, aims and values. The CRED team produced two sets of small coloured cards for teachers and pupils, one for attributes and qualities and the other for skills. These were intended to be available for quick reference and as a reminder of expected pupil attitudes and behaviour.

The CRED team also produced another set of teacher cards as prompts on how to respond and deal with certain issues, such as how to respond to inappropriate comments made by a pupil in the corridor or playground.
Building on good practice

The principal, the SLT and the CRED team identified and built on existing examples of good practice of teaching and learning about controversial issues as part of their whole-school approach.

Using connected learning to teach controversial issues

The school’s connected learning projects provide two examples of good practice. The first project involved teachers in Art, English, History, Religious Education and Drama working collaboratively to produce units of work and activities that make learning connections between these subjects. The connected learning units were based on themes from the novel *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*.

The second was the Troubled Tales connected learning project; this involved History, English, ICT and Art. Teachers from New-Bridge and Banbridge High School developed this Facing History project. Year 10 pupils interviewed relatives about their experiences of the ‘Troubles’. Pupils recorded and presented their stories in digital formats and art forms. The project helped pupils to understand the depth of feelings that people have about their past experiences of the conflict and violence. Pupils also realised that some interviewees had unanswered questions and that making sense of the past was part of an ongoing process.

Both projects provided opportunities for pupils to learn about complex, sensitive and often controversial political issues. This encouraged them to view controversial issues from different perspectives. The projects also enabled pupils to develop, transfer and apply their knowledge and skills across subjects and helped them to deepen their understanding of issues.

Pupils displaying and sharing their work from the connected learning project with others.
Collaboration between subjects

Traditionally, controversial issues in Northern Ireland are associated with history, the ‘Troubles’, sectarianism, identity, conflict and commemoration. These topics usually arise in English, Citizenship, History and Religious Education. However, the SLT and the CRED team felt it was important to show that controversial issues are not restricted to these topics and subjects.

Identifying controversial issues in Science and Religious Education

At the start of the 2014 academic year, the SLT and the CRED team asked heads of department and teachers to teach a controversial issue using appropriate strategies and to trial the key cards.

The Science and Religious Education teachers thought it would be interesting to teach about reproduction, genetic engineering and evolution. These topics encourage debate about ethical and moral issues and reveal diverse and opposing viewpoints.

Creating opportunities for group work and developing communication skills

The Science and Religious Education teachers reviewed and developed an existing unit of work for Year 8 called What Makes You U? The teachers provided opportunities for pupils to learn about reproduction, genetic engineering and evolution from Science and Religious Education perspectives. This included enquiry-based group work activities. These focused on developing pupils’ communication skills by providing opportunities to:

• discuss, debate and self-reflect;
• research and interpret evidence and present different viewpoints; and
• express their ideas and opinions with justified reasons.
The activities also enabled pupils to develop their critical thinking skills. Teachers identified effective open-ended questions to stimulate discussion and thinking.

Developing attitudes and dispositions

The teachers selected attitudes and dispositions that could be developed through the lessons/activities. These included:

- concern for others;
- tolerance;
- openness to new ideas; and
- community spirit.

The teachers intended for pupils to develop the above attitudes and dispositions through discussing controversial issues with others. The ground rules established encouraged them to think about others and to be tolerant and understanding of different views. This required pupils to be open-minded and willing to think about issues in new ways. The idea of community spirit encapsulated the school ethos and the importance of inclusion.

Controversial issues and managing pupil responses

Before teaching lessons, the Science and Religious Education teachers discussed why reproduction, genetic engineering and evolution are considered controversial. The teachers considered pupils in their classes and individual sensitivities. They discussed possible pupil responses to questions and how they might deal with them.

The teachers also used the ground rules found in the CCEA guidance document *Teaching Controversial Issues at Key Stage 3* to help establish a supportive learning environment and provide pupils with a safe and secure place to express differences of opinion.
Using active teaching and learning methods

The Science and Religious Education teachers used a variety of teaching and learning methods, including:

• analysing text;
• structured discussion;
• no easy answers board;
• graffiti board;
• four corners debate; and
• spectrum debate.

The RE teacher and pupils exploring the theory of evolution.

The Science and RE teachers and pupils participating in an agree/disagree debate about the origins of humans.
3. **Staff development**

The third area identified in the school’s self-evaluation was the need for professional development on teaching and learning about controversial issues. This was addressed by:

- providing opportunities for staff to discuss and share practice;
- CRED led INSET training days; and
- departmental meetings.

Professional development was also supported by external agencies. Training focused on:

- developing a shared understanding of what makes an issue controversial;
- planning to teach controversial issues:
  - identifying opportunities to develop skills;
  - using effective questioning; and
  - knowing the pupils and anticipating responses.
- avoiding bias when teaching controversial issues;
- managing pupils’ emotional responses;
- supporting pupils to self-reflect and manage their emotions; and
- pedagogy.
Section 4: Evaluation of teaching controversial issues

Teacher views
The SLT and the CRED team evaluated the trial of teaching controversial issues across subjects using a questionnaire and by interviewing heads of department and teachers. The main findings were:

• Thorough planning for teaching and learning about controversial issues was essential.
• Teachers, especially when they were unfamiliar with a certain issue, required more time to research the issue to find and develop resources.
• Selecting and signposting specific skills and teaching and learning strategies was beneficial for pupils and teachers; this helped pupils to focus on their learning and allowed teachers and pupils to evaluate the success of lessons/activities.
• Allowing sufficient time for a class debrief of the issue was initially challenging.
• Using an enquiry-based approach and active teaching and learning methods made the issue more interesting and relevant for pupils.
• While teachers found it challenging to teach unfamiliar issues or use different teaching and learning methods, it encouraged them to try new ideas and strategies.

Pupil views
Pupil views were obtained from lesson evaluations and through discussions with their teachers in plenary sessions. The main findings were:

• Most pupils found learning about controversial issues interesting.
• The majority of pupils found the learning activities enjoyable and motivating.
• Most pupils felt able to express their views.
• Some pupils were uncomfortable with certain issues and less willing to participate in discussion.
• The activities helped pupils to think critically about issues.
• The activities helped pupils to understand others’ views.
Section 5: External agencies

To develop whole-school practice on teaching controversial issues, the principal and the SLT engaged with outside agencies that have expertise in this area.

Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA)

CCEA was engaged in the process of producing new guidance on the teaching of controversial issues and had established a Steering Group to advice on this work. Members of the steering group came from a wide spectrum of educational fields and experience in teaching and developing resources for controversial issues e.g. QUB, ETI, Curriculum Development Unit, Board personnel, and teachers. The school agreed to pilot and trail some of the teaching strategies in Section 7 of the guidance while the Senior Management and CRED teams used Section 4 as a reference point to help develop frameworks and strategies for teaching issue based work.

Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education (NICIE)

The work carried out across the school during Integrated Schools Week each year focused on teaching controversial issues. This was used to inform policy and practice. The teaching resources from the NICIE website Facing the Past Shaping the Future, on the commemoration of significant events 100 years ago, was made available to the History and English staff.

Community Relations Council (CRC)

CRC resources were used on staff development days to share good practice on ethical remembering. CRC guidance was also used to address sensitive and contentious issues that might arise in the school around the commemoration of events.

Facing History

The Facing History project officer was consulted to give advice on facilitation strategies. This built on the work with History and English departments on facilitation strategies on the recent flag issue and the possibility of an enrichment unit for Year 13 pupils on controversial issues.
Section 6: Conclusion

The principal said she believes the work of the SLT, the CRED team and teachers in developing a whole-school approach to teaching controversial issues has been successful. The commitment of the SLT and the CRED team and the willingness of teachers to engage with the developmental process were critical to this success. External agencies also provided valuable guidance and advice that was crucial to developing whole-school policy and practice.

The self-evaluation and development planning process provided an opportunity for staff to revisit and remind themselves about the aims and core values of New-Bridge Integrated College. The aims and values have been reaffirmed and provide a framework for teaching and learning about controversial issues.

In New-Bridge, teaching and learning about controversial issues is about enabling pupils to deepen their understanding of issues, to reflect and think critically, and reflect on their own and the views of others. This helps pupils better understand others and build relationships based on respect, trust and co-operation.

The principal said it was important that young people had opportunities to learn about controversial issues. This supports them to develop the knowledge, understanding and skills necessary for participation and discussion in a democratic society.