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‘We’re going to have to be careful with this one:’ the attitudes and perceptions of student history teachers in relation to teaching controversial topics

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Abstract

This paper reports on research into the attitudes and perceptions of beginning history teachers in relation to teaching controversial and sensitive issues. In April 2007 a UK Department of Education and Skills/ Historical Association report suggested some teachers were avoiding controversial topics in the history classroom.. 32 beginning teachers completed the questionnaire and six were interviewed at the beginning of the PGCE courses. Early findings show the students are unanimous in their desire to teach controversial topics, even when they might conflict with parental or cultural views. However, students showed differences in their approach to teaching such topics.

Introduction

While the flexible national curriculum encourages teachers to choose content likely to resonate in their multicultural classrooms, in practice some have found it difficult to do so. There are several reasons for this, from the relative familiarity of traditional subjects to the fear of misrepresenting certain topics clouded in controversy. (Lord Adonis, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Schools, 2006)

History education often includes areas of study that can prove contentious in terms of society, culture, religion or ethnicity. There are, however, concerns within political circles that such areas are sometimes avoided by teachers in order to steer clear of controversy in the classroom. Lord Adonis has commissioned research on best practice in teaching emotive and controversial history, but examples of best practice may not be enough to overcome avoidance. As an observer at the first meeting of the research group for Teaching Emotive and Controversial History (TEACH), I heard teachers describe their own perceptions on what topics could prove controversial and how they could be dealt with. As I began talking to other history teachers about their experience of controversy in the history classroom, I was struck by the range of responses. Why are some history teachers able and willing to confront such issues in their classrooms, while others would rather avoid the risk? Are attitudes formed according to the individual’s past experience, their ability to take risks or the culture of the department or school? This initial small-scale pilot project focused on the attitudes and perceptions of student teachers as they enter the profession. Research questions included:

- What do student teachers understand by the term ‘controversial issues’ in terms of the history curriculum?

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- How confident do they feel about teaching controversial issues?

Data is still being collected on a third research question on how the attitudes and perceptions of the student teachers change over the course of the PGCE programme.

Background

Traditionally history education involved the imparting of a grand narrative view of the past; it acted as a vehicle for imparting moral values of good citizenship to young British pupils. The 1970s saw the emergence of the Schools History Project heralding a move for pupils to 'do history,' using evidence and coming to personal understandings and judgements concerning the past (Sylvester, 1994). The use of primary evidence had its benefits: 'Material given at second-hand does not readily attach our emotions, our imagination or our commitment; first-hand, primary sources do, if they are handled with care' (Fines, 1994). There was also an opportunity for a broader range of content in the classroom including history 'from below,' women's history and some black history (Claire, 1996; Husbands, 1996). While the advent of the National Curriculum enshrined the use of evidence and interpretation in school history, there were some concerns that an Anglo-centric view of the past was being promoted (Visram, 1994). Since 2001 an increasingly flexible curriculum has also enabled some teachers to encompass a broader view of the past, however it is clear that there is still room for development. HMI have found that pupils' understanding of the connections between historical topics studied and contemporary issues tends to be weak (Ofsted, 2005). It is at this juncture between past and present that controversy can often lie, where the subject area is of topical interest (Holden, 2007).

Research around the teaching of controversial issues stems from the Humanities Curriculum Project (Stenhouse, 1970). Literature written under the threat of a restrictive National Curriculum (Carrington & Troyna, 1988; Wellington, 1986) has recently been renewed with the introduction of Citizenship education and the promise of a more flexible curriculum (Holden, 2007; Oulton, Justin, & Marcus, 2004). There is, however, little research on the teaching of emotive and controversial issues in the history classroom. The failure to provide a multicultural version of British history has repeatedly been highlighted (Bracey, 2006; Edginton, 1982; Grosvenor, 2000; Visram, 1994), but there is little research on why teachers might avoid such areas. This paper explores the attitudes of the student history teachers at the very start of their course to discover whether the attitudes and perceptions student teachers bring with them to teaching explain part of their reluctance to teach such controversial issues. For the purpose of this research project, controversial is defined as in the OED as 'prolonged public disagreement or heated debate.' I am not interested in specifically historiographical controversy, but rather in controversies that may result in 'heated debate' in the classroom; emotive or sensitive subjects where an authoritative view of the past may conflict with what pupils have brought to the classroom (McCully, Pilgrim, Sutherland, & McMinn, 2002).

Methodology

32 student teachers completed questionnaires at the beginning their PGCE course. The questionnaires included 16 historical topics taken from National Curriculum or GCSE textbooks which participants were asked to rank on a scale of 1 (not controversial) to 4 (highly controversial). Participants were also asked to rank factors that contributed to making a topic controversial and rate their own confidence in using a variety of strategies to handle controversial issues in the history classroom including staying neutral and organising a debate. The responses to closed questions were entered into SPSS which yielded descriptive statistics showing the percentage of responses to predetermined answers.

The questionnaires were used to select six teachers for interview from across the range of responses: three males, three females; two mature students; of which some were very confident, some less confident in their attitude to teaching controversial issues. Before they started their school placements, the six students were interviewed for about thirty minutes each using a semi-structured approach. The data was coded using NVivo and analysed in sympathy with grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

As I am one of the tutors on the history PGCE course, there are inevitably power issues that could have led to some skew in responses, but I took care not to select my personal tutees as interview participants. All participants gave their informed consent to the research and were assured that as far as possible confidentiality and anonymity would be respected (Malone, 2003).

The findings

Controversial history

Defining the issues that could prove controversial, as in emotive or sensitive in the history classroom is not a simple task. The wide range of responses shown in figure 1 supports this. Raw data has been included in this table to give a full picture of the findings that averages can mask and the numbers are rather too small to produce many statistically significant results. The Josephine Butler data does not add up to 32 as several participants gave no response for this topic, possibly not knowing who she was. However, interesting patterns do emerge. (See Figure 1)

Themes emerged from the interviews as similar topics were suggested as controversial by the different participants:

Mark: 'the situation in Ireland, perhaps teaching about slavery, apartheid, the Holocaust'

Victoire: 'Stereotypical the holocaust, but also aspects of the crusades can be quite controversial'

Clear themes of religion, in particular Islam and Judaism, ethnicity and race emerged in these selections. However, there was also some indication that dealing with the history

of migrant communities such as ‘black history’ and ‘Irish history’ could be controversial.

Figure 1: student perceptions of controversial topics

	not controversial	←————→		highly controversial
Apartheid in South Africa	3	11	15	3
Arab-Israeli conflict	1	3	11	17
British Empire	8	10	11	3
Irish famine	7	18	6	1
Josephine Butler	8	13	3	0
Oliver Cromwell	17	11	4	0
Rwandan genocide	1	6	22	3
Settling of the American West	11	13	8	0
The Black Death	23	9	0	0
The Crusades	7	6	16	3
The Holocaust	2	3	17	10
The Reformation	12	16	4	0
Trans-Atlantic slave trade	2	11	13	6
Troubles in Northern Ireland	1	7	12	12
Use of nuclear weapons	2	7	16	7
Vietnam war	2	13	15	2

Factors affecting controversiality

In the questionnaire, four factors were constantly rated as important in affecting whether a topic would be controversial in the history classroom. Firstly the ethnic background of pupils in the class, secondly the religion of pupils in the class, thirdly the possibility of a personal connection with pupil experience and fourthly the political allegiance of parents. These findings were supported in the interviews where all participants thought that pupil background was a key factor in whether or not an issue would be controversial in the history classroom. As Helen said, ‘it depends on the class you’re with.’

Bob went further:

‘I think you need to take into account the particular background or sensitivities that they might have in particular subjects, that might conflict with what they’ve been taught at home’.

The ethnic and religious background of pupils was specified repeatedly as an important factor.

Victoire: ‘it’s very difficult because you have a multicultural society, how do you explain to them that they [the crusaders] thought Christianity was right if you’re in Birmingham with a majority Asian population who come to your school.’

However, race is still seen as an issue in schools with less of an ethnic mix. Helen was concerned that some children might have parents 'who have a very racist attitude.'

Justification

It would appear that the student teachers felt justified in teaching controversial issues in the history classroom. 94% of the cohort responded 'yes' when asked whether controversial history should be taught; the rest responded with 'maybe.' When asked whether it is appropriate for history teachers to teach topics in a way that may conflict with family values/ beliefs or cultural values/ beliefs, 34.4% circled 4 on a scale of 1 to 4 where 4 was 'appropriate.' 43.8% circled 3.

In the interviews, however, justification seemed to come across in diverse ways from the different teachers. Jane, who had experience in schools as a teaching assistant, was an ardent supporter of the teaching of controversial issues:

'I like the idea of doing controversial issues and attacking things that others see as a bit, do I touch on that because...'

She used terms such as 'attacking,' 'struggle,' 'tackling' suggesting that she saw a challenge here, but also perceived a need: 'It might be difficult, but I think you have to attempt to do something.' Jane seems to see the teaching of controversial issues as a way of tackling some of the ills in society.

Craig, a father and a mature student sees the role of the teacher as more guiding than challenging:

'I think you should be involved in controversial issues and to guide them, to inform them, to let them make good decisions, not just idiosyncratic ones, you know on what they've picked up on just what their parents say or people that are close to them.'

These differences in justification for the teaching of controversial issues could affect the eventual success of teaching such topics in the history classroom.

Confidence

At this stage of the PGCE, before the commencement of block teaching placements, the student teachers appeared confident concerning their own ability to handle controversial issues in the history classroom, including staying neutral and dealing with holocaust denial. Questionnaire data highlighted two areas in which they were distinctly less confident: dealing with parents and using historical sources critical of a particular religion. Male participants were generally more confident than females – a difference that grew with age. These findings were not statistically significant, but remain interesting as they were supported in the interview data. Helen, a mature student was the least confident, but perhaps the most realistic of the participants:

'At the moment I'd say no, I wouldn't feel very confident standing there, being the person in the middle, but again I think that comes with knowing your class, with time, the confidence and with support.'

However, being confident did not signal a simplistic naivety about the challenges of handling controversial issues.

Matt: 'I think I would be confident enough to tackle that [white supremacist views on a website], but I think it would be very difficult to get that across to someone who might not see the nuances.'

Several of the students recognised this complexity in teaching the more sensitive aspects of the past, but at this early stage in the course, this did not seem to dissuade them.

Multiple perspectives

There was a consensus among the interview participants that a range of views or interpretations should be promoted in the history classroom. However, the individuals differed in their approaches. Bob, having come straight from a good university with a full history degree, had a historiographical approach:

'You need to do it in a kind of open manner and say this is one interpretation. There are a number of interpretations of this.'

However, not all views should be treated equally. On the subject of holocaust denial Bob said that he wouldn't give it the credibility of being a valid historical interpretation as 'in that way it does conflict with the evidence there is out there,' but does add that 'you need to be aware of it and touch upon the ideas that there are some people who hold this particular line of thought.'

In contrast, Craig, while still determined to have a range of views in the classroom, seemed to have a different, more moral agenda:

'Perhaps if you're talking about Islamic culture everything they get in the playground or at home or in the press is mostly negative, but as historians can we give a positive view? Is there another side? A more balanced view?'

Helen, less confident in her ability to deal with controversial issues in the classroom, takes a more narrative, polar approach:

'At the top of the class you can say, right, we're going to do this subject and this is the way I want to teach it. At the end we will have time for you to put your views and we will discuss your views.... I will teach it my side and you will have your side and ultimately we all have to make our own decisions as to where we stand.'

This range of approaches could suggest confusion or at least dispute over appropriate ways of including multiple perspectives in the history classroom. To what extent is it

necessary to access the views of different historians and what weight should be given to the views of pupils?

Discussion

Although these research findings may seem intuitive and although they are only based on a small number of participants, they are still significant as current research on teaching emotive and controversial history rests on assumptions concerning the attitudes and perceptions of history teachers. The student history teachers who took part in this study feel that the teaching of controversial history is justified and appear eager to carry out that teaching. This raises questions of teacher development if Lord Adonis is to be believed and some history teachers are avoiding controversial topics. Barton and Levstik have suggested that in America, socio-cultural pressures of content coverage and classroom control prevent a full exploration of historical evidence and interpretation (Barton & Levstik, 2004). Research is needed into whether this is the case in England and how professional development can be most effective in helping teachers overcome such pressures.

Multiple perspectives

The student teachers in this study were convinced that one answer to teaching controversial history was the presence of multiples perspectives in the history classroom. At this early point in their careers, however, they were less clear about how they might achieve this disciplinary approach. Seixas, while evaluating collective memory, disciplinary and postmodern approaches to history education, argues that it is still possible to establish a complex, mutiperspectival historical truth for our time. He argues that 'to deny students an education in those methods... is the exclude them from full participation in contemporary culture.' (Seixas, 2000) [p35]. However, HMI have pointed to the teaching of historical interpretations as one of the weakest points in history pedagogy (Ofsted, 2004). This raises important points for ITE and professional development.

Student teachers as individuals

The participants had distinct views on a number of the issues raised in this study, a finding supported by others who have researched student history teachers (Virta, 2002). This highlights the need to discover the values and views each student teacher brings to a PGCE course about history, education and broader social and political topics. The purpose does not have to be to change views and opinions, but rather to acknowledge and discuss them. As Pendry found, if views on the discipline of history are not discussed, then they are unlikely to change before the end of the course (Pendry, 1997).

The affective dimension

Various questions are raised by the choice of topics identified as controversial by the participants. There are clear themes of ethnicity and race running through these choices. It is necessary to uncover why such themes are seen as challenging in the history classroom. Is it a lack of subject knowledge, a lack of resources or something else?

Themes of religion and race can be highly emotive and it is possible that it is this affective dimension to teaching that the student teachers know will be difficult. This is supported by the work of McCully in Northern Ireland, clearly a more contested society where emotions about religion run high (McCully et al., 2002). However, with stories concerning black youth and Islamic dress consistently in the media at the moment, it may be that such issues will also be highly emotive in English classrooms, not least because an official 'textbook' view, aiming to be value neutral, may clash with views picked up from the media. Research on the emotive reactions of pupils of Afro-Caribbean descent and their mothers to the teaching of the triangular slave trade supports this and raises the need to enfranchise all students within history classroom (Traill, 2007).

Knowing the pupils

Knowing the pupils better was repeatedly offered by all the participants as a way to overcome the challenges of teaching controversial issues. This throws up obvious issues for the student teacher, especially in the increasing number of schools where history is only taught once a week. After religion and ethnicity, the key factor to cause controversiality was 'a personal connection with pupil experience' and indeed religion and ethnicity can be seen to form part of this umbrella cause. At the same time the revised history national curriculum for 2008 puts a focus on teaching 'personal history and family history;' conferences such as Why History Matters at the Institute of Historical Research focus on making history more relevant and meaningful to pupils and authors in professional journals focus on relevance (Harris & Rea, 2006; IHR, 2007). If good history teaching is where teachers make a connection with pupil experience, and controversial history is where teachers make a connection with pupil experience, then it is essential that teachers are prepared to teach controversial history and not avoid it. If history education is increasingly restricted to one hour a week, perhaps teachers do not know pupils well enough to take the risks necessary to introduce potentially emotive and controversial issues. Therefore not only is history education being marginalised in the amount of time it has to cover a wide range of topics and instil a disciplinary understanding in pupils, but the limit in time could itself lead to the history taught being bland and unrelated to pupil experience. If the government wants history teachers to address controversial topics then it needs to ensure that history is given the time and status it deserves on the school timetable.

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