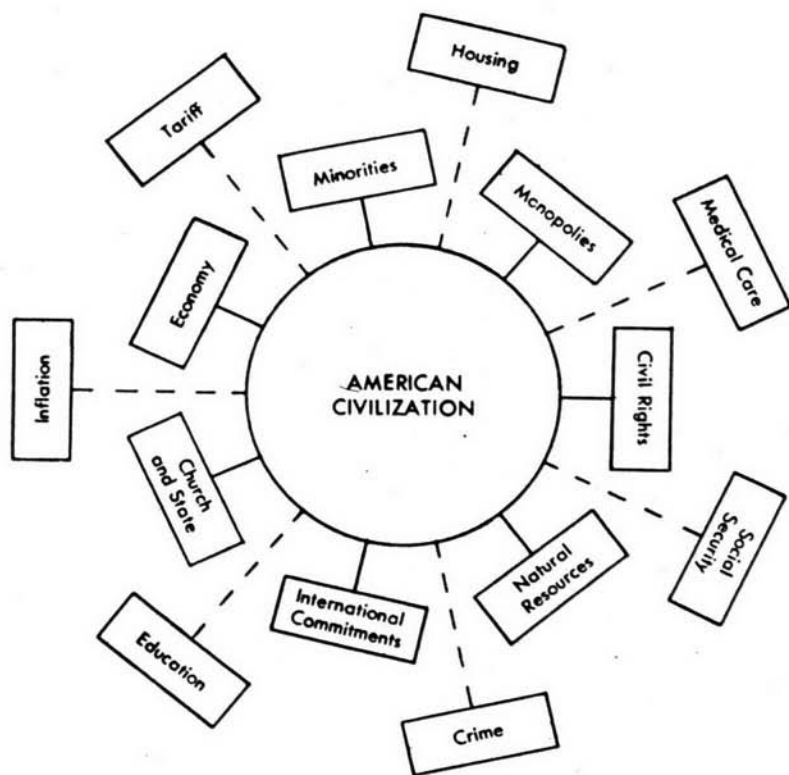


Living Issues Belong in the School

EDUARD C. LINDEMAN

The basic questions of American life with which teachers and learners must concern themselves are clearly stated by Eduard C. Lindeman, professor of social philosophy at the New York School of Social Work, Columbia University. Mr. Lindeman not only defines these issues and their importance to the curriculum but indicates the responsibility of all who call themselves educators in insuring to today's children and youth education for living.



CONTROVERSY is an integral part of democratic experience and hence so-called controversial issues belong in the school. Any other conclusion would imply that education is somewhat insulated from life.

So-called, used as an adjective in the above sentence needs some explanation. Every issue is controversial, that is, subject to varying interpretations. That's what makes it an issue. I have a feeling that this awkward and ungram-

matical phrase—*controversial issues*—has become a propaganda term. It seems to imply that there are innocent issues which are allowable, even for young people, and others which are dangerous. Innocent issues are those about which people differ but in no important sense. It is when differences become important and controversy takes on a fundamental character that the timid get frightened. They wish to shield children and youth from such issues because they, the adults, would also like to avoid coming to grips with fundamentals.

These timid adults should remember that young people do not scare as easily as do their elders. They should also keep in mind that young people are probably capable of clearer intellectual insights because they are less driven by personal and class interests. They are not, in other words, committed in ways which render independent thinking difficult.

No Room for *Verboten*

It will be seen from the above that I believe education can become a lively affair only when conducted in a free atmosphere, with a minimum of signs on which the word *Verboten* occurs. Contemporary issues belong especially in the classroom. But such issues should not be *dumped* into the classroom. Pupils should not be made to feel that life is calm and simple so long as one studies arithmetic, rhetoric, composition, geography, or history, but that on special occasions it becomes exciting because *now* they will study issues. Issues permeate the whole of life and hence should permeate the curriculum. The chief purpose in assimilating and correlating subject matter is to enable the student

to deal with issues, to live a decisive life. Subjects are significant primarily in relation to issues.

Teachers for the Times

The teacher who introduces issues in his teaching requires specialized training. While I believe thoroughly in the principle that issues belong in the school, I am by no means convinced that there are now many teachers available who can be entrusted to weave issue-discussions profitably into the learning process. All too often the teaching of issues is delegated to issue-minded teachers regardless of whether they know how to guide pupils. They may be the very worst persons for this task because they are likely to be persons with high emotional potentials, and this is precisely what education should save children from—an emotion-charged attitude towards contemporary issues.

The first responsibility of the teacher who guides the study of issues is to search out the varieties of facts required in order to understand an issue. How many of the facts involved carry the authority of science? How many fall below the level of tested facts? How many are mere assumptions? Which facts wear masks and are dressed up in such manner as to confuse? How much propaganda has been done on the issue before it gets to the classroom, and how is this to be detected? What facts are absent? This fact-hunting procedure is somewhat laborious and many teachers would prefer to plunge straight into a discussion of solutions. It is at this very point that they might readily disqualify themselves, not merely in the minds of the pupils but in the minds of citizens as well.

A Task for Teacher Education

Perhaps I have already said enough to indicate that there are many difficulties involved in incorporating the treatment of living issues into a curriculum, at least enough to warn teachers colleges that they too have an obligation if this desired task is to be competently performed.

Among the skills to be learned by the teacher who guides the study of contemporary issues is that of distinguishing between two types of issues: those which are primary in the sense that they have a history of chronic persistence, and those which are derivative in the sense that they are impeded by the nation's incapacity to deal effectively with its primary problems.

For example, one test which applies to the United States and its peculiar system in which the power of the judiciary is superior to that of either the executive or legislative branches of government is this: the primary issues sooner or later (and usually with cyclical regularity) pass through the higher courts and finally reach the Supreme Court. This means that we are unable to determine the right and the wrong involved and hence we defer to that remarkable document, the Constitution, in the hope that, if correctly interpreted by the nine justices of the Supreme Court, a clear, moral resolution will be found.

These chronic issues also appear regularly in the platforms of political parties where they are expressed in the high and lofty language of moral aspiration. One also discovers intimations of the significance of these primary issues in the writings of those historians who make use of philosophical perspectives.

The Issues of First Importance

Among the primary issues of American civilization I should include the following:

1. Control of *monopolies*, plus the continuing rivalry for power as between government on the one hand and business on the other
2. Conservation of *natural resources* which, because of soil depletion, includes such questions as subsidies to agriculture
3. Treatment of *minorities* with special reference, obviously, to our Negro citizens
4. Maintaining and expanding *civil rights*
5. Separation of *church and state*
6. Degrees of *economic control* which should or should not be exercised by government
7. *Isolationism* versus acceptance and fulfillment of international commitments.

Some are economic

An analysis of the above issues will quickly reveal that three of the issues (1, 2, and 6) are definitely economic in character, and when considered in combination indicate that we have not yet determined what type of economy would be most suitable in the light of our democratic traditions, our heterogeneous population, and our relative sense of values.

From a pedagogical viewpoint it seems to me that number 2, natural resources, is by all odds the most strategic issue of this cluster and the most appropriate to be confronted by children and youth. Teaching may begin with the simple ecological equation—Man and his environment.

Man's future depends upon the interaction of sun, water, and soil in the production of plants which are assimilable by animals, including Man. Soil fertility is very unevenly distributed in

a thin layer of top-soil. In the United States approximately one-third of this fertility has already been wasted through extractive farming, soil erosion, and dust storms. Destruction of forests causes floods and a lowering of the underground water-table so that less and less water is available to Man for food production. In short, a wealth of convincing facts is available to demonstrate that we are, in a sense, "digging our own graves" and yet we seem to be incapable of checking this disastrous waste.

A ready-made laboratory for the exploration of this issue is within easy reach of every American school. One need not walk far to find a barren gully where once plants and trees were able to flourish. All the disciplines of knowledge might become instruments for a clearer understanding of this issue: history, geography, chemistry, physics, economics, biology, zoology, et cetera, et cetera. Here, in other words, we have an issue which may be said to underlie all other issues since, if Man cannot conserve his natural resources, it will make little difference what type of economy or government prevails.

The humanities have a place

Issues 3, 4, and 5 belong rather to the sphere of the humanities. We presume to be a liberal, humane, democratic people. Why then do we encounter so many difficulties in the realm of human relations? Why do we persistently discriminate against certain citizens on account of their color, race, religion, or national origin? Why do we experience so many barriers in fulfilling the mandate of the Bill of Rights of our Constitution? And why did our forefathers

find it less difficult than we do to keep the affairs of the Church and those of Government separated?

These are extremely important issues which are part and parcel of the chronic difficulty of making democracy work, and I see every reason why children and youth should be exposed to their implications under the auspices of the school. Indeed, the public school which seeks to shield pupils from these issues performs an actual betrayal. It cheats its pupils who have a right to learn reality and it certainly cheats the citizens who, through taxation, make the public school possible.

Power implies responsibility

The fateful character of issue number 7 must have become plain to all teachers in recent months: isolationism is the habitual mood of the American people but we now find ourselves in the position of being unable to adhere to its dictates. Our international commitments are the direct consequence of our economic and military power. We have moved into an area of responsibility for which our past experience has left us unprepared. If we cannot utilize our strengths on behalf of world peace, then there will be no peace.

By what means is it possible to inform future generations of this situation? If this issue does not belong in the public school, where does it belong? Some will, no doubt, answer, "It belongs in the Department of State and in the United States Senate." Yes, so it does, by order of the Constitution. But are these two organs of government to function as though they were independent of public opinion? In a democracy there can be no issues of State

which do not rest ultimately upon the will and consent of the people. Hence, there are no issues which are not properly the business of public education.

The Inevitable Derivatives

I have defined secondary issues as those which are difficult of solution chiefly because of our inability to resolve the primary issues. These derivative issues will have shorter histories and will fluctuate with time. Although they may also include important juridical and constitutional elements, these questions are most frequently encountered in the form of proposed legislation. Among issues of this type I should include the following:

- Housing and slum clearance
- Medical care
- Social security
- Crime and delinquency
- Federal aid to education
- Taxation and tariffs
- Inflation

These are certainly contemporary issues concerning which the American people will be obliged sooner or later to reach conclusions and they are controversial. There is no way of knowing how the American people would vote if they were allowed to vote on the specific issues themselves and not on the issues as embedded in partisan politics. But that is probably as it should be for in a democracy all important questions get themselves incorporated in politics and it is through politics that these issues will finally be resolved. Our immediate problem is whether issues of this type should also be included in the public school curriculum.

It will be recognized at once that these issues arise from needs which are im-

minent. We find ourselves as a nation in a paradoxical position. We admit that families should, in order to become good families, be adequately sheltered but we cannot, somehow, build houses.

We admit that health is a primary requisite but we seem to be incapable of devising a plan whereby medical care can be extended to those who need it most. We know that security against the hazards of modern industrial life are beneficial to individuals, to families, and to society itself but we are restrained from action because of our attachment to the ideal of self-reliance. We should like to free ourselves from the stigma of an incredible crime and delinquency record but we do not know where to begin.

We would prefer an educational system which would offer more or less equal opportunities to all children regardless of where they happen to be born but we fear that federal funds utilized for this equalizing purpose might lead to educational regimentation. We know that so-called protective tariffs impede the free flow of goods and thereby decrease world trade but we fear that an abandonment of the practice would lower our standard of living. We know that our existing principles of lowering taxes when incomes are high is unreasonable but we cannot, somehow, divorce in our minds the problem of government financing from household or business financing and hence we pursue our error. We know that inflation will, if unchecked, lead to a gigantic depression in which we will all suffer but we fear that government control over prices will lead us towards a police state.

In each instance the chief deterrent

to action is fear, and it would be unwise to assert that all of the fears mentioned are unfounded. We ought to fear governmental regimentation of education and we ought to fear the decline of the spirit of self-reliance. We ought to fear both because bureaucracy is an enemy of democracy—and self-reliance is an ennobling virtue. But the persistence of these fears will give us no aid in solving such problems as have been mentioned above. The threat to democracy which comes from slums and inadequate housing, from gross inequalities in education, and from a widespread feeling of insecurity is as formidable as the fears which impede our action in these spheres.

The Solution Is in Experimentation

Fears may be dissipated in only one way: through experimentation. We must find a way of equalizing educational opportunity without accepting bureaucratic regimentation. We must find a way of providing a minimum level of social security without depriving our citizens of self-respect and, hence, lowering their self-reliance.

These ways, democratic ways of doing what has become essential to our survival, can be found only through trial and error. This is one of the many reasons why children and youth should become acquainted with issues of this type at an early age, at least before they have come to distrust experimentation itself. When democracies lose the experimental mood they are already far along in their decline. Theodore Roosevelt's "New Nationalism," Woodrow Wilson's "New Freedom," and Franklin Roosevelt's "New Deal" were all healthy signs of the fact that the Ameri-

can people wish to try something new. In other words, signs of youth.

"Following the elder wisdom we cherish likewise the new; we stay pioneers. . . ."

This is a democratic discipline which one learns in youth or not at all. So again I come to the clear conclusion that issues of this secondary type belong also in the curriculum of the public school, the one universal institution in which democratic habits may be acquired by all.

No Final Answer Available

A final word to those persons of our public school system who are entrusted with the responsibility for curriculum revisions: beware of *the* curriculum. I have noticed that in recent times educational leaders have appeared to be searching for *the* curriculum, *the* course of study which is superior and which, consequently, must be accepted by all and protected against further revisions. This is a futile wish. In a dynamic world there can be no static curriculum. Curriculum revision is a continuous task which will never be completed.

No Vested Interests Allowed

A second tendency causes me a similar concern—the assumption that some teachers or administrators are especially gifted with respect to curriculum matters and that these specialists will finally exercise control of this sphere. I hope this trend can be checked before the unconscious tendency towards a division of labor creates a disorganic separation between those teachers who know what should be taught and those who teach what they are told to teach. Specialized skills are no doubt required for

curriculum revisions, but the most important of these skills should be that of knowing what is going on in the world.

The person who should lead in curriculum revisions is he who knows how to comprehend and interpret social change. This person should be something of a philosopher who combines two varieties of wisdom: that which comes from the knowledge of scientists and that which derives from the experience of the folk.

It has often occurred to me that perhaps one of the most effective methods for a continuing process of curriculum revision would be to have in every community a panel of representative citizens who would meet regularly with teachers and administrators and thus, in joint conference, arrive at suggestions leading to experimentation. By

"representative" citizens I do not mean those who have consistently meddled in school affairs. On the contrary, I mean citizens who in their lives represent the widest range of interests, occupations, formal educational experience, and income; in short, citizens who represent the community's democratic spirit.

Such a group of citizens might even, upon occasion, save the school administration from some of the inane curriculum changes which are forced upon the school by pressure groups. A curriculum leader working with such a group would soon have at its disposal a reservoir of knowledge and wisdom upon which he could place a far greater reliance than he might give to the specialist who thinks only of curriculum matters. Perhaps what I am striving to say is that curriculum affairs should not become a vested interest.

Our Values, Our Decisions, and Our Action

EDWARD KRUG

Readers of *EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP* will remember the splendid statement last October by Edward Krug advocating a more vigorous academic freedom. We welcome this second article which gives concise guides to applying our values in democratic action in order to meet effectively the conflicts and controversy in schools and society at this crucial time. The author is associate professor of education at the University of Wisconsin, Madison.

WE HAVE COME BACK to our teaching jobs this fall in a world more than ever torn by social controversy and conflict. We will have to make decisions

and take action in relation to these realities in thousands of American communities. It is our responsibility to base these decisions and actions on the values

Copyright © 1948 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.