

**Excerpts from *The Political Classroom: Evidence and Ethics in Democratic Education*,
Diana Hess and Paula McAvoy**

The "*political education paradox*," contrasts the need to provide students with a nonpartisan political education on the one hand with the need to prepare them to participate in the actual, highly partisan political community on the other. Part of the ethical challenge of teaching about politics is determining where political education ends and partisan proselytizing begins (4).

Because classrooms are unusual political spaces, introducing political thinking to students in a way that is fair, age appropriate, and culturally sensitive, and that, in the end, prepares them for democratic life, requires teachers to make ethical choices. These include: Which issues will I address in my curriculum? How will I present them? What am I trying to accomplish? And how do my own opinions about this issue come into play?

Many teachers choose to avoid using political deliberations and discussions with students, often because they are unsure about how to negotiate the accompanying pedagogical challenges. Further deterring teachers is the increasingly polarized climate outside schools. Fear of parental and public backlash leads some teachers to retreat to lectures and the textbook (6).

Selecting Issues to discuss

[Hess and McAvoy explored three possible criteria for selecting issues to discuss with students and selected one as most appropriate]. The *politically authentic criterion* distinguishes between what is bandied about in general society as a matter of controversy and that which has entered the authentic political sphere of democratic decision-making. Using this standard, political issues are controversial when they have traction in the public sphere, appearing on ballots, in courts, within political platforms, in legislative chambers and as part of political movements. According to the political authenticity criterion, if these issues are included in the curriculum, they should be presented to students as controversial [or "open", as opposed to "closed" or "settled"]. This aligns with the aims of the political classroom, which seeks to develop in students an understanding of the political world in which they live, a willingness to deliberate issues with an eye toward fairness, a capacity to develop their own (reasonable) views, and an orientation to and preparation for active engagement in the political debates of their time. Using the political sphere as a guide to identifying controversial political issues is a helpful way of determining which issues should be presented as controversial in the political classroom (168-169).

Should teachers share their political views with students?

Teachers' Views

1. Teachers were divided about whether it is appropriate to share their views with their students, with 50% saying sharing is appropriate and 50% saying it is not.
2. The teachers who opposed sharing were most often concerned about influencing students' views about the issues being discussed. There are two worries with "influencing." First, sharing a view will cause students to adopt that view. Second, students could feel coerced to express agreement with the teacher-perhaps to get a better grade.
3. Teachers in favor of sharing identified some educational value in letting students know where they stand. For example, a teacher who explained in detail how he came to hold his views by explaining what evidence and values he found most convincing could model for students how to

reason through a complex issue. Most teachers who found value in sharing also felt they were able to present competing views fairly. Others who valued sharing felt that it was more respectful to students to reveal a bias than try to hide it.

Evidence in Favor of Sharing

1. When asked about their social studies teacher during the post-survey at the end of the course, 79% of students thought it was fine for teachers to share personal views. About 77% did not think sharing would cause them to adopt the teacher's view.
2. We did not find evidence that classes of students were moving to align with their teacher's ideological views, though we note that students and teachers in Like-Minded Schools were largely aligned from the beginning of the course. This suggests that alignment between ethos of the school and the community in which one is coming of age can effectively shape the political orientations of young people.
3. Students were supportive of teachers who "share," but they did not support teachers who "push," "preach," or "force" their opinions onto students. That is, students were not in favor of teachers who use the classroom for political proselytizing.
4. High-SES students were significantly less likely to believe that teacher's views would cause them to change their minds.

Evidence Against Sharing

1. A total of 41% of students suspected that when a teacher shares, other students will change their minds.
2. The 23% of students who thought that they were likely to change their views to align with those of the teacher were more likely to be low-SES students and students with low scores on our measure of political knowledge.
3. Students in classrooms in which the teacher did not share enjoyed feeling like they have to "think more" about the issues and work harder to figure out the issues "for ourselves."
4. Students were significantly more likely to believe that they had a responsibility to participate in classes when the teacher did not share her views.

Evidence That Points in Both Directions

1. Students were overwhelmingly supportive of their own teacher's policy related to sharing--whatever it was--and they remained supportive in the longitudinal follow-ups. In the first follow-up survey, for example, 297 students agreed with their teacher's policy, 12 disagreed, and 23 were not sure.
2. Students wanted to feel that they were figuring out what they think about issues; some felt that knowing the teacher's view helped with this process, while others thought it interfered.
3. There was no clear consensus in teacher practice. About 48% of teachers reported that they did share their opinions. About 54% of the students said their teacher shared, while 37% said their teacher did so only when directly asked by students.