Tackling Controversial Issues in Primary Education: Perceptions and Experiences of Student Teachers

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Abstract: This paper considers the nature and definition of controversial issues in primary education, exploring how they may be deemed controversial in different ways according to context. Drawing on research undertaken with student teachers in their final year of study at universities in England, it explores the issues that they feel apprehensive about facing in their first teaching post and those that they feel it is important to explore with children. It identifies issues relating to relationships, religion and belief and bereavement as being of significant concern, suggesting priorities for teacher training courses and contrasting these with research undertaken a decade earlier.

Keywords: controversial issues; primary education; teacher training; student teachers

1. Introduction

It is timely to review how those training to be teachers are equipped to explore potentially controversial issues with the children in their care. It is now over thirty years since the introduction of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNHCHR 1989), the first legally binding international instrument to incorporate the full range of human rights—civil, cultural, economic, political and social. This convention highlights that children are more than objects directed by their parents and for whom decisions are made. Rather they are human beings with their own rights, views and voice. In addition, it is now over thirty years since the first major texts on teaching controversial issues were published (see, for example, Stradling et al. 1984; Wellington 1986; Troyna and Carrington 1988), over twenty years since the Crick Report (QCA 1998) set out the case for citizenship education and a decade since my own work on tackling controversial issues in primary education was published (Woolley 2010).

As I argued a decade ago, the issues explored in this article are controversial for a range of reasons (Woolley 2010, 2011). Many relate to Cole's (2008) notion of 'isms' and phobias that include classism, racism/xenoracism, xenophobia, sexism, disablism, homophobia, biphobia, transphobia and Islamophobia. I have argued consistently that teachers need to be aware of such 'isms' and phobias in order to create inclusive and welcoming classrooms, founded on an understanding of the importance of student voice, principles of democracy and a sense of the value and unique contribution that each individual brings to a school environment. It must be noted that these 'isms' and phobias can, at times, be used to stifle discussion, where particular groups use them to label others as, for example, "racists" in order silence opponents. In this article they are used to identify attitudes that can be divisive and undermine the appreciation of diversity and equality issues in society.

This article explores the nature of such controversial issues, before exploring the apprehensions of final-year student teachers considering the issues they will face in their first employment. It also

considers their recall of the issues that were addressed during their course of training before identifying recommendations for the development of high-quality initial teacher education.

1.1. Defining Controversial Issues

Issues can be controversial for a range of reasons. First, the age-appropriateness of subject content is a common area of concern both for practitioners in the children's workforce but also for carers and parents. To this I add stage-appropriateness, as not all children develop at the same rate according to chronological age (Mason and Woolley 2019). This concept is often allied to the notion of childhood innocence. Erricker (2003) suggests that the 'fantasy of childhood innocence legitimates the fantasy of adult power' by which adults seem to control children and young people's values and behaviours in order to maintain social norms. By seeking to keep the child innocent, the adult stifles their opportunities to interact critically with the world around them and to engage with matters of interest to themselves. The notion of childhood innocence is thus sometimes used by adults to avoid dealing with controversial or potentially embarrassing subjects, thus protecting the adult more than the child. The debate about whether sex education should be included in the primary school curriculum, and the extent of its coverage, provides one example of where a spectrum of strongly held and carefully argued viewpoints can occur. For example, Mason (2010) argues that being brave with sex and relationship education by providing a structured programme that facilitates children's comprehension of some of the purposes of bodily changes as they grow and mature stands in contrast to the view that children only need to know about the changes associated with puberty and that knowledge of sexual activity can wait. Significantly, twenty years ago Crick (QCA 1998) argued that children need to address controversial issues in order for them to develop the skills necessary to deal with them knowledgably, sensibly, tolerantly and morally. Teachers need to be equipped to develop such skills with their learners in order that age- and stage-appropriate learning can be facilitated. However, Hess (2004) found that there was a mismatch between what learners wanted to explore with regard to controversial issues and what teachers felt equipped and able to deal with.

Secondly, issues may be controversial because of their subject content. It may be that these are contentious because it is possible for different individuals to hold rationally deduced and heartfelt opinions that contrast significantly with those of others. Dearden (1981, p. 38) stated that "a matter is controversial if contrary views can be held on it without those views being contrary to reason." Examples include those on whether experimentation should take place on human embryos, the availability of abortion or divorce, the introduction of same-sex marriage or whether religion should be a part of the school curriculum. By my definition, a controversial issue must be addressed through reasoned reflection, debate and evaluation (Woolley 2011). It is not enough for it to stimulate disagreement, it must be the result of reasoned and evidence-based critical reflection. Further, such issues can be controversial because they arouse great public interest, involve competing values and interests and deal with political sensitivity (CCEA 2015). This necessitates teachers being aware of their role in presenting or discussing such issues with children, aware of their own opinions and biases (where they exist) and able to help children to develop their own viewpoints in a thoughtful, critically reflective and increasingly mature manner.

2. Literature Overview

Over twenty years ago the Crick Report (QCA 1998, p. 57) identified that: 'Controversial issues are important in themselves, and to omit informing about and discussing them is to leave a wide and significant gap in the educational experience of young people'.

Crick was effectively the 'father' of modern citizenship education. His report informed subsequent developments in the subject and provided a foundational argument to justify tackling controversial issues with children and young people. Subsequently, educators have engaged with the aims and purposes of citizenship education seeking to apply these to changing foci and needs within society. Westheimer (2008) argued that students need to acquire thinking skills in order to allow them to solve social problems and improve society, enabling them to be socially engaged, democratic and ethical citizens. Associated with this is the concept that education should be

impactful, facilitating learning and supporting children and young people in the development of the skills of critical reflection and mutual appreciation. Similarly, Oxfam (2018, p. 2) argue that one certainty alongside an uncertain future, is that children and young people will be faced with "decisions about a wide range of issues that provoke strong, varied and often contradictory responses." They identify teachers as having a key role in supporting children to develop the skills necessary to face such challenges, challenging their own views and preconceptions through the process. Indeed, they are not expected to have all the answers, and activities may lead to more questions than they resolve. The fundamental aim is to help learners to develop the skills to think critically and "dig deeper into exploring values and attitudes towards challenging issues with consideration and respect for others" (Oxfam 2018, p. 8).

2.1. Freedom of Speech

Amnesty International identifies that human rights, which consist of the core moral principles and legal instruments of most societies, are the 'principles of equality, dignity and respect for the person which are generally considered to be non-controversial' (Amnesty 2011, p. 1). A tension this creates is when the human right to freedom of speech facilitates debate around controversial issues, leading to the potential for disagreement and potentially compromise in order to find ways forward.

Under the leadership of Prime Minister David Cameron, a focus on Fundamental British Values (FBV) was developed in England, building on curriculum developments from the earlier Blair (1997–2007) and Brown (2007–2010) Labour governments. Guidance published by the Department for Education (DfE 2014b) stated that teachers should promote the 'fundamental British values of democracy, rule of law, individual liberty, mutual respect and tolerance for those of different faiths and beliefs'. This wording mirrored that in the counter-extremist Prevent strategy of 2011. 'Thus, there is a clear link between anti-radicalisation, anti-extremism and the requirement that schools promote British values' (Vincent 2019, p. 17). This creates an agenda behind the more overt values that are being promoted and a tension between the intentions of educators and those of policymakers.

There has been a particular reaction to the notion of nationalism indicated in the title FBV, with many questioning why the values are specifically 'British' rather than Western, universal or human-rights values (Lockley-Scott 2019b). In effect, this infers that those who do not identify as British are 'other' and potentially hold different values. Indeed,

> The 'British' aspect, although seemingly inclusive of all those living in this country, could imply racialized white Britishness and also imply reductive cultural adherence. The notion of 'values', often mistaken in classrooms for symbols of English culture such as teacups or the Queen, become conflated with nationalism or patriotism rather than being understood as a set of positive guidelines for living together as a society. (Lockley-Scott 2019b, p. 364)

Oxfam identifies this tension, stating that: '… teachers have a responsibility to provide safe spaces for classroom discussion and when doing so they are expected to explore these issues in relation to current government policies' (Oxfam 2018, p. 4). However, the debate about what views are permissible in classrooms, and the extent to which children and young people can explore a spectrum of ideas whilst maintaining respect for others continues to cause debate in education circles. The UN Convention asserts a child's right to express their views:

The child shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to speak, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print…" (UNHCHR 1989, Article 13).

However, this clearly has limits in terms of expressing extremist views or inciting hatred. In the context of England, the Equality Act (2010) identifies nine protected characteristics, subsequently enshrined in the National Curriculum (DfE 2014a) of which schools must be mindful. For example, when views about sexual orientation and those stemming from religion and belief conflict, significant tensions can be created. The head of the national inspection agency, Ofsted, suggested

that the way to solve such tensions is to learn to live with compromise. That is not an easy path to tread when views are heartfelt and sincerely held.

Speaking at the 40th anniversary celebration of the Muslim Teachers' Association (1 April 2019), Ofsted Chief Inspector Amanda Spielman outlined that:

We all know that with dialogue sometimes comes disagreement. And it can even take us into uneasy territory, where it's easier not to talk about difficult issues. That is particularly true when for some people religious belief comes into conflict with elements of equalities law or the government's approach to British values… It must be better to engage in calm discussions in order to find a sensible middle ground–one that means children are prepared for life in a diverse, modern, progressive country like ours, but it's done in a sensitive and careful manner that respects the concerns of age, religion or any other background or context. In such circumstances dialogue can be our ally. It is through dialogue that we advance understanding and find common solutions. (Ofsted and Spielman 2019).

This optimistic approach to the power of dialogue belies the difficulties faced in specific circumstances by local communities. However, engaging in the process has the potential to work toward resolution, or perhaps compromise. Amnesty (2011) argues that the benefits of engaging in tackling controversial issues in schools are both social and cognitive: i) learning to express an opinion and have it challenged, becoming increasingly aware of diversity in the range of opinions held by others and learning to accept and tolerate difference; ii) young people have a right to know about issues in the world around them in order to have a range of knowledge and understanding and to know about important issues that may affect their own lives and indeed the lives of others. The exercising of this right to freedom of speech may be restricted in certain situations, for example when considering the rights and reputations of other people.

There are a range of reasons why teachers may avoid introducing the consideration of controversial issues into their lessons. They may avoid raising such issues because of inadequate training (Oulton et al. 2004), fear of negative reactions from their local community (Hess 2002, 2008), nervousness about a lack of support from both colleagues, senior leaders in schools and carers/parents (Woolley 2010; McAvoy and Hess 2013), a lack of curriculum time (Hess 2002) and a disbelief in the ability of the students to deal with the issues (McAvoy and Hess 2013). Teachers may also be anxious about their own ability to remain impartial (Hess 2005), although it is not always necessary for a teacher to remain impartial, or want to avoid getting embroiled in what may be regarded as the manipulation of learners' views or indoctrination (QCA 1998). It is notable that this sense of coercion not only applies to younger learners. Wilkins (2001) found that racist attitudes were evident amongst 10% of 400 postgraduate students engaged in initial teacher education, and that some felt that anti-sexism or anti-racism were being 'shoved down their throats.' There is a tension between promoting what one perceives to be positive and including values that appreciate issues relating to diversity and equality and requiring students to adopt these. Hess (2005) suggests three approaches to tackling such controversial issues:

- privileging, where a teacher preferences one view over others;
- denying, where the controversial nature of the issue is denied;
- balancing, where each view receives a fair hearing, without committing to a particular position.

Further, Hess (2005) notes that the balanced position is not necessarily the simple solution that it may at first appear, as it can lead teachers to choose issues that do not spark much controversy, thereby missing the opportunity to maximise the development of learners' skills. There is also the potential for teachers to be accused of indoctrination, when they present views to their students. Clearly this is inappropriate behaviour for an educator. In the USA, the National Council for the Social Studies provides helpful guidance on how to approach issues relating to religion and belief in an educationally appropriate and non-doctrinaire manner (NCSS 2014). Writing in the context of primary education in Israel, Pollak et al. explored strategies to promote effective engagement with controversial issues in a democracy they identify as fragile. Drawing on the approach advocated by Hess, they argue that teachers should engage with controversial issues, acknowledging that society is complex, democratic and open, and it is important to: 'celebrat[ing] its diversity rather than

mourning its divisive rifts' (Pollak et al. 2018, p. 406). This raises the important matter of whether teachers should focus on creating a sense of homogeneity and shared identity with their pupils, or whether differences are actually acknowledged, celebrated and identified as the norm. One of the key themes of the *Report of the Commission on Religion and Belief in British Public Life* (Butler-Sloss 2015) was the importance of learning to live with difference. Once one acknowledges that the thing that everyone has in common is that they are different, one's perception of 'otherness' can be transformed in positive ways.

Cowan and Maitles (2012) argue that the discussion of controversial issues can have a positive impact on the values and attitudes of young people. Whilst the subject content may not be mandatory, teachers are able to facilitate learning and can make a real difference. They feel that where students have relatives serving in theatres of war or other conflict arenas, and where 'derogatory jibes of "gay", "Paki", "gyppo" and "Jew" can be heard in the playgrounds of primary and secondary schools,' (2012: 225) the justification of the discussion of controversial issues requires a proactive approach:

Attitudes towards religious, ethnic, cultural and sexual diversity are everchanging and can vary from different degrees of tolerance to total acceptance and celebration… Societal norms can influence the classroom environment but we would argue that addressing controversial issues in the classroom can also influence the wider environment and is worth investment. (Maitles and Cowan 2012, p. 229).

The issues that they identify illustrate how controversial issues can be a part of everyday life in schools. Indeed, to ignore such sexist, homophobic or racist language would in itself be controversial. Thus, teachers do not always need to introduce issues to the classroom but can use the lived experience of learners from the environment in which they are learning and living.

2.2. Creating Appropriate Environments

In order to facilitate any exploration of controversial issues in the classroom setting, it is important to consider how an appropriate and supportive environment can be created where children's ideas and questions are valued, and where each individual feels respected. Lockley-Scott (2019a) argues that in order for religion-related dialogue to be engaged with effectively in schools in the UK, four key themes need to be addressed, namely: a need for safe space; an opportunity for public space for dialogue; teachers trained and confident in delivering controversial topics; and a conducive national political context. These four areas can apply for any controversial issue being explored in a classroom setting, whether relating to religion and belief or the other areas identified in my research. The need for a safe space includes creating an environment in which pupils feel respected, have an appreciation of the human rights of others and value the diversity found among their peers. Flensner and Von der Lippe (2019) differentiate between intellectually safe and dignity safe environments, the latter providing a setting in which the students know they are respected, but the former requiring stimulating and challenging learning opportunities. In order for learning to take place there needs to be an element of challenge and discomfort. Thus, the space needs to be safe in terms of those present within it being valued and respected, but it may not feel safe if one's ideas are challenged and begin to evolve. This notion of a safe space is challenged by Iversen (2019) as it can suggest the ambiguity of safety as being either risk-seeking or risk-averse. Rather it suggests an environment in which 'well-managed disagreement' (Iversen 2019, p. 324) is scaffolded.

Flensner and Von der Lippe (2019) argue further that the metaphor of a 'classroom of disagreement' provides a means by which controversial issues may be tackled, identifying that learners will have different viewpoints that may contrast with one another. Different students will experience the safety of the classroom in diverse ways, with each having their own sense of what feels safe. Indeed, it may be more appropriate to talk about being courageous than being safe, as learning is more likely to arise from the discomfort of exploring new and unfamiliar ideas (Flensner and Von der Lippe 2019). This relates to the discussion of freedom of speech outlined in the previous section. For example, if a teacher allows a student to express racist views, this may hurt others in the group. Thus, the space becomes unsafe for those feeling threatened or unvalued by the views

expressed. However, if the views remain unexpressed, there is no opportunity to challenge them and encourage the student to develop their learning. Herein lies a tension when tackling controversial issues in the classroom. As Iversen (2019) notes, the pupils in our classrooms are in the process of learning. They are not yet fully formed and they need the opportunity to be able to change their minds, try things out and develop their thinking. Inevitably this means that there will be times when views are expressed in embryonic form, and there needs to be an understanding that views may change over time and that this is a normal part of growing and learning. Further, Barrett (2010) and Callan (2016) argue that the term safe space should be replaced with an emphasis on civility. Thus, the focus is not on developing a group with shared values and a sense of cohesion, but rather on developing interactions between learners who are able to deal with disagreement and controversy (Iversen 2019). Iversen defines such a community of disagreement as 'a group with identity claims, consisting of people with different opinions, who find themselves engaged in a common process, in order to solve shared problems or challenges' (Iversen 2019, p. 324). In order for this to be facilitated it is necessary that trainee teachers, and those in service, are equipped with the skills necessary to support debate, share and explore views and manage the learning environment effectively.

Lockley-Scott (2019a) notes that teachers identify a lack of training in how to explore controversial issues with their pupils, and that the pupils themselves are happier when discussing war, terrorism or world politics than, for example, their own religious beliefs. Thus, the pupils feel more comfortable when discussing broad concepts or more distant issues in the world around them than those with which they identify at a very personal level. This research was undertaken in secondary education, but the principles apply equally to primary school settings. My research shows that it was the issues with a personal element that caused the student teachers the most concern, namely matters relating to relationships, bereavement and culture and ethnicity, as outlined below.

3. Methodology

Having explored some of the recent debates around tackling controversial issues in schools, we now turn to consider the views of those training to teach in the state system in order to consider their perceptions of tackling controversial issues in schools.

A small-scale study elicited student teachers' views on elements of issues-based education with a focus on the controversial topics that they felt they may encounter in the first year of their teaching career. All students were in the final year of their training course (e.g., an undergraduate degree or a one-year postgraduate qualification). Data were gathered through an online survey of students in universities in England (including pre and post 1992 universities, Russell Group, Guild HE and 1994 group universities) that varied in size of provision and setting. The online questionnaire was used to discover:

- the personal importance placed on key social issues in primary education;
- the issues covered during the students' training programmes;
- the issues students expected to encounter in their first teaching post; and
- the three issues they anticipated finding the most difficult to address in school, with reasons.

The first three elements were addressed using graded scales to elicit responses, and the fourth provided the opportunity for an open response accompanied by free-flow text input to give reasons for the choice. Students could either list their three issues in order of importance or in random order. The students were approached by e-mail by a gatekeeper (usually their course leader or head of department) or an announcement on their virtual learning environment, and in some cases both. All contributions were anonymous and no individual or institution can be identified in the data.

The project was based on an earlier study in 2008 (for an outline of findings see Woolley 2010, 2011) which initially piloted the questionnaire with five student teachers and then received responses from 160. As a result of this, some minor modifications were made for the survey in 2016 (e.g., asking the students to indicate a gender identity). As the education landscape had changed in

the years between the two national surveys, the list of issues provided for the student teachers was modified, as discussed later.

Whilst the sample in 2008 was chosen for convenience (i.e., the course leader was known to me or a colleague made an introduction), in 2016 access was gained to a wider range of universities. This may suggest that the issues had become more mainstream during the intervening years, some were much less controversial than in the past, and the profile of values in the education system in England (including what are termed Fundamental British Values) had increased and is indeed monitored by the national inspection body, Ofsted.

Students were asked to indicate the region in which their university was based, in order to gain a sense of whether coverage was achieved across England (see Table 1). However, it is not possible to identify specific universities or courses, and thus it cannot be known how many students received the link to the survey from their course leader or head of department.

Table 1. Responses by region.

Region of England	Participants 2008 (%) $n = 160$	Participants 2016 (%) $n = 103$
North West	4.6	16.5
North East	10.2	10.7
West Midlands	13.0	23.3
East Midlands	38.0	21.4
London and South East	33.3	9.7
South West	0.9	8.7
Yorkshire/Humber	0	7.8
Eastern England	0	1.9

In 2016, 89% of the student teachers identified as female and 10% as male. This broadly reflected expectations, given the number of male students engaged in initial teacher education. This question was offered in an open format so that students could identify as they wished, rather than from a pre-populated set of answers in order to be as inclusive as possible in the approach. In total, 52.4% of respondents were on a three-year undergraduate course, 11.7% on a four-year course of study, 27.2% undertaking a one-year postgraduate certificate of education (PGCE) and 8.7% on a work-based training route (School Direct). It is worth noting that coverage was a little more even across the country in 2016 than in 2008. Whilst the number of participants was not as high as in 2008, on the whole the free-flow responses to questions were much fuller and more detailed.

All subjects gave their informed consent for inclusion before they participated in the study. The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and the protocol was approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Worcester, UK. The process and research instrument were approved by the research ethics committee, and all data were gathered and stored according to its protocols. The software package used for the survey ensured that all participants could only contribute once and provided a means for them to withdraw their data should they subsequently wish to leave the study.

4. Findings

Student teachers were asked to indicate the three issues they anticipated finding the most difficult to address on commencing their first paid teaching post. They could indicate these in order of priority or random order. For the purposes of this analysis the three are taken as having equal weighting, as three quarters of respondents chose to list them in random order (Table 2).

Table 2. Which three issues do you anticipate finding the most difficult to address in school?

Issue	%
Death and bereavement	33.3
Homophobia	27.6
Anti-racist/multicultural	26.4
Sex and relationship issues	20.7
Safeguarding	18.4
News items and media influences	16.1
Family issues	14.9
Female genital mutilation	14.9

By grouping themes, of the 87 respondents identifying issues they anticipated finding difficult to address in school, 91% identified one or more issues relating to relationships, allied to relationships and sex education (sexual orientation, growing up, puberty, families and homophobia); while 57.5% identified one or more issues relating to anti-racist and multicultural education (including British Values, community or social cohesion, terrorism and the Prevent agenda) and 33% identified bereavement as an area of concern.

4.1. Reasons for Students' Views

For the purposes of this article, student teacher concerns about issues relating to both religion and belief, including associated areas of cultural values, were considered. As noted above, 57.5% identified one or more issues relating to anti-racist and multicultural education (including British values, community or social cohesion, terrorism and the Prevent agenda) as being of concern. In free-flow responses, student indicated that:

Due to what is currently happening in the media I think that many children could be possibly influenced by this and if not educated properly about other religions many children may judge others based on what they see in the media. *Female final year undergraduate (3 year), North West.*

How do you begin to explain to a child what is happening in the world? People are committing horrendous crimes in the name of Islam. But how can this be explained to a child without causing religious hatred or unnecessary fear? *Female final year undergraduate (3 year), West Midlands.*

Communities are becoming ever more diverse, yet views in the general population are becoming more polarised. Debate surrounding migrant issues and terrorism are risking children's perceptions of other faiths and cultures being swayed by an array of external influences. *Male undergraduate (3 year), Eastern England.*

This indicates that some of the trainee teachers are concerned about the external factors impacting the views of the children in their care.

The concept of British Values was identified by a number of students as an area of concern, particularly the notion of the Britishness of those values and whether values can be identified as specific to a nationality rather than to a sense of shared humanity:

Personally I don't think it's important to promote British Values—not everyone would like to be identified as British. *Female PGCE student, South West.*

I find the terminology problematic. Not British. Just values. *Female PGCE student, North West.*

Why should they be called British Values anyway? This only makes non-British children feel as though British Values are of higher importance than their values, they should just be human values, why do they have to be British? *Female undergraduate (4 year), East Midlands.*

Religion and belief were particular concerns for some students, including how passionately-held views in the home might impact on relationships at school, and being wary of using incorrect terminology or accidently causing offence to a person with a religious belief.

Children refusing to play with others due to religion/ethnicity has already been witnessed by myself during placement. I assume it will happen again and I understand how to deal with it although I feel it is an issue because the children are learning this behaviour from home. *Female PGCE student, London and South East.*

Fear of saying something wrong or offensive to different people's religion and beliefs. *Female PGCE student, London and South East.*

Because of the sensitive nature of religion and beliefs—and the possible implications of accusation if you address it in the wrong way. *Female undergraduate (4 year), East Midlands.*

Increasingly parents, pupils and staff hold polarised opinions on religion. This can result in issues with teaching R.E. [Religious Education]. Even though it can be taught in a more philosophical secular way there is often resistance as long as the word religion is in the subject title. Pupils are also exposed to divergent views on nationalism and in the media certain religions are portrayed as linked to particular social groups, identities and nations. My concern is pupils will fall into a pattern of stereotyping. It would be nice if pupils could decide for themselves what they want to / don't want to believe and to be accepting of other beliefs. *Female PGCE student, South West.*

Ideas seen in the news about war and religion. How to address these and reassure children that this isn't normal behaviour. *Female undergraduate (3 year), West Midlands.*

Debate surrounding disability and minorities in education worry me. I'm also increasingly concerned about the rise of Islamophobia in the mainstream and the impact this has on children and their views of tolerance and community cohesion. *Female PGCE student, North West.*

One student identified a tension between their own personally held views and those they may be expected to teach. It is interesting that across the 263 participants in the two surveys (2008 and 2016) this is the only instance of a trainee teacher expressing such a concern. The student does not indicate the detail of the mismatch between their belief and the curriculum for relationships education. It must be noted that the survey predated some of the high-profile news coverage of communities appearing to oppose an approach that is inclusive of a range of gender identities and sexual orientations:

Some areas of the curriculum such as sex and relationships are taught in a way that goes against my own beliefs so I worry about how to tackle teaching these to ensure children are learning what they should be without compromising my own belief. *Female PGCE student, South West.*

4.2. Student Experience

Students were asked to indicate which of the areas identified in the survey were covered during their programme of study. Of course, this is a matter of student recall or perception, but nonetheless these data are interesting (Table 3).

Table 3. Issues covered during students' course of training.

Issue	% in Rank Order
Safeguarding	95.1
British Values	81.6
The Prevent Agenda	72.5
Anti-racist education	67.6
Spirituality	56.9
Female genital mutilation (FGM)	52.4
Democracy	52.0
Families	47.6
Relationships and sex education (RSE)	46.6
Mental Health	46.6
Homophobia	45.6
Sexualities/sexual orientation (SO)	44.1
Bereavement	40.8
Community cohesion	39.6
Education for Global Citizenship (E4GC)	38.6
Environment	36.9
Growing up	35.9
News	35.0
Trans	33.0
Advertising	29.1

Given that both safeguarding and Fundamental British Values are priority areas being focussed on by the national inspectorate (Ofsted), it is interesting that not all respondents identify these as having been covered by their course. One would not expect such high priority areas to be left until the very end of the course, and all participants were in the late stages of their training.

A comparison of findings between the surveys of 2008 and 2016 shows that several areas were covered less often within the programme of study (Table 4). New areas were added to the survey in 2016 due to developments in government policy, the school curriculum and concerns within society.

Table 4. A comparison of the issues students recall being covered during their programme of study.

Issue	2008 (%)	2016 (%)	% Change	Issue	2008 (%)	2016 (%)	% Change
Safeguarding	N/A	95.1	N/A	Homophobia	N/A	45.6	N/A
British Values	N/A	81.6	N/A	Sexualities/SO	19.5	44.1	+24.6
Prevent	N/A	72.5	N/A	Bereavement	29.3	40.8	+11.5
Anti-racist	86.4	67.6	−18.8	Community Cohesion	49.4	39.6	−9.8
Spirituality	56.0	56.9	+0.9	E4GC	76.6	38.6	−38.0
FGM	N/A	52.4	N/A	Environment	63.4	36.9	−26.5
Democracy	63.5	52.0	−11.5	Growing up	31.7	35.9	+4.2
Family issues	57.3	47.6	−9.7	News	35.8	35.0	−0.8
RSE	31.7	46.6	+14.9	Trans	N/A	33.0	N/A
Mental Health	N/A	46.6	N/A	Advertising	37.0	29.1	−7.9
				Holocaust Memorial Day (HMD)/Remembrance	31.7	25.2	−6.5

Whilst areas relating to relationships and sex education and bereavement have seen an increase in coverage, several areas relating to how people relate to one another and to the world around them have seen a decline. Most notably, Education for Global Citizenship (E4GC) has seen a decline of 38.0%, although this may relate to changing terminology used within curriculum areas. It may now be more common to refer to internationalisation or cosmopolitanism, or to focus on sustainable development goals. Coverage of environmental issues has declined by 26.5%, anti-racist education by 18.8% and a consideration of democracy in education by 11.5%. This may not be surprising given the continual rise of a standards-focussed agenda based on academic results, particularly in English and mathematics. Of course, these figures represent student recall of the content of their courses and may not thus reflect actual coverage. This suggests that further research may be beneficial, to compare the perceptions and recall of the students with a document analysis of their course curriculum coverage.

A small number of participants found a mismatch between the rhetoric of the lecture room and the practicalities of working in schools:

There has been focus placed on the fact that our role as teachers is to develop the 'whole child' but there has been little about what that actually means and ways of practically achieving this. *Female PGCE student, North East.*

I don't believe that enough training is given on developing children as a whole person, I feel that my training has focused almost entirely on their academic development to the detriment of helping to prepare children for life. *Male undergraduate (3 year), East Midlands.*

Interestingly, one of these students was on a one-year course and the other on a three-year course. Whilst only a small snapshot from the overall sample, it does suggest that the ethos and emphases within a course can impact its foci, rather than the length affecting what can be covered. This sense of the 'whole' child allies easily with the focus on the spiritual, moral, social and cultural (SMSC) development of children which has permeated the curriculum in England for the past three decades.

Students were also asked to indicate which of the areas identified in the questionnaire was important to them (Table 5). It is notable that at least 75% of all respondents found all the issues either to be of importance or high importance. Some areas of particular focus were on the government agenda at the time of the survey, namely Fundamental British Values and the Prevent agenda; this only appeared in the lower quartile, suggesting that what policymakers deem important and what student teachers perceive as important do not match.

Table 5. Personally, which three areas are important to you?

Issue	Importance (%)
Safeguarding	100.0
Bereavement	99.0
Anti-racist education	99.0
Mental health	98.1
Families	98.1
News	96.1
Growing up	96.1
RSE	94.2
Democracy	93.2
Homophobia	92.2
Environment	90.3
Sexuality/sexual orientation	90.3
Spirituality	86.4
HMD	85.4
Advertising	84.5
Community cohesion	84.5
FGM	84.5
Prevent	81.6
Education for Global Citizenship	76.7
British Values	75.7
Trans	74.8

5. Discussion of Findings

The results from this small-scale research project suggest that participants feel that controversial issues need to be explored with children, and they place importance on such matters. They also suggest that some courses of initial teacher education have changed in emphasis over the years between 2008 and 2016, increasing the exploration of what is now termed relationships education, and to some degree also sex education, and bereavement. As a result, they have moved their focus away from other areas that impact upon the ways in which children and young people relate to the world around them. Given the small-scale nature of the study, it is important that any recommendations arising from analysis of data are tentative. However, they do give an initial indication of areas to explore further, and potential concerns and perceptions of student teachers.

Student views suggest that they are concerned about the various influences on children, in particular, news media and views from within their communities and homes. It is important to prepare these student teachers to address such views in a sensitive way, and to consider how introducing alternative views and considering a range of views in a balanced manner might impinge on the views of parents and carers and potentially cause tensions. This reflects the findings of the survey undertaken in 2008, where concerns about contradicting parental views came through as a significant theme (Woolley 2010). This area was not raised within the survey, and so its appearance as a significant theme in the data was both a surprise and of note. This aspect is significant, particularly in contexts where discussing controversial issues with children may lead to complaints or legal action by parents/carers. This makes it imperative that student teachers receive excellent training in how to tackle such issues in age—and stage-appropriate ways and are prepared to communicate effectively with parents and carers.

The introduction of mandatory relationships education in primary schools in England from September 2020 provides an opportunity for initial teacher training courses and schools to address some of the priorities and concerns of student teachers. In particular, understanding relationships education in its broad sense (i.e., more than romantic or sexual relationships) gives opportunity to explore layers of inter-relatedness in what Sacha Mason and I have described as a Taxonomy of Relationships (Figure 1).

Strangers
Acquaintances
People who help
Friends
Family members
Best friends
Special friends
Ourselves

Figure 1. Taxonomy of Relationships (Mason and Woolley 2019).

This includes relationships with parents/carers and other stakeholders in schools, as well as those between children and adults and children and children. The taxonomy highlights how we interact with a range of others, from those we will never meet (for example those who produce our food or clothing) to those who help in our communities and close friends. It also highlights the need to have a positive relationship with ourselves (with positive self-esteem and sense of identity), to form a strong basis on which all other relationships are founded.

From the participant group, it is clear that student teachers preparing for their first teaching post have apprehensions about tackling controversial issues in their classrooms. These are issues that may arise through the questions that children raise, or may arise from circumstances within children's families, the local community or national and international issues and news items. In contrast to secondary education, where specific lessons may be taught with a focus on a controversial issue, it is more likely that such issues will arise informally and naturally as part of interactions between children and between children and educators. The lived experience of the learners and the environment in which they are living and learning provides the stimuli. Teachers need to be equipped to help children engage critically with such issues in the world around them (Erricker 2003) and to develop the skills necessary to deal with them knowledgably, sensibly, tolerantly and morally (QCA 1998). As noted earlier, Hess (2004) found that there was a mismatch between what learners wanted to explore with regard to controversial issues and what teachers felt equipped and able to deal with. In order for this to be facilitated it is necessary that trainee teachers, and those in service, are equipped with the skills necessary to support debate, the sharing and exploration of views and the ability to manage the learning environment effectively. They need to be equipped with the skills to celebrate difference and help children to appreciate each other's differences in a respectful way.

It is clear that the reasoned and evidence-informed approach required when exploring controversial issues sits in tension with a call to engage in dialogue where polarised and deeply held views are being expressed. There is no easy solution in such circumstances, but to fail to engage in such dialogue is to deny the existence of such views (Hess 2005). Indeed, it may suggest to children that the issues they encounter either as participants or witnesses (e.g., bullying) are not taken seriously within their school community. There is also the tension between facilitating dialogue and enabling freedom of speech, with respecting individual viewpoints and ensuring that the human dignity of each participant is maintained.

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

Research with student teachers preparing to enter the teaching profession has shown that they feel an array of controversial issues to be important. They certainly have apprehensions about some

of these issues, particularly those relating to relationships, whether at points of transition (e.g., bereavement), tensions relating to culture or ethnicity (including religion, belief and values) and relationships education (including sexual orientation, homophobia, puberty and families). Whilst the participants did not signal significant personal concerns about tensions between their own views and those they may be required to explore with children, this is an area for further research. Particularly, there is potential for research to be undertaken in international settings in order to explore how different educational and cultural settings relate to the notion of controversial issues in the context of primary education and how student teachers perceive these in their own context. Notably, there is a perception that teacher training courses in universities in England may be covering issues relating to relationships less than a decade ago, although further ongoing research is needed in order to spot any medium-to-long-term trends. Finally, there is a need to seriously consider how the apprehensions of teachers in the final stages of their training are being addressed, in order to equip them to face a range of issues and situations with as much confidence as possible. This requires an audit of teacher training courses, the continued monitoring of student concerns and ideally a policy focus to ensure that course content addresses the challenges teachers will face in their early careers.

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