

## Book reviews

Theory and Research in Education  
2019, Vol. 17(3) 311–317  
© The Author(s) 2019  
Article reuse guidelines:  
sagepub.com/journals-permissions  
DOI: 10.1177/1477878519887643  
journals.sagepub.com/home/tre



Jonathan Zimmerman and Emily Robertson, *The Case for Contention: Teaching Controversial Issues in American Schools*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL, 2017. 144 pp. ISBN 9780226456348, \$22.50 (pbk)

**Reviewed by:** Zachary Barber, *University of Rochester, USA*

Humans don't deal well with disagreement. Emotional outrage, 'us' versus 'them' tribalism, and retreats to relativism about values – or even about truth itself – are among our typical responses to controversy. Why not educate our youth out of these shortcomings and into more civically wise dispositions, shaping them to address disagreement in democratically productive ways? That's exactly the proposal of Jonathan Zimmerman and Emily Robertson in *The Case for Contention*, their informative and insightful book on incorporating controversial issues into the American K-12 curriculum.

*The Case for Contention* is the third volume in the History and Philosophy of Education series from the University of Chicago Press. The history of teaching controversial issues in American schools is addressed in the first half of the book, helpfully contextualizing the philosophical discussion that comprises the second half. The philosophy is thereby more empirically informed, and its relevance and urgency more easily seen.

In the historical section, we learn about the ebb and flow of public and legal support for teaching controversial issues, starting with Horace Mann's surprising insistence that such issues be strictly avoided in the earliest days of public schooling (p. 11). The overarching theme of this historical overview is that the story of schooling in America largely fell in line with Mann's sentiments. Despite often paying lip service to the importance of teaching hot-button issues, America has, in general, sanctioned the teachers that actually do so. Teachers are portrayed as facing immense public pressure to avoid controversial issues, usually in order to keep their jobs. Things became especially tense during the early Cold War years. Even controversial issues unrelated to communism could 'conjure the communist specter' (p. 25). So omnipresent was that specter that a 1954 poll reported that 20% of Los Angeles teachers deemed the U.S. Constitution and the Bill of Rights to be too 'dangerous' for discussion (p. 25).

The usefulness of having such telling examples at our fingertips in preparation for thinking about applied issues in philosophy is clear. Our ethical analysis can be more calibrated to the world's needs. Nonetheless, one shortcoming of the historical section is that it is difficult to glean a precise thesis from it. The reader is left with an impression of

the enduring opposition to teaching controversial issues – but only an impression – since there are many eras that the authors depict as including energetic movements to incorporate controversy in the classroom. Such movements include those led by John Dewey and others in the Progressive Era (pp. 13–17) and by the student protestors and leftist teachers in the Vietnam War era (pp. 35–38). Still, the impression is enough to highlight the past and current importance of a more philosophically informed approach to teaching controversy.

As for the philosophical portion of the book, it is indeed calibrated to the world's needs. Among its contributions is a useful conceptual landscape for categorizing issues that merit ethically distinct treatment. This landscape builds on, and advances, earlier work by Michael Hand (2008). Hand argued in defense of Robert Dearden's (1981) 'epistemic criterion' for separating the topics that ought to be taught *as controversial*, and therefore given a balanced treatment, from the topics that ought to be taught as settled, even if said topics are in fact debated among members of society. The epistemic criterion advises teachers to teach topics as controversial only if rational inquiry can support at least two sides of the debate. If the employment of reason does not mandate one uniquely reasonable position on a given issue, then that issue is eligible for a balanced treatment in K-12 curricula.

Hand's analysis is correct, but Zimmerman and Robertson helpfully provide a more detailed picture by connecting the role of reason to expertise and inquiry at large. They distinguish between a *maximally controversial issue* – one that merits a balanced treatment of the dispute, since informed persons, including experts, have not yet formed a consensus around any one position in the debate – and *expert-public disagreements*, in which an expert consensus exists, but large portions of the public reject the views of the experts (pp. 49–59). The latter is exemplified in issues such as anthropogenic global climate change and the alleged causal relationship between vaccination and autism. A reasonable case cannot be made on all sides of these issues, since the experts who have examined the evidence most thoroughly have collectively adopted one position. Covering these topics with a balanced treatment would give students a mischaracterization of the state of current knowledge.

This is an important advancement of Hand's work, since meaningful engagement with many issues in the modern world requires understanding and skills of reasoning far beyond the abilities of school-age children. Students are almost certainly incapable of appreciating all of the sophisticated scientific modeling that points to the reality of anthropogenic climate change, but they should be able to appreciate all of the reasons why the scientific consensus around this topic is so epistemically powerful.

Another area in which the authors are clearly sensitive to the real-world nuances of teaching controversial issues is where they recommend avoidance, or at least the granting of exemptions to individual students, in certain cases (p. 90). A requirement to discuss controversial issues could cause parents to remove their children from the schools that address them. This can compromise the quality of the education of both the students who are removed and the students who remain, since both would be deprived of the diversity of perspectives once present in the classroom.

In sum, Zimmerman and Robertson should be praised for the useful theoretical backdrop that they provide, even if the implications of that backdrop are not always entirely

clear for practice (as in, for example, their discussion of white privilege (p. 75)). They also provide an important, even if frustratingly brief, condemnation of the ‘fact-opinion’ distinction that is so widely promulgated in schools (pp. 71–72). But perhaps most importantly, throughout the book, they illuminate the precarious circumstances of teachers, who face public and legal pressures when they court controversy, and moral pressures when they avoid it.

Ultimately, *The Case for Contention* is an important contribution to both our historical and philosophical understanding of the pedagogy of controversial issues – which, as the authors compellingly argue, should be a central component of all general education.

## References

- Dearden R (1981) Controversial issues and the curriculum. *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 13(1): 37–44.
- Hand M (2008) What should we teach as controversial? A defense of the epistemic criterion. *Educational Theory* 58(2): 213–228.

Ruth Cigman, *Cherishing and the Good Life of Learning: Ethics, Education, Upbringing*, Bloomsbury Publishing, London, 2018. 224 pp. ISBN 9781474278850, £63.00 (hbk)

**Reviewed by:** Mary Healy, *University of Roehampton, UK*

Outside of wedding vows and songs by David Cassidy and Madonna, I do not remember the word ‘*cherish*’ being used much in recent years. This alone makes idea of a book exploring *cherishing* in relationship to ‘the good life of learning’ particularly enticing. The first volume in the Bloomsbury Philosophy of Education series, this book explores precisely what ‘*cherishing*’ might consist of and how this could connect to educational concerns.

This is not a long book – a mere 224 pages, including the bibliography – comprising three sections: ‘We need to talk about Children’, ‘Enhancing Children’ and ‘Cherishing Children’. Some of the ideas may have appeared previously in journal articles, but bringing them all together in one volume gives a cohesive flow to the overall aims of Cigman’s project. At the same time, the chapters work as individual standalone sections for readers wishing to dip in and out.

Utilising both wit and examples from literature to illustrate her points, Cigman offers a fresh lens through which to look at popular, yet often still tangled traditional concepts, forcing us question our existing explanations. To her credit, Cigman develops a number of new and potentially constructive ways in which this might be achieved. Drawing on a vast literature from Aristotle to Holt, from Wittgenstein to Kristjánsson, from Gaita to Winnicott, taking in stories from Iris Murdoch and Marilynne Robinson among others, the book moves towards an understanding of what ‘*cherishing*’ might entail in educational terms. Beautifully written, this is undoubtedly a book aimed directly at scholarly readers.

In the first chapter, Cigman lays out the general direction and motivation of the text as a whole. In her analysis, the ‘crisis in education’ is not primarily about education