

Is Climate Change Education Ever a Form of Political Indoctrination? Pedagogical and epistemological tools for managing climate change ‘controversy’ in the classroom

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While there is a scientific consensus regarding anthropogenic climate change, it remains a socially controversial, highly politicised issue. This may impact the ability of teachers to implement quality climate change education. Research has shown that teachers are often hesitant to teach ‘controversial issues’ for various reasons, including concerns that: (1) they will be accused of indoctrinating, or imposing their own values on, students; (2) the topics will provoke strong emotional responses from students and/or heated classroom exchanges that are difficult to manage; and (3) they may be burdening students with distressing problems, which the students are not emotionally equipped to deal with or in any position to help solve and, as such, this may incite a sense of hopelessness or despair. Such concerns can result in teachers avoiding such topics altogether or using potentially problematic pedagogies, such as the ‘teaching the controversy’ approach, where the teacher adopts a ‘neutral stance’ and presents both sides of the debate, allowing students to formulate their own opinion. Recent research from the USA indicates that many science teachers are using this approach to teach about climate change (Plutzer, et al., 2016, p. 17). We believe such an approach may undermine the fundamental goals of climate change education (e.g., fostering an understanding of climate science; the promotion of pro-environmental behaviours, like reducing one’s carbon footprint; an informed, critical engagement with government policies and action on climate change). In this paper, we utilise some philosophical literature on the concepts of ‘indoctrination’ and ‘controversial issues’ in order to recommend pedagogical approaches that can mitigate some of the aforementioned concerns. In particular, we recommend well-established pedagogical tools, such as Philosophy for Children’s Community of Inquiry dialogue based pedagogy; place-responsive education; Critical Indigenous Pedagogy; and social justice approaches to community service learning, focusing on how such approaches can enable teachers to foster a proper understanding of climate science and pro-environmental values without engaging in practices associated with indoctrination.