



# Learning gone viral ...

## tackling controversial issues in the primary classroom

**Richard Woolley** reflects on learning of epidemic proportions.

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See Tide~ publication: [Comparative Education & Quality Global Learning Engaging with controversial issues in South Africa and the UK.](#)

### Student teacher Concerns -

91% felt one or more issues relating to relationships, allied to Sex and Relationship Education (sexual orientation, growing up, puberty, families, homophobia) would be difficult to address;

57.5% identified apprehension about addressing one or more issues relating to anti-racist and multicultural education (including British Values, community or social cohesion, terrorism and the Prevent agenda);

33% identified bereavement as an area of concern.

[Woolley 2020]

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The Elephant Times

In 2005, I took part in a study visit to South Africa organised by Tide~ and led by Clive Harber and Jeff Serf. Ten participants had been meeting regularly in the preceding months to establish a group and foster mutual learning. The intention of the visit was to learn how education for democracy was developing in the KwaZulu-Natal province and reflect on what we might learn to inform future developments in the UK education systems and our own professional development.

Visiting the town of Richmond we were welcomed by children and staff at Kwamlamuli Primary School. In one classroom (pictured), alongside displays of the letters of the alphabet and a poster indicating that **“Reading is power”** were posters relating to HIV-AIDS. Posters stated **“My friend with HIV and AIDS is still my friend”** **“Use a Condom”** **“AIDS Kills.”**

I was surprised to see such content in a primary school classroom, particularly with such prominence. In my own experience of working in primary schools, I was aware of addressing challenging issues with children, for example alcohol and drug misuse, prejudice, stereotypes and bullying. I was not aware of any discussion about the impact of HIV or the ways in which it is transmitted. To see the use of contraception included in the displays in a primary school was certainly challenging for me\*. For these children in Richmond, aged between 9 and 11 years, HIV/AIDS was not only an issue in their families or community, its implications were a daily part of their classroom environment.

### Re-contextualising the challenge

I returned to the UK feeling challenged to reflect on how we could discuss HIV with children of primary-school age. However, my reflections soon led me beyond this. I realised that it is not appropriate to simply transport an issue or idea from one setting to another, however important it may seem. It is important to consider what is significant in the setting in which we find ourselves. Rather than addressing HIV in primary education, I began research asking students training to be primary school teachers:

- which issues they anticipated finding challenging in their first post;*
- the importance they placed on a range of issues.*



In the fifteen years that have followed, this research (undertaken in 2008 and again in 2016) has informed my writing, publications and teaching.

Notably it led to the publication of **Tackling Controversial issues in the Primary School**

There are chapters addressing each of the issues identified by the student teachers.



**My learning from the visit to KwaZulu-Natal has had a long-lasting impact.** It set me on a journey of research and publication, giving new focus to an enduring interest in education for social justice that started even before I trained as a teacher myself. Over the past decade its particular emphasis has been on developing relationships education and promoting inclusion ... post the Equality Act (2010). At the present time, it is interesting to reflect on how we enable learning about the spread of Covid 19.

**My experience in South Africa suggests that primary school children are capable of discussing the impact of such issues ... the challenge is: How do we support each other to do this?**

References: see [page 34](#)

### HIV and the context of South Africa

According to the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS, 2004), HIV prevalence among South Africans aged 15 to 49 was 21.5% in 2003. At this point 4.3 to 5.9 million people were living with HIV – the largest number in any country.

It was estimated that around 600 people a day were dying of AIDS-related infections (Ruxton, 2004) and eleven teachers died of AIDS-related illnesses each day (MacGregor, 2005; see also Adams et al., 2008).

By 2016 this figure was 18.9% of the population, with 56% of adults and 55% of children on antiretroviral treatment and 7.1 million people living with HIV

(AVERT, 2017 cited in Mason and Woolley, 2019).

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