

Guidance for Schools on Controversial Issues Relating to Faith and Culture

Introduction

Controversial issues are simply defined as issues that have *no easy answers*. Frequently they divide opinion, and can create suspicion and mistrust of others whose sense of identity, belonging, views, values and experience differ from our own. These issues have the potential to accentuate divisions and arouse emotion.

How can teachers best respond to such issues and events that are complex, topical and associated with extremist religion and belief?

Often these arise spontaneously in the classroom and teachers wrestle with ways to respond and address issues that require skilful handling, while thinking on their feet.

Recent tragic national and international events challenge us to look again at controversial issues that threaten to destroy communities and harmonious relationships that we value in a borough and a society that has a rich blend of faith and culture. Politically sensitive issues arouse controversy and divide opinion. Frightening events bring out all kinds of responses including people who are willing to help, risk their lives and offer support to others.

Knowing how to deal with such issues sensitively and productively in an open and safe classroom space with a diverse student population from a variety of backgrounds is a challenge.

Concerns for pupils and teachers

Children and young people are exposed on a daily basis to the influences of the mass media and those around them. They hear, often in sound-bites, news about social injustice, human-trafficking, refugees, child abuse, domestic and gender violence, divides between rich and poor, rebellion, idealism, fanaticism, extremism, religious beliefs, stereotyping, diversity and prejudice. Such news items need to be handled appropriately and sensitively in the classroom. Often the issues are religiously, culturally or politically sensitive. They affect everyone, whether they have a particular faith or not.

Concerns of pupils	Concerns of teachers
Putting their identity and self-esteem on the line.	Risk that pupils may withdraw and remain silent.
Fear of offending others.	Handling uncomfortably strong reactions.
Fear of being humiliated, excluded or bullied for things that may have been said.	Being accused of bias.
Fear of being held to account or even being reported for holding unpopular or radical views.	Accentuating divisions, particularly in a multicultural setting.

Government guidance

The Department for Education guidance on British values as part of spiritual, moral, social and cultural development (SMSCD), stresses the role of democracy, the rule of law and human rights. These are seen to promote citizenship in education and to counteract extremism and radicalization.

Under the general duty of safeguarding, schools are required to ensure that young people are safe from bullying, racism, prejudice and narratives that demean or incite hatred of others.

More recently the DfE, together with the Home Office has published its 'Educate Against Hate' website at: <https://www.educateagainsthate.com/> This contains information and practical advice on protecting children from extremism and radicalisation for Teachers, Parents, School Leaders.

The Government's 'Prevent' (preventing young people from being drawn into terrorism) strategy is also supported with online training and can be accessed at: <https://www.elearning.prevent.homeoffice.gov.uk>. Some schools ensure that all their teachers do the online course and get a certificate.

Some people wonder whether the Prevent agenda enables students and teachers deal with the issues that emerge or whether it sometimes silences opinion for fear of being reported. Is it possible to create a safe and neutral space where students can air and express their concerns?

Controversial issues require sensitive handling as they aim to make students more critically aware and give them reflective skills to evaluate the world they are living in. They require students to develop and exercise moral and ethical reasoning.

Controversy is part of living in a diverse society and we certainly need to help students to deal with it. For example, learning how to hold a dialogue with others whose ideas and opinions differ is part of living in a democracy and is a vital skill that students need to acquire for life.

Religious Education

Religious Education is one place in the curriculum where students learn about and from religion and belief. It gives students information and enables them to develop skills to identify differences and to communicate disagreements respectfully,

The agreed syllabus for Haringey, Awareness, Mystery, Value (AMV), which can be found here: <http://www.awarenessmysteryvalue.org>, aims to promote religious literacy and critical thinking skills. Religious literacy means giving students the knowledge and skills to understand and discuss religion, values and beliefs confidently, accurately and critically. Lack of religious literacy leads to simplistic understandings of the role religions play across time and space. Generally the media do not report religious issues in a balanced way. Stories that are covered tend to focus on extremism, clashes and controversies.

The introduction to the syllabus offers the following *vision* for pupils:

- Pupils who follow this syllabus gain a deep awareness of their own and others' identities; they wrestle with the mysteries of life and the answers given by a wide variety of religions and beliefs; they develop a clear sense of what is of real value in the world today.

- Pupils who follow this syllabus gain a deep knowledge and understanding of the teachings, practices and life stories expressed in a variety of ways within Christianity and other principal religions and worldviews. Through reflection on their own beliefs and values in the light of their learning, they grow in respect for themselves and others.
- Pupils who follow this syllabus encounter the transformative power of religions and beliefs in people's lives – in our area, in the UK and in the wider world. They demonstrate curiosity about men and women of faith and commitment who have changed individual lives, society and culture. Through RE, they feel compelled to imagine and contribute to the creation of a better world for all.

In order for this vision to be fulfilled it would seem important to create safe spaces within school for pupils to engage in dialogue about controversial and current issues, without fear. But there is a 'paradox of participation' here, as identified the authors of 'Safe Spaces, Difficult Dialogues and Critical Thinking' (see <https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/ij-sotl/vol7/iss2/5/> or download directly at: <http://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1390&context=ij-sotl>)

Creating safe spaces in school for dialogue about controversial and current issues in RE/Citizenship/PSHE

In the 'Safe spaces...' study¹, students were asked what they needed to help them participate in discussions of controversial issues. The researchers used Baxter Magolda's (2000) categories for inclusive and effective learning environments to analyse the students' views. These note the importance of:

1. viewing students as capable participants by respecting students and their experiences and moving students to the next level of critical thinking;
2. providing practice that engages students in reflection and analysis that leads to more complex thinking;
3. establishing a community of peer learners that creates an atmosphere that encourages interaction and risk-taking to challenge one another's point of view; and
4. standing by students during times of transition by showing support for students, yet encouraging deeper levels of thinking.

Students in this study collectively developed class communication rules. Common themes that emerged from this process matched quite well with Magolda's categories. They included creating a classroom environment where each individual felt safe in voicing her or his viewpoint, encouraging others to speak, asking questions without being offensive, actually listening to others, and trying to understand differing points of view. Pupils need opportunities to explore, question and challenge ideas to help them develop, clarify and extend their own thinking.

Creating a dialogical space for the interchange of ideas suggests that people make meaning, sharing and growing in knowledge and understanding together. Communication and understanding are promoted through *respectful* exchanges which value the perceptions of others and the frameworks people bring with them into the classroom. This benefits students.

¹ Gayle, Barbara Mae Dr., D. Cortez, and R.W. Preiss (2013). 'Safe Spaces, Difficult Dialogues, and Critical Thinking', in *International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning: Vol. 7: No. 2, Article 5*.

Exchanges need to be:

- **reciprocal** – meaning that students and teachers listen to each other, pool and share ideas and consider alternatives;
- **supportive** – students voice their ideas without fear of getting things wrong. They help each other to reach and share common understandings that are democratic; and
- **cumulative** – students and teachers build on each other's ideas.

In the dialogic classroom efforts are made to help students to share and build meaning together. Learning through dialogue is a social activity; it helps learners to explore their thought processes, nurtures student engagement, learning, confidence and responsibility. Thinking skills require collaborative talk, where pupils listen to each other, share and express ideas and consider other viewpoints. They analyse ideas, explore values and test evidence rather than accept somebody else's certainties without question (Alexander 2006). When students engage with their peers in the classroom their individual skills and competencies are enhanced and extended by the competencies of others.²

Peer educators

1. Development of peer ground rules.
2. Tools and techniques that support young people in self-facilitating.
3. Facilitator skills, confidence and ability to set an ethos that is inclusive and supportive and to be able to deal with the unpalatable, incendiary or offensive things some young people inevitably say.

Facilitators need knowledge to counter stereotypes about a particular religion or culture or they need to be able to signpost students to people, places and sites where they can get the required information.

Resources for building resilience to extremism

Violent Extremism means using fear and violence to achieve political ends. It includes: views that glorify or justify terrorist violence, seeking to provoke others to terrorist acts, fostering hatred intended to cause violence between communities.

Radicalisation is not a single pathway – it is an unfolding process. Resilience is the ability to bounce back from adversity – and overcome negative influences.

The Religious Education Council of England and Wales (REC) have produced excellent free materials to support schools in matters of 'belief-based' extremism: <https://www.religiouseducationcouncil.org.uk/resilience-teaching-controversial-topics/> and there are high quality lesson plans for secondary Art & Design, Citizenship, English & Drama, History and RE that have been produced by the 9/11 education programme. They are freely available here: <https://since911.com/911-education-programme>.

Other useful documents and resources

² Sue Lyle, 'Dialogic Teaching: Discussing Theoretical Contexts and Reviewing Evidence from Classroom Practice': <http://www.lec.ie/media/docs/Dialogic.pdf>

Suffolk SACRE has produced a highly recommended 'Teaching Controversial Issues Toolkit', which is available for free download here:

<https://www.haringeyeducationpartnership.co.uk/school-improvement-2/sacre/>

This document from DCSF lays out the territory simply and efficiently: DCSF: Learning together to be safe: A toolkit to help schools contribute to the prevention of violent extremism: <http://dera.ioe.ac.uk/8396/>

The Research report DFE-RR119, Teaching approaches that help to build resilience to extremism among young people:

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/182675/DFE-RR119.pdf

The 3 Faiths Forum (3FF) works to build good relations between people of different faiths, beliefs and cultures and creates safe spaces in schools and universities and the wider community where people can engage with questions about belief and identity and meet people that are different from themselves: www.3ff.org.uk/schools/ and www.3ff.org.uk/resources/

Generation Global: <https://institute.global/co-existence/generation-global> is a project initiated by the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change. It is intended to help young people to be resolute in the face of narratives that may feed the development of extremist ideologies. Devised by an international group of educational experts, advisers and religious leaders, the programme provides opportunities for students to put critical thinking skills into practice through facilitated dialogue. Students learn about one other, and explore the roots of openness and diversity in their own cultural and religious traditions.

Another project dealing with conflict resolution at its heart is the Christian spirituality of Corrymeela in Northern Ireland. Information about its programmes can be found here: <https://www.corrymeela.org/programmes>

Also see: <http://www.extremedialogue.org>. This is an excellent resource with a teacher's manual on dealing with extremism with short accessible video narratives of real people who have joined extremist groups.

Key ingredients of effective interventions

1. Making a connection through good design and a young-person centred approach.
2. Facilitating a safe space for dialogue and positive interaction.
3. Equipping young people with appropriate capabilities - skills, knowledge, understanding and awareness.

Whatever the setting and resources available, the principles of good design and facilitation – the first two of the three – are crucial and non-negotiable. This research suggests that a well-designed, well-facilitated intervention will go a long way to building resilience. To be more confident of **longer-term, sustainable resilience**, however, an additional focus is needed, over and above good design and facilitation, on building 'harder' skills, knowledge, understanding and awareness, including practical tools and techniques for personal resilience.

Legacy and future generations

Recent surveys by **NATRE** (National Association of the Teachers of RE) indicate that a quarter of secondary schools are not fulfilling the law in providing Religious Education, which leaves many students unprepared for the challenges of modern life. RE in schools provides opportunities to explore issues which students see in the wider world and to deal with the problem of evil.

Some schools commemorate the Holocaust and try to take learning lessons from it. But this alone is insufficient to challenge prejudice and unfair discrimination in society. The Community Security Trust (CST) has reported more Anti-Semitic attacks, verbal abuse and harassment of the Jewish Community. The Trust provides security training to schools and synagogues, and assists members of the Jewish Community who have been affected by anti-Semitic incidents. See:

<https://cst.org.uk/public/data/file/d/1/IRJJ17-e.pdf>

Some groups try to exploit patriotic feelings and sometimes advocate pro-Israel stances in response to perceived Muslim threat or hatred of settled Muslim communities. This is completely incompatible with British Values. There is now an independent, non-governmental organisation which works on tackling anti-Muslim hatred: <https://tellmamauk.org>. Tell MAMA raises issues of anti-Muslim hatred and helps to shape and inform policy makers, whilst ensuring that an insight is brought into this area of work through the systematic recording and reporting of anti-Muslim hate incidents and crimes.

ISIS Narratives: <https://www.vox.com/2015/11/18/9755478/isis-islam>

There is a type of apocalyptic recruiting pitch that targets vulnerable young people with the idea that the world is coming to an end at any moment and that they need to be fighting on the side of God as everything comes crashing down. This interview exposes how some extremist scholars have used a partial and particular interpretation of Islamic teaching to excite young people to leave their families, friends and jobs and travel abroad to join their cause.

Counter-extremism video from the London Grid for Learning:

http://counterextremism.lgfl.org.uk/videos/ISIS/HD/vid_en_3.mp4

Other issues

- Knowledge required to counter extremist narratives or challenge negative stereotypes.
- Supporting vulnerable individuals.
- Addressing grievances that are exploited by ideologies.
- Boosting critical thinking skills.
- Philosophy for Children (P4C) – An approach that engages young people with analytical and critical ways of thinking.