



# In Focus: Teaching Controversial Issues

Talking to children and young people about what is happening in the world today, the stories they are hearing and the images they are seeing, can be challenging. Sometimes we choose not to discuss difficult issues in the classroom and to steer clear of potential controversy.

## What is a controversial issue?

Lesley Emerson and her colleagues describe controversial issues in their excellent resource **Teaching Controversial Issues in the Citizenship classroom** 'When someone talks about something being controversial, it usually means that it involves more than just simple disagreement between people. In general terms, controversial issues can be described as being:

- Issues that deeply divide society – such as euthanasia, economic cutbacks, social welfare payments, immigration.....
- Issues that challenge personally held values and beliefs – strong political positions, racism, gay rights, civil partnerships.....
- Issues that generate conflicting explanations - historical events, conflicts such as Northern Ireland, Palestine and Israel....
- Issues that evoke emotional responses - crime and imprisonment, education, abortion, disability....
- Issues that may cause students to feel threatened and confused – where their families have very strong views on an issue, where peer pressure is strongly in favour of one side of an argument....'

## Why discuss controversial issues?

The description above highlights the challenge of dealing with complexity in the classroom, but also the opportunities they bring for young people to develop essential skills.

*'The teaching of controversial issues is proposed as a means to develop students' critical thinking. Through discussion of controversial issues, students develop cognitive skills, such as constructing hypotheses and collecting and evaluating evidence. They also gain insights from sharing information with their peers.*

*As students participate in discussions, they also develop important attitudes and communication skills, such as listening carefully, responding empathetically, speaking persuasively, and cooperating readily, with others in a group. Well-managed discussions also promote tolerance of diverse viewpoints on any single issue.'*

Angela Harwood & Carol Hahn, 2010

## Circle Time Activity – Empathy Footsteps

**Resources:** 2 pairs of paper feet on the floor that children can stand on, facing each other.

1. Act out a simple conflict between two people. E.g. Tariq has lost his pencil and he thinks Ellie has taken it.
2. Ellie and Tariq stand in 'their own' footsteps facing each other and tell each other how they feel using an 'I' statements. E.g. *I felt angry because.... I would like it if ....*
3. They then swap over and stand in each other's footsteps. They acknowledge each other's feelings by repeating back what they said – e.g. *I heard you say you were angry because.... And you would like it if....*
4. They return to their own footsteps and talk about how it felt to be in the other's shoes. They could talk about the ideas raised by the other person and this can lead to ideas to then try to resolve the conflict.



Empathy Footsteps can be used in all sorts of ways, for example to explore how it feels when a new person arrives in school, with one person being the new arrival and the other another child in the playground.

**Training Opportunity – Responding to the News.** Peacemakers offers a **one day training course**, giving teachers opportunities to try out a range of activities and strategies for raising sensitive topical issues through circles and circle time. Contact [jackie@peacemakers.org.uk](mailto:jackie@peacemakers.org.uk) for more information.

## Useful Resources



The following websites and resources offer excellent support for teaching controversial issues:



Teaching Controversial Issues [in Science], 2014 [www.ase.org.uk/resources/teaching-controversial-issues/](http://www.ase.org.uk/resources/teaching-controversial-issues/)



Association for Citizenship Teaching [www.teachingcitizenship.org.uk](http://www.teachingcitizenship.org.uk)  
(Type controversial issues into their search engine for primary and secondary resources.)



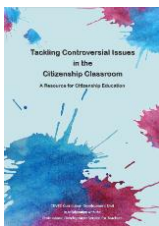
Teaching Controversial Issues, 2006, Oxfam:  
<https://www.oxfam.org.uk/education/resources/teaching-controversial-issues>



Citizenship Foundation:  
<http://www.citizenshipfoundation.org.uk/main/page.php?79>



'Five Principles on Teaching about Controversial Issues', Robin Richardson  
<http://www.insted.co.uk/sensitive-issues.html>



Tackling Controversial Issues in the Citizenship Classroom  
<http://www.ubuntu.ie/media/controversial-issues.pdf>



[What do we tell the children? Confusion, Conflict and Complexity](#)  
Angela Gluck Wood, Trentham, 2007



Guidance on Conflict in the Middle East – Issues for School (NUT website)  
[http://www.teachers.org.uk/files/Gaza-6pp-A4-6289\\_0.pdf](http://www.teachers.org.uk/files/Gaza-6pp-A4-6289_0.pdf)



British Red Cross  
<http://www.redcross.org.uk/cy-GB/What-we-do/Teaching-resources>