



GATEWAY DOCUMENT 1.1

Controversial and contentious issues – terms at the heart of *REsilience*

WHY IS THIS RELEVANT TO *REsilience*?

RE teachers are accustomed to teaching 'controversial issues' – a term often associated with relationship issues such as divorce and re-marriage, life and death issues such as abortion and euthanasia, questions of justice and equality, such as civil rights and liberation theology and issues related to war and peace

In order to benefit fully from *REsilience*, teachers need to consider the subtle difference between traditional controversial issues and the 'contentious' issues addressed by *REsilience*. The words 'controversial' and 'contentious' generally mean much the same thing. However, for the purposes of the *REsilience* programme a distinction is being made between the controversial issues that have traditionally been raised within religious education lessons, like abortion and euthanasia, and a particular cluster of specific issues that the programme is concerned with, which are being termed 'contentious'.

What we are calling 'contentious' issues are controversial current issues that have a particular link to the undermining of social cohesion. Some of these issues arise directly from within British society, such as the continued existence and activities of far right groups such as the English Defence League and the British National Party, which may promote hostility towards immigrants, asylum seekers and members of particular ethnic minority or religious groups. Other contentious issues concern events elsewhere in the world but which personally concern citizens of the UK; for example, the British Tamil community feels understandably aggrieved at the suffering of members of its community over many years at the hands of the Sinhalese in Sri Lanka, and this can cause tensions in schools where both communities are represented. Most especially at the moment, the activities of Islamist terrorist groups such as Al Qaeda in New York, Mumbai and in particular London, has caused a lot of unjustified fear of, and hostility towards, the overwhelmingly peaceful and hardworking Muslim communities in the UK and elsewhere.

Some sorts of contentious issues have, of course, been discussed within RE for a long time. For example, the issue of when a person may legitimately resort to violent subversion of the state for its greater good is an issue which arises in study of the German

pacifist Christian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who participated in a conspiracy to murder Hitler. Malcolm X and Martin Luther King took different approaches to the campaign for civil rights. Desmond Tutu and Oscar Romero are probably the most famous names among Christians who struggled with the question of the legitimacy of using violence to achieve human rights in South Africa and Latin America respectively.

The issues addressed in *REsilience* are those that have a particular resonance with adults and young people alike in Britain here and now. Tackling these issues in the classroom will enable young people to gain the understanding and skills to help them become more effective members of a diverse but united British society. Schools should seek to equip students with both the skills and the will to challenge prejudice, misinformation and unfounded assertions. Students also need to be able to recognise commonalities whilst making sense of differences. Most importantly for British democracy, students must learn to handle disagreement peacefully in the important matters of religion, politics, and morality. Through this learning process, young people can be helped to emerge as 'resilient' individuals who are involved in shaping a 'resilient society' where freedom of expression is treasured and there is robust and democratic exchange about matters of concern to us all as citizens. Religious education, in particular, needs to carry the banner for the pursuit of a common good whilst drawing on the different cultural, religious and belief traditions of all members of a responsible society.

KEY QUESTIONS

How can this help teachers and students to increase their understanding of contentious issues?

An issue is a question that at least some people regard as very important and which typically divides people of different opinions into opposing camps. Some issues are practical; for example, my builder may say, 'We've got a bit of an issue here – if I build the wall there your neighbour may complain that it shuts off his light'. In this context 'issue' is used in a similar way to 'problem', although it has an added dimension in that a problem doesn't necessarily imply interpersonal conflict. In this case I trust that after negotiation the builder will find a practical solution to the issue that satisfies all parties. If so, the issue will go away. However, if the builder constructs the wall as planned and my neighbour 'takes issue' with the outcome, possibly in the courts, then the issue will not have gone away, although a practical resolution is still possible.

There are numerous occasions when 'issue' is used in this way. In the context of the *REsilience* project we are concerned with a range of issues that typically have practical, theoretical, political and/or religious/theological dimensions. In RE the issues that occur are mainly theological, philosophical and moral. Theological or philosophical issues concern, for example, the existence and nature of God, and life after death. Ethical issues include abortion and lying. Because people are divided over many theological, philosophical and moral issues it could be said that all these issues are controversial

because they are all subject to disagreement and therefore open to argument or debate. So what distinguishes the issues we are labelling contentious?

What makes an issue contentious?

The use of the term 'contentious' to describe *REsilience* issues has been chosen alongside 'controversial'. There are two reasons for this: firstly, although both terms are applied to issues that are subject to dispute over matters of opinion, a 'contentious' issue may be more likely to go beyond dispute to ill-feeling or even violence. Secondly, the term 'contentious' distinguishes *REsilience* issues from the 'controversial' issues already familiar to RE teachers, such as medical ethics and environmental issues.

In this paper, both terms are used because an issue that for some people is the subject of disagreement and debate, for others can go further and lead to conflict. Members of groups defined by religion, or by social and economic status, often have significant shared experiences and may also share a number of beliefs and views. They may feel that the prevailing consensus on particular issues hinders their chances in life, or is unjust or harmful to people or to animals or goes against what they believe is the clearly revealed will of God. In such instances, divisions in society may be expressed in political, social or economic ways but will also on occasion give rise to violent action.

What classroom challenges might arise in RE?

Teaching about contentious issues gives rise to particular challenges when the issues deal with violent divisions around national identity, ethnicity or religion. These situations can arouse deep emotional reactions in students who may initially be unwilling to engage in discussion.

Teaching about contentious issues is complex because there are so many different reasons why an issue remains contentious and hence perhaps irresolvable, for example:

- There is as yet insufficient evidence to settle the matter
- Evidence relating to the matter is conflicting, complex or difficult to assess
- The range of criteria for judging a matter is agreed but the relative weight given to individual criteria is disputed
- The range of criteria for judging a matter is agreed but the interpretation of each criterion is disputed
- The different experience of students throughout their lives shapes their judgement in different ways
- These issues cut into the core of people's identities and people may not really be aware of where their views come from nor that other people may perceive their views as biased
- Emotion as well as reason plays a significant part in people's decisions
- Power relations may be such that reason does not prevail
- People tend to justify protecting their own interests.

How can teachers address such challenges?

- In such situations teachers need to establish a trusting environment for exploration of the issue
- Techniques useful for addressing contentious issues in the classroom are referenced in several of the *REsilience* gateway documents in section 2 (see e.g. Gateways 2.5, 2.6, 2.7 and 2.8)
- It is important that teachers do not overstress commonalities at the expense of the real differences in our world
- Teachers and students need to accept that there will be disagreements and consider how to negotiate them.

NEXT STEPS

Signposts for further reading

Holden, Claire (2007). *The challenge of teaching controversial issues* Trentham Books

Huddleston, T and Rowe, D (2001). *Good Thinking. Education for Citizenship and moral responsibility*; Evans

Lockyer, A., Crick, B. and Annette, J. (2003). *Education for democratic citizenship: issues of theory and practice*; Ashgate

McCully, Alan (2005). Teaching controversial issues in a divided society. *Prospero* 11(4):38-46

Signposts for further resources

Stannard, R. and Blaylock, L. (2008). *Tackling Tough Questions*; RE Today Services

www.globaldimension.org.uk Global Dimension is a useful subject database with ideas for teaching controversial issues, inter-cultural issues, etc.

<http://www.oxfam.org.uk/education/teachersupport/cpd/controversial/> The Oxfam website includes the section *Handling sensitive and controversial issues*.

“Using Experiential Education to Tackle Controversial Issues” .pdf document downloadable from home page of <http://www.shropshirebridges.org.uk/>

<http://www.humanism.org.uk/education/teachers/secondary/controversial-issues-in-the-classroom> The British Humanist Association website includes the section *Handling controversial issues in the classroom*.

<http://www.citizenshipfoundation.org.uk/main/page.php?79> The Citizenship Foundation website includes the section *Controversial Issues: Guidance for schools*.

<http://www.schoolslinkingnetwork.org.uk> The Schools Linking Network website includes guidance on facilitating deeper discussions.

<http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20110202110631/teachernet.gov.uk/wholeschool/behaviour/tacklingbullying/racistbullying/preventing/controversialissues/> Teachernet brings together guidance from a range of sources to produce its own summary, *Teaching about controversial issues*. Teachernet has now been archived but this document is still available – follow the links from the original site. There has not been any replacement guidance on teaching about controversial issues.

<http://www.teachers.tv/video/23152> Teachers' TV has produced this film of a teacher who works in a Muslim majority school teaching a lesson in which controversial issues are covered. (Teachers' TV programmes have now been moved and are available via a number of host sites. To access this programme, follow the redirect instructions to any of the addresses and select 'secondary' then 'RE')

<http://www.threefaithsforum.org.uk> The Three Faiths Forum has amongst other resources produced guidance on talking about conflict in a productive way.

Signposts for further action

Audit instances of controversial and contentious issues covered across the curriculum in order (a) to develop a coherent approach across the school; and (b) to identify opportunities and gaps.

Discuss with colleagues whether a staff training session on these issues would increase teacher confidence. Such training could utilise some of the material on websites above to clarify the school's approach across the whole curriculum.