



GATEWAY DOCUMENTS 2.7 AND 2.8

Encourage pupils to express their own ideas and beliefs in a sensitive and respectful way, even when those ideas and beliefs are negative or controversial

Challenging prejudice, discrimination and stereotyping

WHY IS THIS RELEVANT TO *REsilience*?

Central to the purposes of *REsilience* is the need to treat controversial or contentious issues in the classroom respectfully and with sensitivity. Students are unlikely to learn about or from the opinions of others when expressed aggressively or without consideration for those with different opinions. They need to learn the rules of public debate where it is unacceptable to make personally hurtful comments or damaging remarks.

This is a difficult issue for teachers because the more contentious the issue, the more likely it is that passions will run high and polite discourse give way to excited argument. *REsilience* issues are likely to arouse strong feelings; indeed it would be surprising if they did not. A passionate response may be desirable since it is unreasonable to expect students to be neutral or apathetic to serious issues of this kind. The challenge for teachers is to maintain sensitivity and respect even in these conditions. Here the teacher of RE can make common cause with colleagues in citizenship and explain that British democracy is built on the principle of civil and rational discussion in which all views can be expressed, explained and considered.

Concepts such as prejudice, discrimination and stereotyping need to be explored and discussed in a way that focuses on the issues, for example by discussing some prejudiced views in the third person ('Some people suggest that ...') which will help to avoid having students express such views themselves.

KEY QUESTIONS

What classroom challenges might arise in RE?

- The discussion may be dominated by a small number of students.
- Students may not be prepared to listen to any opinion that does not accord with their own.
- Students may ridicule a speaker rather than contesting what is said.
- Students may take exception to opinions that challenge their family's values.
- There may be tensions in the local community that are expressed in racist language.
- Students may have links with people involved in conflict, such as the armed forces stationed in Afghanistan, and this may spark angry disputes.
- Students from minority groups, including those with religious beliefs, may feel threatened if they hold an opinion at odds with the views of most of their class or group.
- Students may use the issues to 'have a dig' at others (fellow students or teachers).

How can teachers address such challenges?

Teachers should aim:

- to make the classroom a positive environment (see Gateway 2.3);
- to display rules for discussion agreed with students and draw attention to them;
- to lead by example and speak in the manner one wishes students to use, demonstrating that it is possible to be excited about an issue without being offensive;
- to give particularly vocal students a predominantly listening role which requires impartiality and carries with it responsibility for representing the whole group – e.g. rapporteur, secretary (see Gateway 2.8);
- to manage seating and grouping carefully to isolate likely disruptive students from potential allies. Use starter games and activities to separate students, without making it obvious;
- where a class includes only one or two students from the same religion or religious/secular group, to consider sometimes putting them in the same group for mutual support if one or more lacks confidence;
- to avoid over-reacting to inappropriate behaviour in a way that disrupts the lesson more than the actual behavior;
- to divert inappropriate talk by distracting the student with a question or by introducing new materials;

- where a student is too agitated to respond to low level distraction, to remove him/her from the discussion without being confrontational (e.g. collecting notes from all groups; typing up main ideas emerging in the plenary session; posting up displays produced by groups).
- to remind students about the need to consider diversity and not to talk as though (e.g.) all Hindus or all Roman Catholics or all old people behaved in the same way or shared the same views.
- to treat racist, sexist and homophobic attacks as well as those on grounds of religion and belief as unacceptable. In such cases, including those that might be classified as 'racist incidents', teachers should follow the school policy including the requirement to report them formally. Students should be encouraged to observe a degree of courtesy towards those they are studying with even when they feel it necessary to attack certain beliefs and practices and therefore implicitly, or even explicitly, those who hold them. It is essential for teachers to emphasise continually that civilised life in a pluralist democracy such as Britain is only viable when people of differing views and lifestyles are able and willing to interact civilly with those of radically different opinions and ways of life.
- to consider including for discussion issues even where they are sensitive within the local community. In such cases, your lesson may be the only forum where students are able to encounter a balance of views in a safe environment. The Citizenship Foundation offers the following advice: '*Schools need to be able to defend this provision against accusations that they are undermining parental or community views. All positions should be able to be discussed, and it does young people no favours to shield them from views they are likely to encounter in society*' (Huddleston, in *Signposts* below). One way of guarding against such situations is to develop students' (and teachers') capacity to talk with those of opposing views.

NEXT STEPS

Signposts for further reading

Huddleston, T (2003) *Teaching about controversial issues: guidance for schools*, The Citizenship Foundation: http://www.citizenshipfoundation.org.uk/lib_res_pdf/0118.pdf

Rowe, D (2003 revised edition) *Education for citizenship, diversity and race equality*, Citizenship Foundation. Available at http://www.citizenshipfoundation.org.uk/lib_res_pdf/0095.pdf

Hunt, D (2005) *Introducing Philosophy of Religion*, Nelson Thornes.

Signposts for further resources

Three Faiths Forum: <http://www.threefaithsforum.org.uk> Look at section on Schools > Teacher training.

Signposts for further action

Review at a whole school level staff awareness of policies related to equality and discrimination, including the procedures for reporting racist incidents.

The RE department may be particularly well placed to offer support and advice or perhaps lead training on ways of encouraging students to express their ideas and beliefs in a sensitive and respectful way, even when they are negative or controversial.