

# TEACHING CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES

A guide for teachers



## INTRODUCTION

This guide explores:

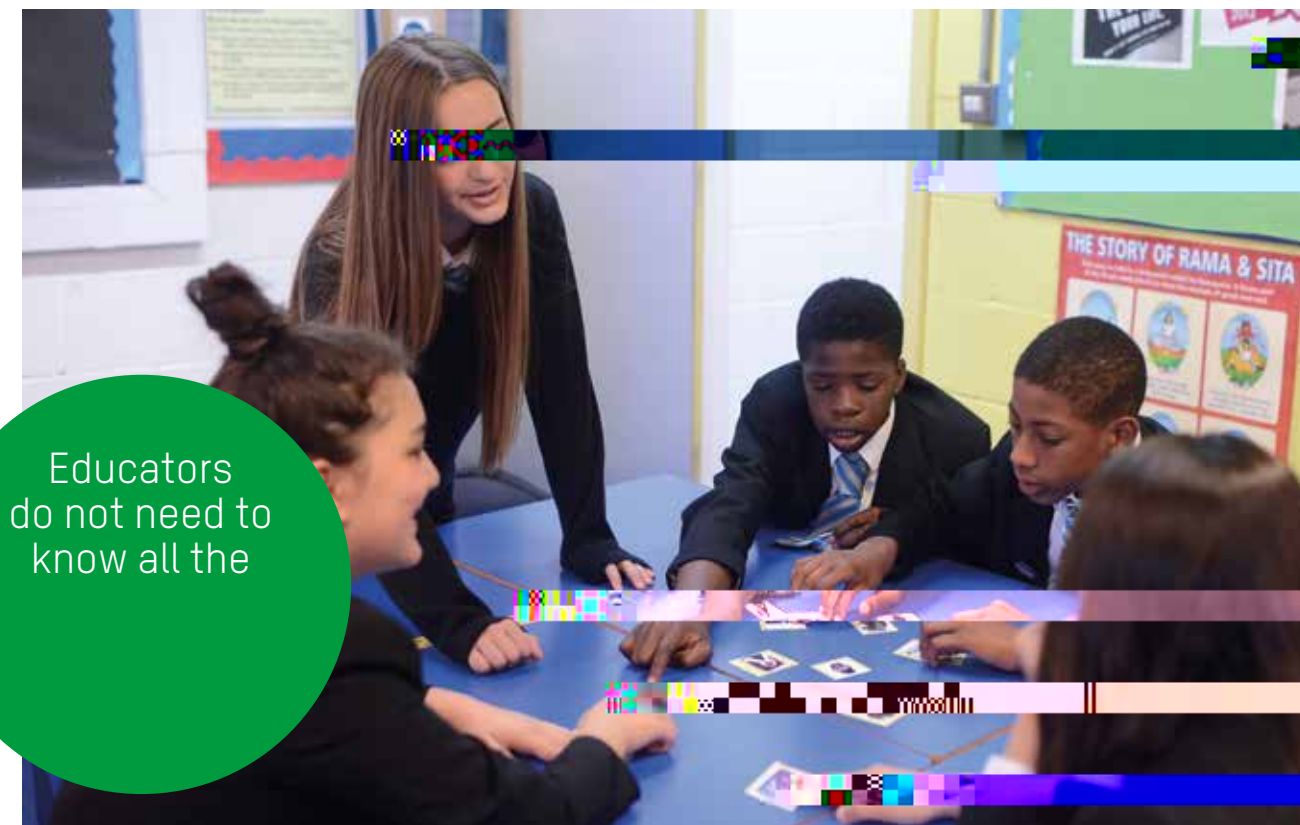
- What controversial issues are.
- Reasons for teaching controversial issues.
- The value of a global citizenship education approach.
- Guidance and classroom strategies for handling and exploring controversial issues.
- Some practical activities for teaching controversial issues.

We may not know what the future holds for today's young people, but we can be confident that they will be faced with decisions about a wide range of issues that provoke strong, varied and often contradictory responses. If they are to become effective local and global citizens able to play a critical role in creating a just world without poverty, all young people should have the opportunity to engage appropriately with controversial issues.

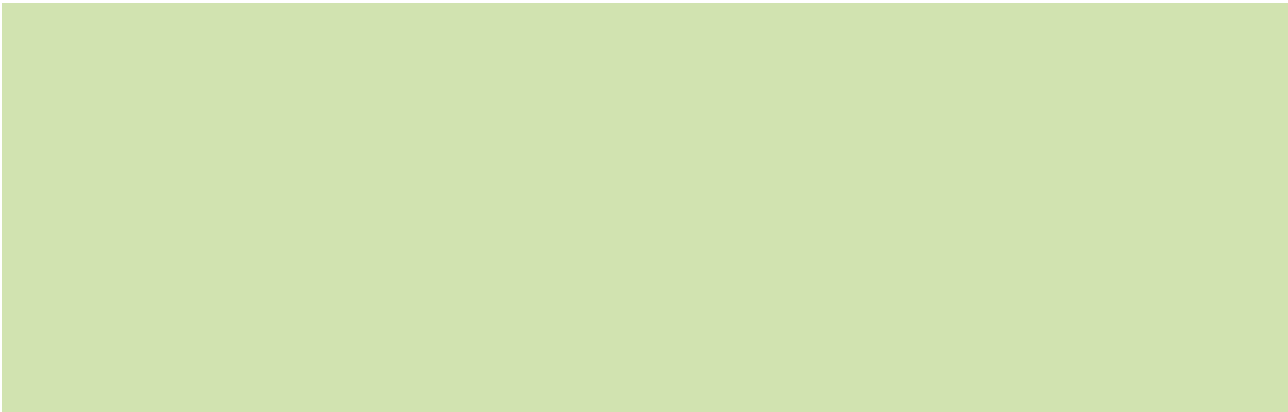
Teachers have a key role in enabling young people to develop the skills they need to do this. As educators, we are not expected to have all the answers. Rather, developing effective approaches to discussing controversial issues enables teachers to challenge their own views and explore ideas in greater depth with young people.

This revised and updated version of Oxfam's popular guide recognises the changes in social and political contexts in recent years and seeks to support educators in their discussions with young people in this complex environment. In increasingly divisive and polarised times, the need for young people to feel confident in tackling controversial issues is more pressing than ever. Advances in technology and the rise of social media mean that it is more important than ever for young people to think critically to become effective global citizens.

The guide is suitable for use with all ages from under 5s to post-16s, and across a wide range of curriculum areas. It is appropriate for use in the classroom, for curriculum planning and for professional development. This guide refers to children as "young people" throughout. This includes those as young as five because it is important to encourage the development of the skills needed to have challenging conversations early on.



# WHAT ARE CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES?



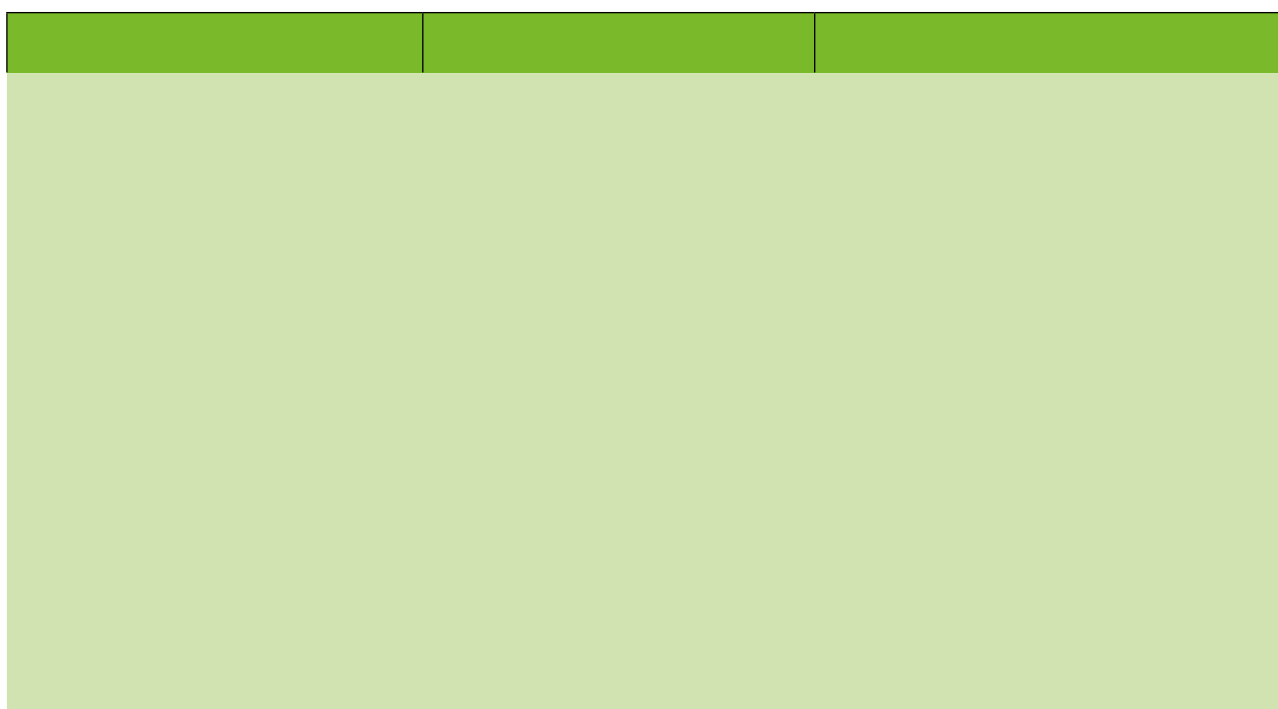
## WHY TEACH CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES?

It is important to create opportunities for young people to learn to communicate with each other by focusing on issues on which they share different viewpoints. By holding conversations in a safe space, young people can gain knowledge and understanding of issues and critically evaluate their own values and attitudes. By doing this, young people develop the skills necessary to build their capacity to cope with challenging circumstances in their own lives and communities. Here are some other reasons to teach controversial issues:

### They are in the curriculum

Teaching controversial issues is embedded in curricular advice across the UK. The need to discuss a controversial issue can present itself in any subject and teaching controversial issues may be a way in which to strengthen cross-curricular learning across subject areas.

To varying degrees, all national curricula expect such issues to be addressed and expect educators to provide a wide range of opportunities for doing so. The importance of developing knowledge and skills connected to real world situations to prepare young people for the complexities of life in the 21st century is well recognised. Specifically:



In addition to curriculum guidance, teachers have a responsibility to provide safe spaces for classroom discussion and when doing so they are expected to explore these issues in relation to current government policies. It is important to note that teaching controversial issues goes beyond the scope of topics such as terrorism and extremism but the approaches to handling difficult conversations in this guide will be useful in covering these areas.

### Young people need to explore their values and develop their skills

For young people the world can seem difficult to handle both on a personal level and on a global level, but they should not be sheltered from controversial issues – it is important for them to clarify their emotions and values and learn to think for themselves. Research evidence shows that values are of central importance in leading people to express concern about social and environmental issues such as poverty and climate change.<sup>5</sup>

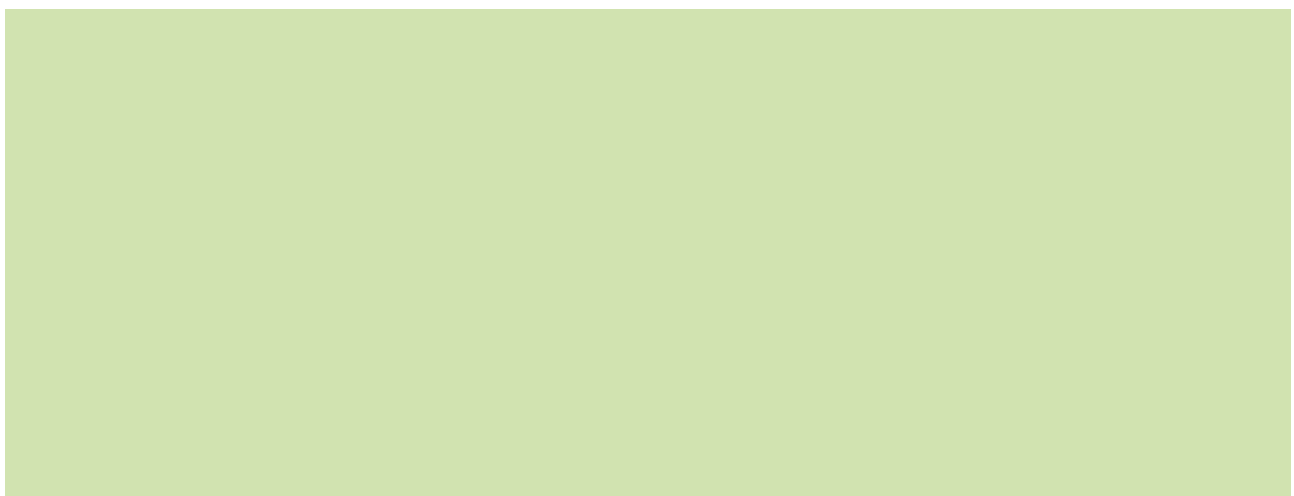
Developing and strengthening values of empathy and respect will therefore enable young people to contribute to social change as global citizens.

Self-esteem, crucial to global citizenship education and supporting personal and academic development, is a pre-requisite for debating wider global issues if young people are to handle disagreement and acknowledge other people's viewpoints. By actively participating in difficult arguments and debates, young people learn to make reasoned judgements, respect the opinions of others, consider different viewpoints and resolve conflicts. These skills enable them to build resilience and confidence to manage conflicts that arise in response to global issues and in their own lives, whether this be in the playground, at home, or in their local community.<sup>6</sup>

### They affect young people's lives

To ignore controversial issues is to ignore the realities in many young people's lives. Young people in our classrooms may feel marginalised for any number of reasons, such as: poverty, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religion, disability and social group. At any age, many young people are likely to experience the effects of controversial issues in their own lives and communities, and be exposed to national and global issues through the media. Recent research by Childline suggests that the 35% annual increase in children seeking help for anxiety was, in part, due to increasing concerns about global affairs viewed on social media.<sup>7</sup> Even children under five may hear about complicated and upsetting events at home or in the playground. Providing a safe and supportive space for them to process these is an important task for schools. The danger of not providing young people with space to discuss issues they are concerned about means they are at greater risk of being isolated and they are also exposed to information that may simply be wrong or reinforce a particular narrative.

### Young people want to know more about global controversial issues



## ENGAGING WITH THE MEDIA AND “FAKE NEWS”

In teaching controversial issues, we need to encourage young people to engage critically with the media and think about its influence in informing their thinking and ideas and in shaping their values and attitudes.

Today many young people potentially have 24/7 access to global news and views across various online platforms. Even very young children are exposed to the media and accessing content online. Navigating the range of easily accessible social media platforms can create new challenges for young people and their parents/guardians.

“Fake news” presents a significant challenge as it is becoming increasingly difficult to ascertain the original source of information, particularly when it is accessed online. It is even harder to distinguish verified facts from untruths or “alternative facts”. Young people themselves recognise the importance of education in understanding fake news and social media content.<sup>10</sup> However, they can struggle to engage critically with the content they are consuming, often assuming that news appearing in their social media newsfeed is from reliable sources.<sup>11</sup> Additionally, there is a risk that young people may disengage with valid news content because they start to view all content as “fake”. These issues emphasise the need to address how to evaluate media content with young people and raises points for discussion about the importance of facts.

While there are challenges in young people’s use of social media, it can be a tool for teachers and young people to enhance their involvement in active citizenship too. Young people can use social media as a way to engage with issues they are interested in and to share their own ideas. They are often keen to use their digital skills to influence change and social media is an effective way to add their voice to the social issues of the day.<sup>12</sup>

### FACTORS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE TO CONSIDER WHEN ACCESSING MEDIA CONTENT

- To attract audiences, media companies will often focus on stories of disasters and problems rather than “good” news which tends to be less compelling. This may lead to stereotyping of people and places.
- Organisations such as Oxfam often take a different perspective from the mainstream media and try to tell a longer-term story of the resilience of survivors. That said, like any other source, Oxfam has its own bias. Young people need develop the skills to critically evaluate sources of information asking questions such as “Who wrote this?”, “Why?” and “When?”.
- Regulations and responsibilities of the media vary greatly between countries and even the type of media. For example, in the UK, the broadcast media have public service responsibilities which are enforced by relevant bodies whereas the printed press is self-regulating. Therefore online news from different outlets can look similar but be subject to entirely different rules and regulations. Learning to discern the origin of a news story and the context in which it was written can help young people judge its reliability.
- News companies, just like other businesses, may have particular views they wish to promote, perhaps for the benefit of their owners, stakeholders or audiences. Media companies can appear to be independent from one another and attract different audiences but they are often part of a large media group which owns other outlets, or be owned by a large multinational company. For example, in the UK, just three companies control 71% of the UK’s national newspaper circulation.<sup>13</sup> This can mean audiences are not exposed to a diverse range of opinions and information.

## WHY TAKE A GLOBAL CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION APPROACH?

Sometimes teachers are confronted with events in the news that are of such significance that young people are being affected by them, or are at least actively curious or concerned. If there is no “tradition” within the classroom of engaging with real-world issues through the curriculum or in other ways, it can be challenging for both teachers and young people to deal with these events.

Therefore global citizenship education offers an embedded approach that supports the development of a classroom culture where both ongoing and unexpected or isolated controversial issues can be addressed. It is a framework to equip learners for critical and active engagement with the challenges and opportunities of life in a fast-changing and interdependent world.<sup>14</sup>

Even very young children come face to face with the controversial issues of our time through the media and modern communications technology. Far from promoting one set of answers, global citizenship education

## GUIDANCE FOR DEALING WITH CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES IN THE CLASSROOM

The Education Act 1996 in England aims to ensure that children are not presented with only one side of political or controversial issues by their teachers. Educators are required to take all reasonable steps to ensure that, where political or controversial issues are brought to young people's attention, they are offered a balanced presentation of opposing views. However, the Equalities Act 2010 clearly states that people should be treated fairly and without discrimination.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, while this guide is promoting the importance of teaching controversial issues with as much freedom of expression as possible, educators need to be aware that they must make it clear when any views being expressed are counter to human rights or the Equalities Act.<sup>17</sup> Teachers need to operate in a safe space between these two parameters.

Teachers are not expected to "know the answers" when they are tackling controversial issues within the classroom. It is perfectly valid for these discussions to raise more questions than answers. The value is in providing young people with the opportunities to think critically and dig deeper into exploring values and attitudes towards challenging issues with consideration and respect for others.



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### The wider school context

When discussing controversial issues, young people will bring their experiences beyond the classroom with them. They may hold particular views based on their cultural or religious values from their life at home, in their local community and from personal experiences. At times these values may be in conflict with human rights and equality, in which case the school has a duty to make this clear.<sup>18</sup> It is therefore helpful for the school to develop open relationships with parents about the importance of children discussing controversial issues (in ways that are appropriate for their age). This is especially relevant in primary schools where parents may not think children should be involved in uncomfortable or complex issues. Fostering an open dialogue with parents about the value of discussing controversial issues, along with a clear school policy, will enable teachers to approach these issues within an appropriate school framework.

Encouraging the development of a whole school approach to safe spaces and discussing controversial issues provides support and confidence for teachers in the classroom and the wider school community. The nature of discussing controversial issues means that the potential for safeguarding concerns to arise is greater. Teachers should therefore be aware of school safeguarding policy and where necessary seek support from senior management.

### Role of the teacher/facilitator

Controversial issues can challenge teachers' own thinking at times, but with good guidance and training, educators can have the confidence to handle moments of uncertainty in discussion. Teachers can model to young people that, even for adults, some issues are complex and that we all need to take time to think and respond thoughtfully. Teachers need to find approaches that meet the need for balance and objectivity, and avoid bias. Different methods can be chosen according to level of confidence and experience, as well as the maturity and skills of particular groups of young people.

The teacher plays a pivotal role when discussing controversial issues and it is important to judge when, how, and if to express personal views and opinions. The educator can play six possible roles when dealing with difficult conversations in the classroom. It is important to be flexible in the choice of approach as well as to be clear about why a particular method is being used on a given occasion. Any of these roles may be appropriate depending on factors such as the topic, age of the young people and any prior learning or curricular work. It may be useful to discuss the roles with the group or invite young people to take one or more of the roles themselves.



## Teaching approaches and their benefits

Controversial issues touch on deeply held views and embedded attitudes and therefore didactic approaches are not best suited for dealing with controversy. Evidence suggests that telling young people what to think or preaching at them about how to behave is likely at best to have no effect and at worst to close their minds to considering alternative views. Encouraging a participatory approach in the classroom enables young people to take an active role in their own learning. Some of the areas which might benefit from more active approaches are oracy, emotional literacy, interpersonal or social skills, critical thinking skills, citizenship skills, literacy skills, or combinations of these.

Different methodologies will focus on the development of different skills, values and attitudes. In addition to familiar approaches such as debate, drama, role-play and simulation, other effective, innovative approaches and their benefits include:

- **Making connections** through activities such as “Mysteries”, “Diamond ranking” and the “Consequences wheel” can develop reasoned argument and organisation of ideas as young people are required to sort, organise and analyse large amounts of information.
- **Asking questions** is a good basis for generating group discussion as young people with varying levels of knowledge of a subject can respond to the same stimulus material. Questioning images helps young people to investigate different personal feelings and political reactions from around the world. It encourages them to explore bias, and develop analytical, enquiry, and critical thinking skills. Activities such as “Why, Why, Why chains” or “Issue trees”, help young people to deepen their understanding of an issue.

- **Exploring viewpoints** and values is a way of encouraging learners to think through their position on opposing views about an issue. Young people can explore their values using an “Opinion continuum” or “Washing line activity” which enable them to adapt their position

## CREATING A SAFE SPACE FOR CONVERSATIONS

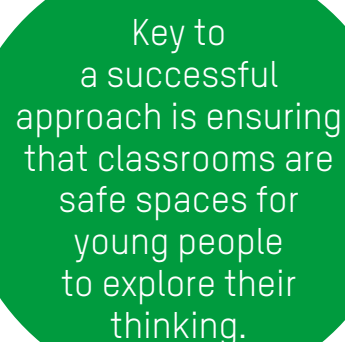
Key to a successful approach is ensuring that classrooms are safe spaces for young people to explore their thinking. This means providing a “space which is collaborative, respectful and provides an opportunity for open dialogue where young people can test out their views in an open forum for critical, in depth and respectful discussion”.<sup>22</sup>

Ideally, when raising a challenging topic in the classroom it should be carefully planned and considered. As there are many demands on curriculum time, it may be useful to create opportunities to talk about challenging issues in settings such as assembly, circle time or discussions by school councils. However, controversy may arise unexpectedly in the corridor or playground and educators will need to be prepared for this too.

At the same time as acknowledging the benefits of exploring controversial issues in the classroom, particular teaching skills are required to prevent reinforcing stereotypes, raising tension between young people or increasing confusion. Knowing the young people and the context of their lives both in and outside of the classroom will help inform judgements. It may be necessary to seek the support of colleagues with experience of discussing particular topics or those who have a good understanding of issues in the local community.

Within the classroom, a young person may be personally affected by a sensitive issue such as poverty, conflict or migration. It is worth checking with them before a planned session that they are happy to discuss the issue, or give them an option of leaving the room if necessary. It may be appropriate to provide the young person with an opportunity to discuss the issue further with an experienced colleague.

The concept of balancing rights is important to consider. One young person may express views that diminish another’s right to feel safe and secure in the classroom. Setting the boundaries for an inclusive discussion where all young people are able to participate is important. This can be achieved by establishing ground rules.



Key to a successful approach is ensuring that classrooms are safe spaces for young people to explore their thinking.

### Ground rules

Before launching into a chosen activity, it is important to establish ground rules to ensure a safe environment for young people to express their opinions.

These ground rules could include:

- Allow only one person to talk at a time – no interrupting.
- Show respect for the views of others.
- Challenge the ideas not the people.
- Use appropriate language – no offensive comments.
- Allow everyone to express their view to ensure that everyone is heard and respected.
- Invite young people to give reasons why they have a particular view.

Depending on the sensitivity of the issue, it might be appropriate to split the class into smaller groups relating to gender or experiences. This will ensure that greater confidentiality exists and enables less confident young people to express their opinions in a less-pressured environment. A particularly effective way of creating ownership of a discussion or activity is for the group to draw up the ground rules for themselves at the beginning. The group is then able to regulate its own learning process.

## ACTIVITIES

The following activities exemplify how controversial issues can be incorporated into sessions for all ages and across the curriculum, supporting learners to develop some of the key elements of global citizenship education. In all cases, you may find that standard circle time or speaking and listening warm-up activities are useful in creating the right space in which learners can explore controversial issues.

### Activity 1 - Diversity

#### All About Me (Early Years)

**Aim:** Learners will become aware of similarities and differences between people; improve their listening skills; and gain a sense of identity and self-worth. This activity is adapted from *Developing Circle Time* by Teresa Bliss, George Robinson and Barbara Maines.<sup>23</sup>

Within sharing or circle time, or in small groups, suggest the beginning of one of the following sentences and invite learners to complete it:



## Activity 3 - Social justice and equity

### Captions (7–11 years)

**Note:** It may be useful to model some example captions with the class before starting this activity.

1. Ask learners to select and cut out five photographs from magazines or newspapers (or print out images from the internet) and stick each picture on a plain sheet of paper. Ask learners to write one negative and one positive caption for each of the images.
2. Display the work around the classroom and discuss the impact that the different captions have on learners' perceptions of the places and any people in the photographs.
3. Then discuss as a class the examples of photographs and captions that promote stereotypes, generalised or racist views.
- 4.



## Activity 4 - Gender

Challenging perceptions of gender (8–14 years) Adapted from the Gender Respect project, DECSY<sup>2</sup> <sup>5</sup>

**Aim:** This activity encourages learners to think critically about gender, and to reflect on how and why mainstream gender stereotypes exist. It is a starting point for a wider discussion about gender stereotypes.

### Resources

- Copies of the lists of terms provided below.
- Large plain sheets of paper.

1. Organise learners into pairs or groups of three and give each group a sheet of paper and a copy of one of the lists of words: *Adjectives*, *Jobs* or *Domestic roles*. The job roles can be adapted to be age appropriate.
2. Ask learners to draw a large Venn diagram on their sheet of paper. Next, ask learners to cut out and place the words/statements on the Venn diagram according to whether they perceive the word/statement to be *Female*, *Male* or *Non-gender specific*. They could add their own examples of adjectives, jobs and domestic roles. Teachers could ask learners to approach this from the perspective of society in general rather than focusing on personal views. Learners may recognise that although the prevailing norm ascribes gender to these roles and characteristics, they may know many examples to the contrary. Educators might also want to explore the binary nature of this activity in the light of LGBT+.
3. Invite learners to share and discuss their groupings. *How did they decide? What sort of discussions were had? Where do their ideas about how to decide come from?* Note: With the list of domestic roles, it is likely that learners will be influenced by what happens in their family. This may cause sensitivity, for example if a learner is in a single parent family or if one or both of their parents goes out to work.
4. Ask learners' whether they think that their answers would look different if the activity was done:
  - During the period when their parents and grandparents were children?
  - By a child in 20 years' time?
  - By a child in another country?
  - In which countries do learners think young people might give different answers?
5. Discuss whether learners think that these gender roles should be challenged: *Can they think of examples that do not conform to gender specific categories? Which words could be gender-neutral? Which words should be gender-neutral?*
6. Discuss what this activity has taught learners about gender roles and their perceptions: *How do they think the roles of men and women are changing? What changes would learners like to see?*

Adjectives	Jobs	Domestic roles
Strong	Nurse	Cooking
Caring	Chef	Gardening
Kind	Teacher	Doing the washing up
Tough	Pilot	DIY
Thoughtful	Soldier	Doing the shopping
Clever	Carer	Cleaning
Brave	Footballer	Paying the bills
Mean	Artist	Ironing
Sporty	Doctor	Fixing a technical problem
Noisy	Firefighter	Doing the laundry
Quiet	Headteacher	Putting the rubbish out
Bold	Dancer	Child-care
Friendly	Social worker	Cleaning the car
Confident	Inventor	Making decisions





## Activity 7 - Philosophy for Children

(All age groups)

**Aim:** This activity develops a community of enquiry through quality dialogue in group discussions.

### A summary of how P4C works in a typical session:

- Young people are taught how to create philosophical questions, inspired by a “stimulus” that might be a piece of text, story, film or activity.
- They then collectively choose one question to be the focus of an enquiry (dialogue).
- Young people usually sit in a circle and the teacher, as the facilitator, enables them to have a quality dialogue by introducing philosophical skills and language.
- The facilitator also supports the development of the “4Cs”: critical, creative, caring and collaborative thinking.
- The community reflects on the enquiry, and plans for improvement in the next session.
- P4C is intended to be a regular activity so that the young people develop their thinking and reasoning skills over time.

The stimulus material can be drawn from a variety of sources such as storybooks, photographs or cartoons that are age appropriate. Some examples of open-ended questions for facilitators are suggested by Professor Robert Fisher in his book *Teaching Thinking*:<sup>27</sup>

#### 1. Questions that seek clarification:

- |  |                 |
|--|-----------------|
| • Can you explain that...?               | Explaining      |
| • What do you mean by...?                | Defining        |
| • Can you give me an example of...?      | Giving examples |
| • How does that help...?                 | Supporting      |
| • Does anyone have a question to ask...? | Enquiring       |

#### 2. Questions that probe reasons and evidence:

- |  |                     |
|--|---------------------|
| • Why do you think that...?                      | Forming an argument |
| • How do you know that...?                       | Assumptions         |
| • What are your reasons...?                      | Reasons             |
| • Do you have any evidence...?                   | Evidence            |
| • Can you give me an example/counter-example...? | Counter examples    |

#### 3. Questions that explore alternative views:

- |  |                   |
|--|-------------------|
| • Can you put it another way...?                       | Re-stating a view |
| • Is there another point of view...?                   | Speculation       |
| • What if someone else were to suggest that...?        | Alternative views |
| • What would someone who disagreed with you say...?    | Counter-arguments |
| • What is the difference between those views/ideas...? | Distinctions      |

#### 4. Questions that test implications and consequences:

- |   |                    |
|---|--------------------|
| • What follows on from what you are saying...?    | Implications       |
| • Does it agree with what you said earlier...?    | Consistency        |
| • What would be the consequence of that...?       | Consequences       |
| • Is there a general rule for that...?            | Generalising rules |
| • How could you test to see if that were true...? | Testing for truth  |

#### 5. Questions about the question/discussion:

- |   |                       |
|---|-----------------------|
| • Do you have a question about that...?                   | Questioning           |
| • What kind of question is it...?                         | Analysing             |
| • How does what was said/the question help us...?         | Connecting            |
| • Where have we got to/who can summarise so far...?       | Summarising           |
| • Are we any closer to answering the question/problem...? | Coming to conclusions |

If you are new to P4C, you might like to find out more about the methodology. See [www.sapere.org.uk](http://www.sapere.org.uk)



## PHILOSOPHY FOR CHILDREN (P4C) CASE STUDY

Lancashire Global Education Centre ran sessions with disengaged young people at a local secondary school. The stimulus used was a real-life refugee story of a young person forced to escape his/her home country and settle in the UK.

## Activity 8 - Values continuum

Exchanging views (11–16 years)

**Aim:** This activity will generate discussion about a controversial issue, encouraging learners to listen to the opinions of others and develop reasoning skills.

### Resources

- Small pieces of paper or card, one for each learner.

1. Read the following statement to the class: “Violence is never justified in protests, either by protesters or by the police”.
2. Ask learners to choose their position on this statement and write it on their piece of paper. Next, ask learners to rank this between one and five, with one being “strongly disagree” and five, “strongly agree”.
3. Ask learners to find someone who shares their viewpoint and discuss the statement for three minutes. If learners change their mind at any point, they can write their new position on their piece of paper.
4. Then ask learners to move on to find someone whose position is one step removed from their own and discuss the statement, before finding someone who has a very different view from them.
5. Finally, come together as a class and discuss the process.
  - How many learners found that they changed their position?
  - What led them to change their mind?
  - What have learners gained from this process?



## REFLECTION

Having completed any of the activities above, it is valuable to take time to reflect on the process with learners.

### Ask learners:

- What skills did you learn/develop from this activity?
- What were the challenges?
- How did you overcome these challenges?
- If you were to do the same activity again with a different issue, how would you approach it?  
In a similar or different way? Why?
- How could this activity be made more challenging?
- Are there any other issues that you could explore using this technique?

Finish by asking learners to look at the key elements for developing active and responsible global citizenship (provided in the table on page 7).

- How has this activity contributed to their role as active global citizens?

## References

1. [education.gov.scot/](http://education.gov.scot/)
2. [learning.gov.wales](http://learning.gov.wales)
3. [www.gov.uk/government/organisations/department-for-education](http://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/department-for-education)
- 4.

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