

# Teaching Controversial Issues at Key Stage 3



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## Acknowledgements

CCEA would like to acknowledge the invaluable support and guidance provided by the principals and teachers from the following schools:

Drumragh Integrated College  
Lurgan Junior High School  
Nendrum College  
New Bridge Integrated College  
St Dominic’s Grammar School for Girls  
St Mary’s High School (Lurgan)



# Introduction

Addressing the teaching of controversial issues can be difficult for school leaders and teachers. The main reason for this is that they are issues which divide people's opinions within society. Groups of people within society may hold different values. They promote opposing viewpoints. They offer alternative interpretations and explanations for events to suit their position or agenda (Stradling, 1985).

Controversial and sensitive issues can arise in all subjects. Whether they are planned or unplanned. Schools and all subject teachers need to be prepared to discuss these issues with young people.

Teaching controversial and sensitive issues can be challenging because they may be based on or lead to conflicting values and arouse strong feelings in pupils. However, there are significant benefits. Pupils can gain a deeper understanding of such issues. They can develop skills such as critical thinking and how to communicate better. They can become more emotionally aware. Research also suggests that learning about controversial issues helps prepare pupils for civic and political participation (Barton and McCully, 2007a).

Research also shows that teachers may avoid teaching controversial issues for a variety of reasons including lack of confidence (Barton and McCully, 2007b; Fournier-Sylvester, 2013).

Therefore, this guidance supports principals, senior leaders/managers and teachers to plan and develop approaches to teaching controversial issues at whole-school and classroom levels.

We have designed this guidance to complement and add value to other guidance and work on controversial issues. It focuses on teaching controversial issues at Key Stage 3. However, you can apply the teaching and learning approaches in Key Stage 4.

## Aim

The guidance aims to:

- support the development of a whole-school approach to teaching controversial issues within the context of the Northern Ireland Curriculum;
- support schools to develop quality teaching and learning; and
- support teachers to develop the confidence, skills and motivation to teach controversial issues.

## The policy context

This guidance supports the following policies and strategies:

- Advancing Shared Education (Connelly et al., 2013)
- Community Relations, Equality and Diversity in Education (CRED), (DENI, 2011)
- Every School A Good School: A Policy for School Improvement, (DENI, 2009a)
- Together: Building a United Community (OFMDFM, 2013a).

## CCEA guidance and resources

Schools and teachers may find it useful to refer to the following CCEA resources. These are referred to in this guidance. They are available at **[www.nicurriculum.org.uk](http://www.nicurriculum.org.uk)**

- *Assessment for Learning-A Practical Guide* (CCEA, 2009)
- *Active Teaching and Learning Methods for Key Stage 3* (CCEA, 2007a)
- *Communication Skills: Levels of Progression in Communication across the Curriculum: Key Stage 3*
- *Insync: Personal Development* (CCEA, 2007b)
- *Thinking Skills and Personal Capabilities at Key Stage 3* (CCEA, 2007c)
- *Thinking Skills and Personal Capabilities Progression Maps* (CCEA, 2007d)
- *Guidance on Teaching, Learning and Assessment at Key Stage 4* (CCEA, 2013).

## Other guidance

- *Joined Up: Developing Good Relations in the School Community* (NICIE, 2005) available at **[www.endbullying.org.uk](http://www.endbullying.org.uk)**
- *Tackling Controversial Issues in the Citizenship Classroom: A Resource for Citizenship Education* (CDVEC Curriculum Development Unit), available at **[www.curriculum.ie](http://www.curriculum.ie)**
- The Historical Association, *T.E.A.C.H. Teaching Emotive and Controversial History: A Report from The Historical Association on the Challenges and Opportunities for Teaching Emotive and Controversial History 3-19*, available at **[www.history.org.uk](http://www.history.org.uk)**

# Section 1

The nature and scope  
of controversial issues



## Section 1

# The nature and scope of controversial issues

### Introduction

Research shows that there is a lot of discussion about what controversial issues are, why they should be taught in schools, and what makes an issue controversial. As there is no agreed definition of what controversial issues are (Berg et al., 2003) this guidance defines them as issues which divide people's opinions within society; groups of people within society may hold different values, promote opposing viewpoints, and offer alternate interpretations and explanations for events to suit their position or agenda. This section explores the concept of controversial issues and outlines some of the challenges and benefits of teaching them.

### What are controversial issues?

Controversial issues are those which people feel are important to them and to society. Issues become controversial when people hold conflicting or opposing viewpoints. People may have strong beliefs and feelings about an issue which can lead to complex emotional responses. Examples of controversial issues include genetic engineering, global warming, stem cell research, euthanasia, abortion, and so on. However, in Northern Ireland controversial issues often relate to the more recent past and to religion, culture and identity. Controversial issues can give rise to strong emotional responses from people. People's emotions are often barriers to resolving the issue by reason (McCully, 2005) (see also CDVEC, 2012; NICIE, 2005; T.E.A.C.H, 2007).

Controversial issues are complex. They are influenced by young people's culture, religious beliefs, experiences, values, and sense of group/community belonging and identity (Oulton et al., 2004). This can make teaching these issues challenging for teachers. It is often the dynamics around the issue which make it controversial (Figure 1).

Generally, controversial issues are ones which:

- deeply divide a society;
- arouse great feelings of emotion;
- generate conflicting arguments and debates;
- have competing values and interests; and
- are complex.

### What can make an issue controversial?

An issue might be controversial because there isn't enough information or evidence available for an informed debate about it. People can use information, sometimes intentionally, to present a biased viewpoint. Issues are also likely to be controversial when people believe that they are part of an agenda serving political, religious or economic interests (Figure 1).

Generally, an issue is controversial:

- when it arouses great public interest;
- there are competing values and interests;
- people strongly disagree about statements, assertions, and actions to be taken;
- there is a great deal of political sensitivity; and
- it arouses strong emotions.



Figure 1: What makes an issue controversial?

The argument or debate that can make an issue controversial is usually down to the following:

- Interpretations and competing versions of what has happened
- Interpretations and competing versions of why something has happened
- Perceived agendas
- Desirable outcomes
- The likely effect of action.

### What are the general controversial issues in Northern Ireland?

In Northern Ireland society, as in other societies, there is a range of what might be considered controversial public issues. These include abortion, creationism, evolution genetic engineering, and so on (Hess, 2002) (Appendix 1 provides further examples of public controversial issues). These issues are also likely to arise within certain subjects as shown in the following examples:

- Science e.g. creationism, evolution, genetic engineering, animal testing and stem cell research.
- Religious Education e.g. abortion, same sex marriage, the death penalty and assisted suicide.
- Personal Development e.g. sexuality and relationships, sexual orientation and child abuse.

In subjects such as, English and Drama young people can explore a range of controversial and sensitive issues including those above through, literature, poetry and moving image and participate and express their views in debates and discussion.

Although public controversial issues generate strong views the teacher can usually support discussion by using an enquiry-based approach focussing on researching evidence and reasoned argument (Barton and McCully, 2007b).

### Controversial issues specific to Northern Ireland

In Northern Ireland there are other local controversial issues such as parades, emblems, flags and commemoration. These issues are associated with the past – religion, identity and culture. Discussing these issues in the classroom can elicit a strong emotional response from some pupils. The emotional dimension makes these issues different from other controversial public issues (Barton and McCully, 2007b; McCully, 2005).

With many controversial issues in Northern Ireland, people can disagree on what happened in the past, why it happened, or on a way forward. Even when people agree on the causes of a situation they can often disagree about what the desirable outcome should be, or how it might be brought to an end. Perhaps the best recent example of this is the Hass talks (BBC News, 2013; OFMDM, 2013b).

### Teaching controversial issues in a divided society

The period of conflict euphemistically referred to as the ‘Troubles’ (1968-1998) has left a legacy in Northern Ireland. While the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement has led to a more stable and peaceful society, it remains divided. Over the years, Northern Ireland has often been portrayed as a sectarian society comprising two main communities: Catholic/Nationalist/Republican and Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist. Although the ‘Troubles’ ended with the signing of the Agreement in 1998 some people still hold strong views and feelings around issues which they view as unresolved (Bell et. al., 2010). This makes teaching controversial issues particularly challenging (Niens et al., 2013; McCully, 2005).

While many of these issues such as sovereignty, identity, victims/survivors and justice relate to the past, they also have a profound effect on the present; debates, actions and decisions relating to these issues will shape the future of Northern Ireland society. Therefore, it is crucial that schools provide young people with opportunities to engage in difficult conversations about controversial issues. History and Local and Global Citizenship are two of the main (although not the only) subjects through which the following can be taught:

- many controversial issues related to the legacy of conflict in Northern Ireland; and
- the causes and consequences of divisions in society (DENI, 2011; DENI, 2012; also see *Together: Building a United Community* (OFMDM, 2013a).

Although today young people of school age will not have direct experience of the conflict, many are likely to have indirect experiences through older family members and relatives. Some may have been involved in the conflict as members of the security forces or paramilitary organisations. Others may have had family members and relatives who were innocent victims or survivors of the conflict.



**Drumragh Integrated College:** Teachers and Year 10 pupils consider Northern Ireland's past (History class).

Research suggests that young people's thinking is influenced by strong community associations. Therefore, young people often have strong emotional ties to particular cultural and political positions, which may hinder their ability to think critically when encountering sensitive material (Reilly and McCully, 2011). This means that they can sometimes react with suspicion and anger. They can often have an emotional response rather than a reasoned and rational dialogue about the issue. This can present a serious challenge for the teacher.

In Northern Ireland and other divided societies people can hold strong opposing views about, for example:

- what happened;
- interpretations of events;
- how issues can be resolved; and
- desirable outcomes.

In the classroom young people's views may be no less controversial (Berg et al., 2003).

Therefore, teachers need to have the confidence, skills and motivation to engage young people in exploring controversial issues. They also must be prepared to deal with young people's emotional responses (Barton and McCully, 2007b).



**New Bridge Integrated College:** Year 10 pupils learning about prejudice through reading the book *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* (English class).

### Teaching controversial issues in a diverse and multicultural society

While Northern Ireland remains a divided society, it is also more diverse and multicultural than ever before. This is reflected in the school population and acknowledged in the DENI CRED Policy (2011).

Unfortunately, this more diverse Northern Ireland society has given rise to increased prejudice and discrimination towards two minority groups in particular. There has been an increase in racism and racist attacks against people from ethnic minorities groups, and discrimination towards people from the Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Community (LGBT) (see ECNI, 2013). These types of prejudice and discrimination in wider society are mirrored in schools, with increased incidents of racist and homophobic bullying (ibid.).

If schools are to challenge these and other forms of discrimination they need to support pupils to develop a deeper understanding of some of the controversial issues related to race, cultural identity, sexual orientation, and transgender identity.

### Why teach controversial issues?

Democratic societies support human rights and promote the right of free speech. They encourage and expect people to participate in politics and society. A vital part of this is supporting young people to participate in public discussions about issues arising in politics, society, and the economy. Young people should be encouraged to express and share their views on issues, some of which will be controversial.

Research shows that although teaching controversial issues in Northern Ireland presents significant challenges for teachers, there are also important benefits to the young person and wider society (Barton and McCully, 2007b; Bell et al., 2010; CDVEC Curriculum Development Unit, 2012; NICIE, 2005; T.E.A.C.H., 2007).

### The challenges of teaching controversial issues

- Teachers may lack confidence and experience of teaching controversial issues.
- Teachers may lack knowledge and understanding about an issue or the skills to effectively engage pupils in discussions.
- It is difficult to deal with pupils' emotional response.
- Although teachers can plan the teaching of controversial issues, they still can lead to unexpected outcomes.
- There may be disagreement amongst pupils and heated discussion between opposing sides. This can unsettle and may upset some pupils.
- Teachers must be able to facilitate effective discussion.
- It creates issues for the teacher around managing pupils' behaviour and emotions.
- Teaching these issues may lead to complaints from parents/carers and others in the wider community.
- The school ethos may not support the teaching of certain controversial issues.

### The benefits for pupils of teaching controversial issues

Pupils can:

- develop a deeper understanding about important issues;
- learn to handle disagreement and acknowledge other viewpoints, and to resolve conflict;
- develop an understanding of their emotions and those of others;
- learn to work collaboratively;
- develop their communication skills;
- develop empathy;
- become better able to manage their emotions and emotional responses;
- learn to respect the views of others;
- develop higher levels of self-esteem and confidence;
- develop higher order thinking skills and learn how to become critically reflective thinkers;
- learn how to clarify their thoughts and values;
- learn to think for themselves;
- develop their capacity for ethical and moral reasoning;
- become more informed and better prepared to make a positive contribution to society; and
- become better able to participate, both in a civic and political sense.



# Section 2

The Northern Ireland  
Curriculum and  
teaching controversial  
issues



## Section 2

# The Northern Ireland Curriculum and teaching controversial issues

The Key Stage 3 Northern Ireland Curriculum provides a range of opportunities for teaching controversial issues (see Appendix 2, The 'Big Picture' of the Curriculum at Key Stage 3). Controversial issues can be taught within subjects. They can also be taught across the curriculum using curriculum key elements which are integrated within all subjects. These include personal understanding, mutual understanding, moral character, citizenship, cultural understanding and ethical awareness.

Appendix 3 illustrates how teaching controversial issues through the Key Stage 3 curriculum key elements can support pupils to develop knowledge, understanding, skills and capabilities.

### Developing skills and capabilities

Teaching controversial issues through an enquiry-based approach can support pupils to develop certain aspects of skills and capabilities alongside subject knowledge and understanding. This helps them to:

- construct their own learning;
- gain a deeper understanding of concepts and issues; and
- make progress in their learning.

See CCEA guidance on *Thinking Skills and Personal Capabilities at Key Stage 3* (CCEA, 2007c), available at [www.nicurriculum.org.uk](http://www.nicurriculum.org.uk)



**St Dominic's Grammar School:** Year 10 pupils participate in a silent conversation activity using source materials in a lesson about the holocaust. Pupils explore the consequences of people's actions and who has the right to judge others (History class).

## Developing Thinking Skills and Personal Capabilities

When planning the teaching of controversial issues teachers might find it useful to refer to the CCEA *Thinking Skills and Personal Capabilities Progression Maps* (CCEA, 2007d). These are available for all Key Stage 3 subjects at [www.nicurriculum.org.uk](http://www.nicurriculum.org.uk)

Teachers can use the subject progression maps to identify learning opportunities for pupils to develop aspects of Thinking Skills and Personal Capabilities. Once pupils have acquired these skills and capabilities teachers can support them to apply, develop, transfer and use them across subjects. The following are examples of ways that pupils might develop Thinking Skills and Personal Capabilities through learning about controversial issues.

## Managing Information

In English and Local and Global Citizenship pupils might, for example, explore racism. Pupils could identify questions to ask and plan their research. They could explore the causes and consequences of racism. They could select, classify, compare and evaluate different sources of information, for example PSNI statistics and media reports on racism. Pupils could then record, adapt and communicate their findings.

## Thinking, Problem-Solving and Decision-Making

In History and Local and Global Citizenship pupils could investigate the causes and effects of division on cultural identity in Northern Ireland society. They could explore the causes and consequences of a local issue or incident and relate this to past events. Pupils could gather and analyse a range of evidence from different perspectives. They could then consider options, weigh up pros and cons, propose solutions, form opinions and justify their views.



**St Dominic's Grammar School:** Year 10 pupils discuss Northern Ireland's past and who the past belongs to with local journalist and author Jude Collins (History class).

### Being Creative

The curriculum key element of Personal Understanding provides pupils with the opportunity to explore personal identity in different subjects, such as English, Drama, Local and Global Citizenship and Personal Development. Pupils might consider the idea of multiple identities. This could include considering sexual identity such as sexual orientation and transgender identity. Teachers could encourage pupils to use their initiative, ask and find their own answers, and seek out and explore some of the issues around sexual identity. Pupils could explore why people hold different views and how this can lead to stereotyping, prejudice and discrimination. Part of the learning process involves pupils taking risks, and turning mistakes into new learning.

### Working with Others

Teaching controversial issues presents opportunities for pupils to work with others. Pupils could work together, learning to co-operate and to research information. For example, in History and Local and Global Citizenship they could work together to research issues such as parading and commemoration. In the English class pupils might work in groups to research and present arguments for and against Loyalist/Republican parades. Pupils could participate in discussions, presenting their views, listening actively to others, and influencing group thinking and decision-making while taking account of others' opinions. In Drama pupils could work together to devise scripts, create a role-play or take part in improvisation to explore issues around racism and its impact on individuals and society.



**St Dominic's Grammar School:** Year 10 pupils developing their skills of working with others as they learn about how propaganda is used to influence public opinion (History class).

## Self-Management

To learn about controversial issues pupils need to be open-minded to the views of others. They have to be willing to have others question and scrutinise their ideas. These experiences help pupils to be more self-aware and to think about their own values, views and emotions, and to reflect on their learning experiences.

## Developing Cross-Curricular Skills

Teaching controversial issues presents opportunities for pupils to develop aspects of Cross-Curricular Skills: Communication, Using Mathematics and Using ICT. Teaching these issues focuses strongly on developing pupils' communication skills and in particular, their talking and listening skills, for example:

- listening to and taking part in discussions, explanations, role-plays and presentations;
- contributing comments, asking questions and responding to others' points of view;
- communicating information, ideas, opinions, feelings and imaginings using an expanding vocabulary;
- structuring their talk and speaking clearly so that ideas can be understood by others;
- adapting ways of speaking to the audience and situation; and
- using non-verbal methods to express ideas and engage with the listener.

Teachers can also plan a range of opportunities for pupils to develop their communication skills in reading and writing (see Key Stage 3 Cross-Curricular Skills: Communication [www.nicurriculum.org.uk](http://www.nicurriculum.org.uk)).

## Values

Values are generally long-term standards or principles which people judge an idea or action against. Values provide the criteria by which we decide whether something is 'good' or 'bad', 'right' or 'wrong'.

Pupils often have to make value-based judgments about a controversial issue. As pupils may hold different values they are likely to disagree on decisions about what ought to be done or what should be done, or on judgements about the rightness and wrongness of a situation.

Therefore, teachers may find it helpful to teach about controversial issues with reference to Human Rights values such as:

- Equality
- Diversity
- Inclusion
- Respect for the others and their views
- Respect for justice
- Conflict resolution by democratic means.

(See also CDVEC, Curriculum Development Unit, 2007; NICIE, 2005)

### Attitudes and Dispositions

Learning about controversial issues can help pupils develop positive attitudes and dispositions (Appendix 2).

**Attitude** is a state of mind. It involves feelings, beliefs, values and dispositions to act in certain ways.

**Disposition** is a habit. It is a tendency to act in a given way.

Attitudes and dispositions such as personal responsibility, commitment, self-belief, curiosity and flexibility support pupils to become more independent in their learning.

Attitudes and dispositions such as concern for others, empathy, community spirit, tolerance, respect and moral courage support pupils to become active citizens.

# Section 3

Developing a  
whole-school approach



## Section 3

# Developing a whole-school approach

Schools could consider developing a whole-school approach to teaching controversial issues. The approach can be based on supporting quality teaching and learning in the classroom (see Appendix 4: Characteristics of quality teaching and learning in the classroom). Teaching controversial issues could be part of the school self-evaluation (DENI, 2010a) and development planning process (DENI, 2010b). It could also be a focus for teacher self-reflection against professional competencies (GTCNI, 2011).

### Benefits of a whole-school approach

The benefits of developing a whole-school approach to teaching controversial issues include the following:

- It supports improvements in teaching and learning.
- It establishes a clear rationale for teaching controversial issues.
- It helps to clarify how controversial issues are defined and what controversial issues are.
- It develops a shared understanding amongst teachers and pupils of what makes an issue controversial.
- It encourages the teaching of controversial issues.
- It supports a consistent approach to teaching controversial issues across subjects.
- It enables learning connections to be made between subjects.
- It encourages teachers to use a range of active, enquiry-based teaching and learning methodologies.
- It provides opportunities for teachers from different subjects to share practice and expertise and build staff capacity for teaching controversial issues.
- It supports the teaching of complex controversial issues from different subject perspectives.
- It provides a safe forum for pupils to engage, share and debate views with others.
- It helps to prepare pupils to participate, both in a civic and political sense.

### Challenges for school leaders

While there is a range of benefits to pupils, the school and wider society of teaching controversial issues, developing a whole-school approach presents challenges to school leaders. These include the following:

- Teachers may feel vulnerable when teaching contentious political issues.
- Teachers may have their own views on certain controversial issues and feel that they cannot teach these in an objective way.
- Teachers may feel that they lack the knowledge, skills and expertise to teach controversial issues.
- Teachers may be concerned that complicated issues would take too long to cover and that other aspects of the curriculum would be neglected.
- Certain controversial issues have personal resonance with their pupils, their families and their communities.
- External influences, including those of parents/carers and the community, may make schools and teachers reluctant to teach certain controversial issues.
- The school Board of Governors may not support the teaching of certain controversial issues.
- Certain controversial issues may conflict with school values.
- Some issues may be considered to be 'too controversial.' A teacher perceived to challenge the majority view or to question prevailing values may be open to criticism.
- Practical constraints around timetabling and classroom management may make it difficult for teachers to find and create the right classroom space for teaching controversial issues.

## The role of senior leaders

The school Senior Leadership Team has a key role to play in overcoming the challenges above and leading the development of a whole-school approach to teaching controversial issues. This could be part of the school self-evaluation (DENI, 2010a) and development planning cycle (DENI, 2010b). The role of a member or members of SLT in consultation and collaboration with colleagues could include the following:

## Evaluate and review

- Review the school's current policy on teaching controversial issues
- Review relevant guidance and identify links with teaching controversial issues
- Consult with the school Board of Governors, teachers, pupils, parents/carers and the wider community
- Ask teachers what concerns they might have about teaching controversial issues
- Clarify school values and consider how they support or conflict with controversial issues
- Use consultation evidence to identify controversial issues which are likely to be particularly problematic and why
- Use this guidance and other sources to create models of effective practice for teaching controversial issues.

## Identify strengths and prioritise areas for improvement

- Identify effective practice of teaching controversial issues within the school
- Use examples of current practice to identify key factors that contribute to effective teaching of controversial issues, for example enquiry-based learning, effective questioning, managing emotional responses, active teaching and learning methods, and so on
- Identify and prioritise areas for improvement
- Reach consensus on how controversial issues will be defined
- Work with heads of department to compile a list of the main controversial issues in each subject
- Consult with heads of department, teachers and pupils about effective and engaging teaching and learning approaches
- Discuss how controversial issues are currently taught in the school and how they might be taught differently
- Consider the role of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and community groups in supporting the teaching of controversial issues
- Identify training needs for teachers to teach controversial issues
- Identify resource requirements.

## Plan and implement action

- Plan outcomes for a whole-school approach to teaching controversial issues:
  - This might be a staged implementation. Outcomes could focus on teaching controversial issues in certain subjects, classes or years.
  - Outcomes might focus on developing aspects of effective practice, for example building pupil relationships, facilitating discussion, the use of effective questioning, and so on.
- Develop an action plan
- Set SMART targets
- Decide actions and timescales for completion
- Identify key people involved

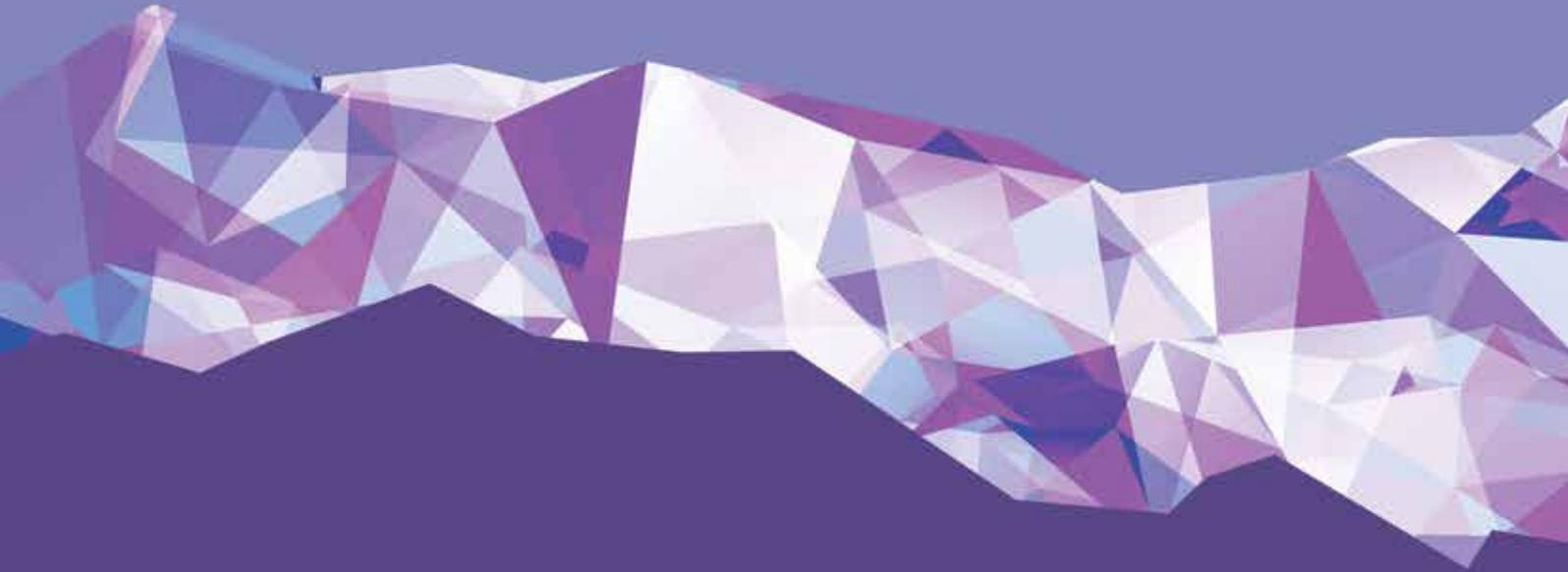
- Define roles and responsibilities
- Identify training needs for teachers to teach controversial issues
- Identify resource requirements
- Set success criteria.

### Monitor and evaluate

- Establish monitoring, evaluation and review procedures
- Identify what evidence will be gathered, when it will be gathered and by whom
- Agree on how progress will be measured
- Ensure communication to staff is clear, and give regular feedback.

# Section 4

Reviewing and  
developing policy



## Section 4

# Reviewing and developing policy

The teaching of controversial issues can itself be controversial. Teachers, pupils, parents/carers and those in the wider community are likely to have diverse and often opposing views about certain issues. This can leave the schools and teachers open to being challenged about why or how a certain issue is taught. Therefore, if a school does not have a policy for the teaching of controversial issues, it could consider either integrating it within another appropriate school policy(ies), or creating a separate policy for teaching controversial issues.

When a school reviews its policies in relation to teaching controversial issues, it could consider other relevant policies and make appropriate links. This could include the DENI CRED Policy (2011) and Guidance Notes, (DENI, 2012). Schools might also consider ways in which teaching controversial issues might provide opportunities for developing cross-community links and promoting shared education (Connolly, et al., 2013).

When reviewing policy, schools might find the following questions helpful:

- Is teaching controversial issues covered in any school policy(ies)?
- If so, is the information up to date and relevant?
- Is teaching controversial issues covered by separate subject policies?
- Is there a need to have a separate whole-school policy on teaching controversial issues?
- Does school policy link school values to the teaching of controversial issues? If so, how?
- Is the teaching of controversial issues linked to policy aims and objectives?
- Is the rationale for teaching controversial issues clearly communicated in policy?
- Are there guidelines on working with NGOs, community groups and guest speakers?
- Are teachers and parents/carers aware of policies that relate to teaching controversial issues?

Schools could consider, for example, aligning policies related to pastoral care and personal development with the following principles:

- Emphasise school values and how they underpin policy and rationale
- Emphasise the need for creating a classroom culture of mutual trust and respect
- Encourage pupils to think and freely express their views
- Encourage and support teachers to move from teaching around 'safe issues' to those which are controversial and likely to cause conflict
- Support teachers and pupils to recognise and value disagreement as a healthy and natural part of everyday life in a democratic society
- Support teachers and pupils to recognise the importance of being able to live with uncertainty and differences rather than settle for more simplistic solutions
- Clarify how teachers are expected to respond to inappropriate remarks/comments by pupils
- Ensure a consistent approach to working with NGOs, community groups and guest speakers
- Highlight the importance of the pupils' intellectual and emotional development and the need for pupils to:
  - develop and apply critical thinking skills;
  - develop their understanding of self and their ability to clarify their values and recognise, articulate and manage their emotions; and
  - develop positive attitudes and dispositions.

# Section 5

Developing effective  
practice



## Section 5

# Developing effective practice

When planning and developing effective practice for teaching controversial issues at whole-school level, schools could consider the following:

### Supporting the teaching of controversial issues

A whole-school approach to teaching controversial issues is more likely to succeed when there is a committed and supportive attitude from the school's Board of Governors and Senior Leadership Team towards the teachers. Teaching controversial issues often takes teachers beyond their 'comfort zone' and can expose them to risk and criticism, so it is important that they know that they have the school's support. School leaders can support teachers by:

- ensuring policies and procedures are in place which address teaching controversial issues with clarity;
- encouraging and motivating them to teach controversial issues;
- providing a forum for them to voice any concerns they may have about teaching controversial issues;
- encouraging collaborative working between teachers and departments and sharing practice;
- supporting Continuing Professional Development (CPD) of teachers and teaching controversial issues; and
- supporting the teaching of controversial issues by providing opportunities for them to work with other schools across the community.

### Engaging parents/carers

Parents/carers play a crucial role in supporting their child's education (DENI, 2009a; Harris and Goodall, 2007). When teaching controversial issues it is important for schools to consult with parents/carers. Schools can inform parents/carers about the main controversial issues being taught, school policy, and the rationale for teaching controversial issues. This gives parents/carers the opportunity to discuss any concerns they may have and to clarify any misunderstandings or perceptions around why certain issues are being taught.

When discussing controversial issues with parents/carers, schools could:

- explain their place in the Northern Ireland Curriculum;
- highlight the benefits of teaching controversial issues to their child's learning and in helping to prepare them for life beyond school;
- reassure parents/carers that issues are being taught in a balanced way from a variety of viewpoints; and
- provide an information sheet for parents/carers outlining what controversial issues are, why they are taught, and the school's approach to teaching them.

Below is an example of a school's guidelines for parents/carers on how teachers will ensure balanced teaching of controversial issues.

Teachers in our school will:

- facilitate discussion, rather than being the leading authority on a topic.

Teachers in our school will not:

- present their own views as factual evidence to the pupils;
- present their own views about the views of others; and
- present information as opinions and not as indisputable facts.



**New Bridge Integrated College:** Year 10 pupils discussing prejudice. The teacher uses the school's easy steps guidance cards in her hand for teaching controversial issues (English class).

## Planning for progression

Teaching controversial issues should be planned within and across subjects as pupils move from Year 8 to Year 10. Teachers need to plan, monitor and assess progression in knowledge and understanding alongside skills and capabilities. Progression is about teachers enabling pupils to:

- build confidence and acquire and develop the skills and capabilities required to engage in increasingly complex controversial issues;
- recognise and manage their emotions and respond appropriately;
- know and understand more about the issues being explored;
- think more critically about controversial issues – research, question and analyse information; deconstruct ideas; and draw conclusions;
- communicate better – create and present reasoned arguments, and form and restructure responses in clearer and better ways;
- apply their learning to dealing with unfamiliar controversial issues;
- become more capable – think about thinking and learning, learn from mistakes; challenge and reflect their own thinking, views and values and those of others; and
- work with others – negotiate with and influence the views of others, and manage and resolve conflict.

When planning progression in learning about controversial issues, teachers could use the following CCEA Key Stage 3 resources to plan, monitor and assess progress, for example in:

- Talking and Listening – communication skills, Levels of Progression and *Generic Characteristics of Communication Key Stage 3*
- Thinking Skills and Personal Capabilities Subject Progression Maps for Key Stage 3
- emotional development – *Insync* (Personal Development)
- subjects – *Guidance on Subject Assessment at Key Stage 3*.

See also *Guidance on Teaching, Learning and Assessment at Key Stage 4* (CCEA, 2013).

The above resources are available at [www.nicurriculum.org.uk](http://www.nicurriculum.org.uk)

### Establishing a safe and secure environment

Teachers and pupils may find discussing controversial issues uncomfortable. The issue may have personal meaning for teachers and pupils, or it could conflict with their values and beliefs, especially if it involves identity and religion. Pupils may find it difficult to express and manage their emotions. Some pupils find it difficult to participate in class discussion because they lack the communication skills or the ability to think critically about the issue. Pupils may lack confidence or worry about being ridiculed, making a mistake, or giving a ‘wrong answer.’

Therefore, it is important that schools create a safe and supportive environment which encourages teachers and pupils to openly discuss controversial issues. Teachers could consult with pupils about creating a school culture which promotes and encourages discussions on controversial issues. Pupils could contribute to creating classroom procedures for discussing such issues and resolving conflict. Pupils can help to create an environment where they feel confident and willing to take the risk of expressing a minority view or one which challenges the status quo.

### Acknowledging prior learning

The school and teachers need to take into account the backgrounds of pupils and their personal and cultural experience. They need to recognise how pupils’ views and values are influenced by their informal learning experiences and by the views of family, peers, community and the media (DENI, 2011). Schools and teachers need to be able to recognise and anticipate which issues are likely to be particularly problematic.

### Supporting the emotional development of pupils

Schools and teachers need to be prepared to deal with the emotional dimensions of controversial issues.

Schools can do this by supporting their pupil’s emotional development. This is already part of the Key Stage 3 Northern Ireland Curriculum. The subject strand of Personal Development provides opportunities for pupils to:

- develop an understanding of their feelings, thinking and behaviour;
- manage their feelings, thinking and behaviour; and
- cope with their feelings.

Teachers could explore these themes with pupils in other subjects through the key element of Personal Understanding, which teachers could then connect to their teaching of controversial issues (see Appendix 3). The best way to do this is by giving pupils time to reflect on their responses, their emotions, and their interactions with others. We advise teachers who are considering teaching controversial issues to consult with the Personal Development (PD) teacher.

The PD teacher may be best placed to provide advice on supporting the emotional development of pupils. Engaging in controversial issues activities may elicit a strong emotional response from pupils. Pupils may hold strong opposing views about an issue. They may find it difficult to express or manage their emotions, leading to tension and conflict between individuals or groups in the classroom. Therefore, it is crucial that the teacher plans for and supports pupils to develop, manage and express their emotions in constructive ways.

CCEA Key Stage 3 guidance and resources for Personal Development can be found at:  
**[www.nicurriculum.org.uk](http://www.nicurriculum.org.uk)**

### Using enquiry-based learning

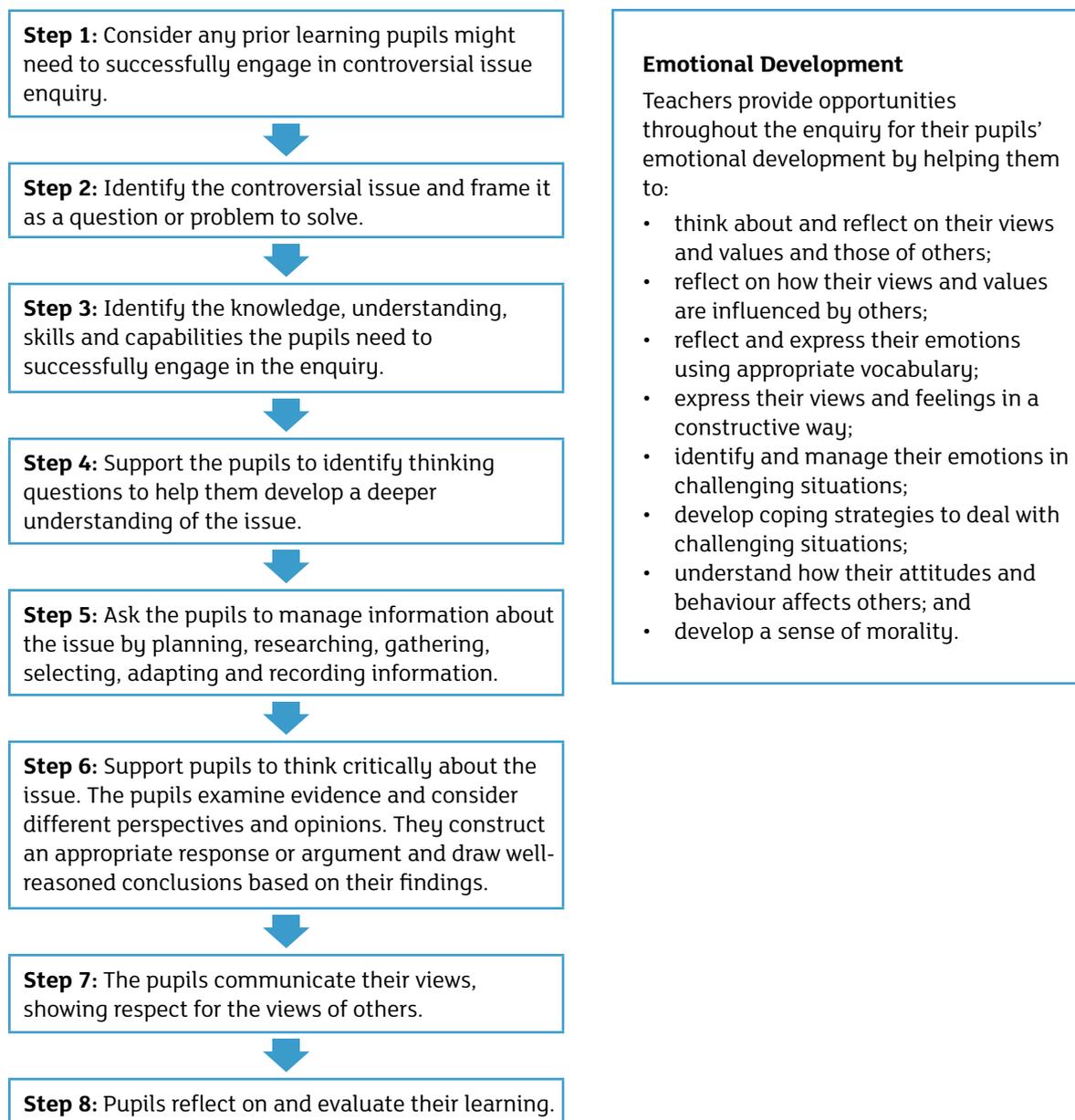
Teachers can use an enquiry-based learning approach when teaching controversial issues. This supports pupils to construct their own meaning and develop a deeper understanding of controversial issues (CCEA, 2013).

Teachers may find the enquiry-based learning model below useful. The model has a strong emotional development focus.

## Step-by-step guide to planning an enquiry about a controversial issue

The following model helps you to plan an enquiry about a controversial issue.

Figure 2. Controversial issues enquiry



Source: see *Guidance on Teaching, Learning and Assessment at Key Stage 4* (CCEA, 2013)

## Using a range of teaching and learning approaches

Schools should encourage teachers to involve pupils in the learning process. Teachers should use a learner-centred approach to teaching and learning about controversial issues. The teacher's role is to facilitate pupils' learning, using a range of enquiry-based, active teaching and learning approaches and effective questioning. The teacher's approaches should support the pupils' independent learning and enable them to develop knowledge, understanding, skills and capabilities, attitudes and dispositions.

Schools and teachers might find it useful to refer to the following CCEA guidance:

- *Active Teaching and Learning Methods for Key Stage 3* (2007a)
- *Thinking Skills and Personal Capabilities at Key Stage 3* (2007c)
- *Guidance on Teaching, Learning and Assessment at Key Stage 4* (2013).

The above resources are available at [www.nicurriculum.org.uk](http://www.nicurriculum.org.uk)



**New Bridge Integrated College:** Year 10 pupils participate in a conscience alley activity on the issue of parading in Northern Ireland. The teacher sets different scenarios assigns pupils roles and asks them to think about making choices and consequences (English class).

### Using effective questioning

Schools can promote the use of effective questioning throughout the school as part of improving the quality of teaching and learning. Effective questioning is a critical part of enquiry-based learning. Asking effective questions enables pupils to think critically, to reflect, and to develop a deeper understanding of controversial issues (see *Guidance on Teaching, Learning and Assessment at Key Stage 4*, CCEA, 2013).

### Using assessment to support learning

Teachers can use a range of assessment approaches to support pupil progression in learning about controversial issues. This can include:

- peer and self-assessment; and
- providing quality feedback to pupils on:
  - strengths and focus development;
  - how to improve their learning; and
  - supporting their emotional development.

For more information about AfL (Assessment for Learning) strategies, teachers should refer to *AfL Assessment for Learning: A Practical Guide* (CCEA, 2009), available at [www.nicurriculum.org.uk](http://www.nicurriculum.org.uk)

### Developing connected learning opportunities

Teachers could consider planning their teaching of controversial issues in ways which allow them to make learning connections between subjects. This involves teachers from different subjects working together and sharing practice. They could make learning connections either through theme or through the curriculum key elements.

Connected learning encourages pupils to view controversial issues from different perspectives. It enables pupils to develop, transfer and apply their knowledge and skills across subjects and helps them to deepen their understanding of issues.

# Section 6

The role of the teacher



## Section 6

# The role of the teacher

The role of the teacher when teaching about controversial issues is to facilitate and support pupils' learning. Teachers should support pupils to:

- think critically about controversial issues;
- recognise and manage their emotions;
- reflect on their own views and values;
- challenge their views of others;
- ask probing and critical questions;
- examine controversial issues from multiple perspectives;
- gather and select evidence from a range of sources;
- analyse, interpret and compare different sources of information;
- evaluate sources of information;
- identify prejudice, bias, stereotyping and propaganda;
- actively listen to, respect and respond constructively to the views of others;
- develop a well-reasoned and justified argument;
- communicate effectively – clearly express their views, ideas and feelings; and
- accept and act on criticism constructively.

### Teacher: self-reflection

When planning their teaching about a controversial issue, teachers need to recognise their own personal values, views and feelings. They need to reflect on how these could influence their views about an issue in the classroom.

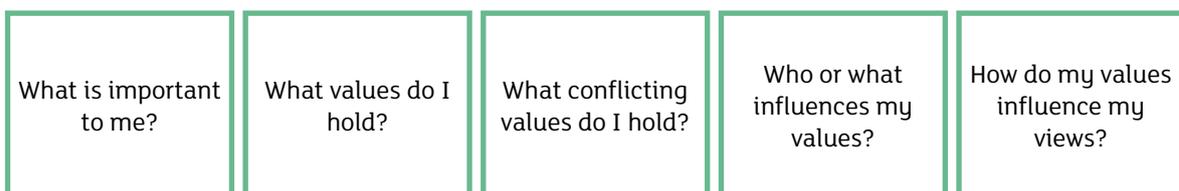


**New Bridge Integrated College:** Teacher facilitates discussion about immigration and inclusion with Year 9 pupils (Local and Global Citizenship).

## Values

Teachers may wish to reflect on their values and how these may influence their thinking and teaching about an issue. Teachers might find the prompt questions in Figure 3 useful.

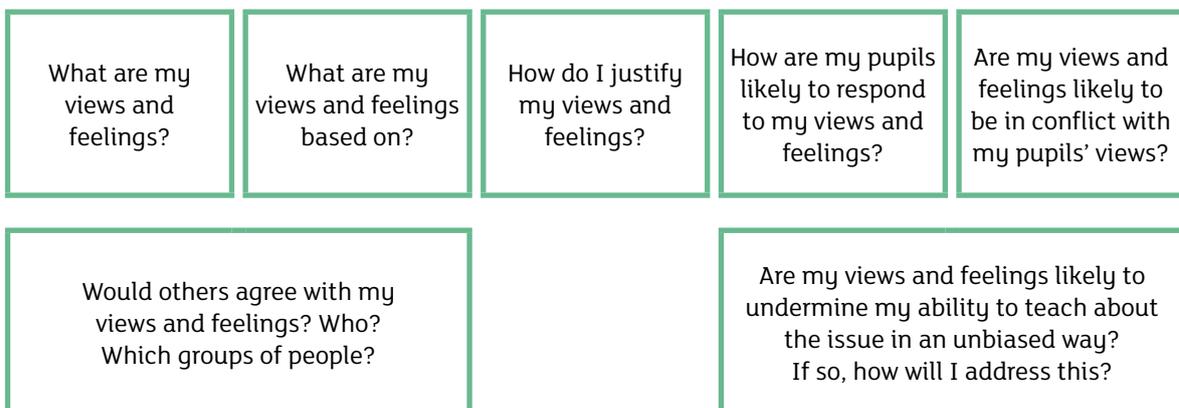
Figure 3. Clarifying values



## Views and feelings

Teachers may also wish to think about the pupils' views and feelings and whether it is appropriate for them to share these on a particular issue. Teachers might find the prompt questions in Figure 4 useful.

Figure 4. Thinking about my views and feelings



## Planning

Planning is essential to successfully teaching controversial issues. At the planning stage it is important that the teacher should:

- make sure they know about their pupils' cultural and educational backgrounds;
- anticipate information or material that is likely to cause controversy and actively plan to manage it; and
- be prepared for unexpected responses.

## Questions to think about

When planning, teachers might find it useful to consider the following questions:

- What makes the issue controversial?
- How can I support pupils to develop a deeper understanding of the issue?
- What responses could I expect from my pupils?
- How can I support the emotional development of pupils?

- What are the main arguments for and against the issue and where do I stand?
- What strategies will I use to engage the pupils in meaningful discussion?
- How can I get my pupils to move away from giving an expected right answer during discussions, to exploring more open-ended discussions?
- What methods can I use to prevent pupils from offering a simple solution to complex issues?
- Which strategies will I use to help take the heat out of some discussions?
- How will I deal with unexpected offensive comments in the classroom or ‘throwaway’ comments in the corridor?

### The teacher as facilitator

The teacher often needs to act as a facilitator when using active and enquiry-based learning approaches to teach controversial issues. In the role as facilitator the teacher needs to support pupils to be active, participatory learners, and to take greater responsibility for their learning. Teachers can take on different facilitating roles/functions to enhance and stimulate pupil learning.

These roles include:

- **Neutral facilitator:** chairs the discussion while staying neutral
- **Devil’s advocate:** presents opposing view
- **Declared interests:** states their own position
- **Ally:** supports the views of an individual or group
- **Official view:** states official position
- **Challenger:** challenges pupil views
- **Provocateur:** initiates a view/argument to provoke a class reaction
- **In-role:** role-plays being a different person, putting their views forward for the class.

Source: see *CCEA guidance on Active Teaching and Learning Methods for Key Stage 3*.

### Avoiding bias

There is always the risk of unconscious bias when teaching controversial issues. For example, teachers can introduce unconscious bias by:

- inappropriate or unbalanced selection of materials;
- not offering alternative viewpoints;
- not challenging certain positions;
- misrepresenting the views of others; and
- nonverbal clues about their views, such as body language.

To avoid unconscious bias teachers can:

- be reflective;
- give equal importance to all views;
- present information as open to challenge;
- not reveal their views in unconscious ways, such as through their tone of voice, body language and facial expressions; and
- challenge consensus views.



**Drumragh Integrated College:** Jude Collins and the teacher facilitate class discussion about who the past belongs to (History class).

## Establishing ground rules

Teachers should negotiate, agree, record and display ground rules, or agree a class contract for discussing controversial issues. Teachers might find the following example of ground rules useful.

When participating in discussion about controversial issues pupils will:

- actively listen to the contributions of others with an open mind;
- ask other pupils to clarify views or points;
- use evidence to challenge the views of others and to present points or arguments;
- discuss ideas or positions, not people;
- be open to persuasion by others and be willing to change their views;
- be prepared to compromise;
- develop the points which others have made by adding to them;
- take turns when speaking – make their points and let others make theirs;
- respect the views of others; and
- manage and express their emotions appropriately.



# Section 7

Classroom teaching  
and learning



## Section 7

# Classroom teaching and learning

Teachers can use enquiry-based learning, effective questioning and a range of teaching and learning approaches when teaching about controversial issues. Teachers should provide opportunities for pupils to develop knowledge, understanding, skills and capabilities to deepen their understanding of controversial issues.

### Learning through enquiry

When pupils have limited experience of using enquiry-based tasks to explore controversial issues, teachers could begin with a structured enquiry. Teachers could then move them on to guided or open enquiry tasks as they gain more experience and skills (CCEA, 2013).

When planning an enquiry, teachers can identify some aspects of skills and capabilities to focus on alongside developing the pupils' knowledge and understanding about controversial issues.

### Deciding on the enquiry focus

When planning the enquiry the teacher could:

- contextualise the enquiry within a conceptual framework, such as within a human rights framework;
- consider the controversial issue at a global level and make comparisons at a local level;
- use effective questioning to find out pupils' prior learning;
- use Know, Want to Know and Learn (KWL) activities to access pupils' prior learning and to create questions and enquiry options to explore; and
- use the No Easy Answers Board activity to generate questions to explore.

### Pupil activities

Once the teacher and pupils have identified the focus of the enquiry the pupils need to discuss and agree on what activities or tasks they need to carry out. They should identify what they need to do and plan their work accordingly.

### Working with Others

The enquiry process and associated activities provide a range of opportunities for pupils to work with others. Working with others is an important part of developing a deeper understanding about controversial issues. Teachers could identify and plan activities to develop aspects of these capabilities. For example, teachers can provide opportunities for pupils to:

- work collaboratively;
- agree on goals and ways of working;
- share ideas, views and opinions;
- learn with and from others; and
- actively listen to and respond to others in constructive and respectful ways.

(See CCEA guidance on *Thinking Skills and Personal Capabilities Subject Progression Maps*, 2007b)



**New Bridge Integrated College:** Year 10 pupils create a gallery to share and display their work on the holocaust (History class).

## Managing Information

A central part of exploring controversial issues involves researching, gathering, selecting, adapting, and recording information (CCEA, 2007c). Teachers can use a range of active teaching and learning approaches to support pupils to develop their skills to manage information including:

- graffiti boards
- carousel
- post-it collections
- Plus, Minus and Interesting (PMI).

## Critical thinking

Teachers should encourage pupils to think critically throughout the controversial issue enquiry and to be particularly critical when examining evidence and drawing conclusions. When pupils are examining their evidence, the teacher should provide opportunities for them to:

- analyse controversial issues;
- share, discuss and challenge each other's information, ideas and feelings;
- review and evaluate their sources of information;
- identify stereotyping, bias, prejudice and hidden agendas;
- explore their evidence from different viewpoints;
- recognise the strengths and weaknesses of their evidence/position;

- use the evidence to develop a line of reasoning;
- explore the causes and consequences;
- draw justified conclusions; and
- evaluate ways to affect change or resolve the issue.

### Debriefing

Debriefing is a vital part of the learning process and provides an opportunity for self-reflection and evaluation. The teacher could consider asking pupils:

- Were you able to see the main points in the argument?
- What was your thinking when you had to present the other side of the argument?
- What were your thoughts about other people's views?
- Did you find it difficult to listen to someone from the opposing side making their points?
- Why is it important to learn to disagree with one another respectfully?
- How might you react differently next time?

### Planning effective questioning

Teachers should plan effective questioning to encourage all pupils to become fully involved in the learning process. Teachers can support pupils to do so. When planning effective questioning, teachers can:

- use the revised Bloom's Taxonomy (Anderson, and Krathwohl, 2001; CCEA, 2013);
- create a range of questions from simple to complex;
- ask questions that stimulate thinking about an issue;
- ensure that the questions are matched appropriately to the pupils' ability range;
- think about the type of questions and key questions to ask;
- think through possible pupil responses and their own; and
- have model answers to help illustrate and explain more difficult concepts or ideas.

Teachers might find the questions in Appendix 5 useful as a starting point. They can then formulate and pose other questions as the lesson or activity unfolds.

### Using effective questioning techniques

Teachers may find the following techniques helpful when using effective questioning:

- At the start of the activity, ask big questions about the controversial issues.
- Ask open-ended questions.
- Sequence and ask questions that range in their level of challenge.
- Ask different pupils questions.
- Use questions to build on pupils' ideas.
- Give pupils time to think before responding to the question. If pupils do not respond, do not give the answer – ask a prompt question instead.
- Use focus questions – if a pupil is having difficulty answering a question, support the pupil by leading her or him through the steps to find the answer.
- Use the 'no hands up' rule, mini-whiteboards or digital voting systems.
- Use 'phone a friend' – if a pupil cannot answer a question, allow them to nominate a friend to answer.
- Use 'hot-seating' – a pupil agrees to sit on the hot-seat and take questions from pupils and the teacher.

- Preview – display and share questions that you will ask at the start of the lesson.
- Use pair rehearsal – pupils discuss the question and agree their responses.
- Target questions to groups – listen to group discussions and ask the group specific questions.
- Use developed questions – pupils have to answer the question using key words or phrases or expand on previous responses.

### Active Teaching and Learning Methods

This section outlines some active teaching and learning methods which the teacher can use and adapt when teaching controversial issues.

Further information can be found in CCEA guidance on *Active Teaching and Learning Methods for Key Stage 3, 2007*.

#### *Analysing text*

An important part of the enquiry process is analysing information and evidence, including texts.

#### *Questioning the author*

Teachers can use this method with pupils to critically analyse a text/book. It requires pupils to think about the text/book and how it was written for audience and purpose. Pupils create a list of questions that they would like to ask the author. These could include:

- What is your own view on the issue?
- Why did you write the piece?



**New Bridge Integrated College:** Year 8 pupils create an identity tree as part of an activity to explore aspects of diversity and inclusion such as, immigration ethnic minority groups and racism (Local and Global Citizenship).

- Is it written from a particular perspective?
- Whose views are not represented in the text? Why?
- What choices did you make about what to include and what to leave out?
- How did you present the controversial issue?
- You have selected information to present ideas or characters in a certain way. Why?

As a debrief teachers could explore how the text/book influenced pupils' thinking, views and attitudes. They could consider what new insights pupils gained. Pupils could reflect on why it is important to critically question all sources of information.

### *Analysing writing*

Teachers can use the language bag as another approach to develop pupils' vocabulary and ability to analyse complex information. Teachers place a selection of words in the bag which can be used, for example, to describe the author's tone or meaning. This is important because the way an article is written and its tone can have implicit meaning. Pupils need to be aware that the way in which information is written can lead to their interpreting the meaning differently, which can create controversy.

In this activity the teacher asks different pupils to read an extract from a source text aloud. Reading aloud can help pupils to think about the tone, punctuation and emphasis of the piece. Pupils are given time to read the source and to think about its meaning. The teacher then asks a pupil to read aloud. This pupil uses their own words to describe the tone, or they can choose a word from the language bag, but they don't tell the class which word they have chosen. The pupil then reads the text using that tone. Other pupils guess which word best describes the reader's tone. By using the same source and different groups of pupils, the teacher can illustrate how the tone can vary within the text, and how the pupils can interpret the text in different ways.

### *Analysing images*

Teachers can use this approach as a stimulus for the class to discuss a controversial issue. Teachers can select some images, perhaps choosing the ones most likely to provoke debate. The teacher displays a photograph on a whiteboard and uses effective questioning to explore pupils' views. They allow pupils a few minutes to study, ask questions and think about the source. The teacher then asks pupils not to make any initial interpretations about the source, and to respond to the following questions:

- What do you see?
- What stands out in the source?
- What questions do you need answered before you can interpret the photograph?

Pupils can think about and make a list of questions using the five **Ws** as a framework:

- Who?
- What?
- Where?
- When?
- Why?

Pupils discuss their questions with two others in the class to try to explore answers. The teacher could also use prompts to stimulate discussion about the image such as:

- I think the artist is saying ...
- The intended audience is ...
- The image makes me think about ...
- The image makes me feel ...

Pupils refer to the detail in the image to justify their views and support this by using background knowledge and understanding.

### *Slow reveal*

Teachers can use the slow reveal of an image to stimulate pupils' curiosity. This can be a useful lead into exploring a controversial issue. The slow reveal is when the teacher reveals small portions of an image at a time. The teacher decides which section of the image to show first, next and so on, and plans questions to ask at each point, perhaps giving clues. As a debrief the teacher can focus on how pupils' interpretation of the image changes as more of the image is revealed. It can be useful to focus on which point pupils' perceptions begin to change, and why.



**St Dominic's Grammar School:** Year 10 pupils display of their research about personal stories during the 'Troubles.' Pupils discuss their ideas with Sheelagh Dean who supported the controversial issues project.

### Exploring multiple perspectives

If pupils are to develop a deeper understanding about a controversial issue they need to explore the issue from a range of different viewpoints. Below are some approaches teachers can use.

#### *Spectrum debate*

The spectrum debate is a method that teachers can use with pupils to explore a controversial issue from different perspectives. Pupils position themselves along a line. Each end of the line represents the extremes of the two viewpoints. Pupils stand at the point on the line where they think that their opinion would lie. The teacher then asks the pupils to use their evidence to justify their position on the line.

#### *Line of continuum*

This is a variation of the spectrum debate. Create a line of pupils in the classroom as before. One end is positive and could be labelled, for example: 'strongest evidence for', or 'certain', or 'non-threatening'. The other end of the line is negative and might be labelled: 'threatening', or 'strongest evidence against', or 'uncertain'. Teachers follow the steps below:

- Allow time for pupils to reflect on their views.
- Ask pupils to stand on a position on the line which best represents their views.
- Facilitate class discussion.
- Ask pupils to provide justified reasons for their position on the line.
- Ensure that pupils listen to the views of others.
- Allow time for pupils to reflect and reconsider their views or position.
- Give pupils the opportunity to move to a different place on the line. Debrief.

#### *Washing line*

The teacher attaches a piece of string to either end of a classroom wall and places a controversial issue-based question on the middle of the line. The teacher then follows the steps below.

- Ask the pupils to pin their evidence for or against an argument or position on the line.
- Ask the pupils to record and interpret the class information.
- Ask the pupils to review and build on their argument.
- Ask the pupils to use the information to plan, construct and produce an extended piece of writing.
- Debrief.

#### *Agree/Disagree*

Another way teachers can stimulate debate about a controversial issue is by reading out statements and then asking pupils to stand at certain points in the room if they agree, disagree, or are unsure. Then, facilitate discussion so that pupils can explain their thinking and views about an issue.

#### *Post-it barometer*

Teachers may use this approach to show the range of views or agreement within the class on a controversial issue. The teacher draws a continuum line on the board. Pupils write down points on a post-it and place it on the line of continuum according to their opinion. Pupils then discuss the variation of responses and extent of agreement/disagreement within the class.

***Diamond nine***

This activity encourages pupils to think and prioritise points, and to reach consensus. Before the lesson, prepare nine statements on card or post-its. Pupils read the statements in groups of four or five. They then have to arrange them in a diamond shape in order of importance. The most important statement goes to the top of the diamond and the least important to the bottom to form a diamond shape.

In this activity pupils have to listen to one another and weigh up arguments. They also need to negotiate, influence and persuade others about the order of the statements and finally to reach consensus. They may find that it is not always possible to reach consensus.

**Using drama techniques to promote discussion**

Drama and role-play are a useful way to explore controversial issues. Pupils may feel less vulnerable when expressing their ideas through a character in a role-play. The following are some examples of drama techniques:

***Freeze frame***

In the freeze frame activity pupils work in small groups. Give them an event or situation associated with controversial issues. Pupils then discuss what they are being asked to do and how they will create a freeze frame. In turn, each group gets into and holds their position for a few minutes, while other pupils observe and discuss.

The teacher can extend this activity. Groups could enact different stages of a particular issue and take photos. They could create a photo story.

***Conscience alley***

Conscience alley is an approach which allows pupils to explore different perspectives on an issue. In this activity pupils are given a role and asked to state how their character feels about a particular issue or situation. The focus of the activity may be on making a difficult decision.

Pupils form two lines facing each other, leaving space for another pupil to walk from one end to the other. The pupil in character walks between the two rows of pupils who take on the role of protagonists. One row of protagonists supports one view about the issue while the others hold an opposing view. As the pupil walks along the 'alley' the other pupils offer advice or call out their thoughts or feelings about the issue. The pupil walking through the 'alley' then has to come to a decision at the end of their journey.

***Mantle of the expert***

In this activity pupils take on the role of an expert and view an issue from this perspective. The teacher asks the pupils to get into groups and research a controversial issue. They then present their 'expert' view for the benefit of the stakeholder or client.

### *Hot seating*

Hot seating is an effective questioning technique which teachers can use to explore a controversial issue through role-play. A pupil takes on the role of protagonist and agrees to answer questions from the class in this role. The teacher can use this approach to explore the protagonist's views and feelings about an issue. It helps pupils to place themselves in the position of another and to see issues from a different perspective.

### Communicating findings and ideas

Teachers could discuss with pupils the different ways of communicating their findings, ideas, views and opinions. For example, pupils could do this in writing or by participating in discussions, debates and role-plays.

Teachers could focus on developing certain aspects of pupils' communication skills. They may find it helpful to use the Key Stage 3 Levels of Progression for Communication to plan communication-based activities. The following are some examples of communication-based activities:

### *Structured discussion*

The teacher could use a structured approach to support pupils to participate in discussion about controversial issues (Hennessy, 2007). In this activity pupils can use the template in Appendix 5 to help them construct an argument. The teacher could use the following approaches. This approach differs from the usual form of debate as it allows pupils to experience both sides of an issue before making a stand themselves.

#### *Example 1*

Pupils work in pairs or groups to explore a question from different viewpoints.

1. The teacher discusses a controversial issue with the pupils.
2. The pupils use KWL to generate questions to explore.
3. The pupils agree on questions for discussion.
4. In groups, half the class researches one viewpoint while the other half considers an opposing viewpoint.
5. Each group constructs and presents their argument.
6. The groups swap positions on the issue and argue from an opposing perspective.

#### *Example 2*

1. The class is split – half of the pupils read and discuss material supporting one position in pairs, while the other half considers the opposing view.
2. Pairs of pupils with opposing views exchange and share views.
3. The pupils critically evaluate the opposing positions.
4. Pairs of pupils present the view of the opposing pair.
5. There is a class discussion to reach consensus in favour of a position.

### ***Writing a report***

The teacher can use the structured discussion activity to prepare pupils to produce an extended piece of writing. They could present this as a report. The teacher can support pupils to focus their report by asking key questions:

- What is the issue?
- What is the pro position?
- What is the con position?
- What side did you support before you read the material?
- What facts support the pro/con views?
- What opinions support the pro/con views?
- What would be the benefits of adopting the pro/con views?
- What are the consequences of adopting the pro/con views?
- Who or which groups stand to gain from supporting the pro/con views?

The teacher can use a wheel of consequence activity to help pupils to make connections between the actions and their consequences.

### ***Silent Conversation***

In this method pupils have a silent conversation in writing with others. They work in pairs or small groups. Having a written conversation gives pupils more time to think about what they want to say than they would in a normal conversation. It means they have to focus on others' views. The silent conversation also allows pupils to keep a visual record of their thinking, views, feelings and questions. This can be explored through further discussion. The teacher might find the following approach useful:

- Give each pair/group a sheet of flip chart paper with the conversation stimulus placed in the centre.
- Give the pupils time to read the text and additional 'conversation' time.
- Using a different coloured marker, the pupils in each group highlight and annotate key points on the source and write down their views and ideas.
- Encourage pupils to ask questions, to clarify points and to seek further information (in silence).
- When each group has recorded their comments, they pass the paper to another group to comment on, and so on.
- The teacher can vary the activity by adding questions or information to develop the conversation.
- The teacher can facilitate a discussion when all groups have reviewed each other's work.

The teacher can vary this activity by including a gallery walk: pupils display the group conversations on the classroom walls. Pupils then read each conversation and comment.

## **Managing discussions**

Teachers may find managing pupils' emotional responses arising from discussion about a controversial issue challenging. Therefore, it is important that they recognise different emotional responses, and know how to deal with them. Below are some of the emotional responses pupils might display.

- Silence – non-responsive
- A feeling of tension – ready to 'attack'
- Attacking – responding with the intent to hurt others
- Laughing – not sure how else to respond or showing disrespect
- A side commentary – provides a running commentary

- Internalising – taking comments personally, believing something to be true
- Confusion/frustration – angry, hurt, annoyed but not sure why
- Naming – identifying the problem or source of annoyance
- Confronting – demanding that the behaviour or the source of upset is dealt with
- Humour – responding with a humorous comment: can be constructive or can be laughing at someone else's expense
- Using discretion – saving comments for another time.

When managing discussions teachers might find the following approaches helpful.

- Establish and remind pupils about ground rules for discussion.
- Depersonalise the issue by using:
  - case studies;
  - card sorting activities; or
  - drama role-play.
- Focus on facts and evidence rather than opinion.
- Using 'time out,' pause the discussion. Give pupils time to think and calm down. Rather than pick up the discussion at the point it was paused, you can open the discussion from a different perspective.
- Use journals. Give pupils time to write down their thoughts and feelings in a journal. You can restart the discussion with pupils reflecting on and sharing their ideas and feelings.
- Focus on the consequences of pupil comments.
- Allow pupils time to reflect during and at the end of the lesson.

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# Appendices



## Appendix 1

### Examples of controversial public issues

Abortion

Alcohol drinking age

Animal rights

Anti-Semitism

Assisted suicide

Asylum seekers

Child labour

Climate change

Creationism

Death penalty

Deforestation

Drugs in sport

Drug legislation

Energy

Evolution

Fracking

Genetic engineering

Globalisation

GM foods

Immigration

National parks

Obesity

Paternity Leave

Racism

Same sex marriages

Social media

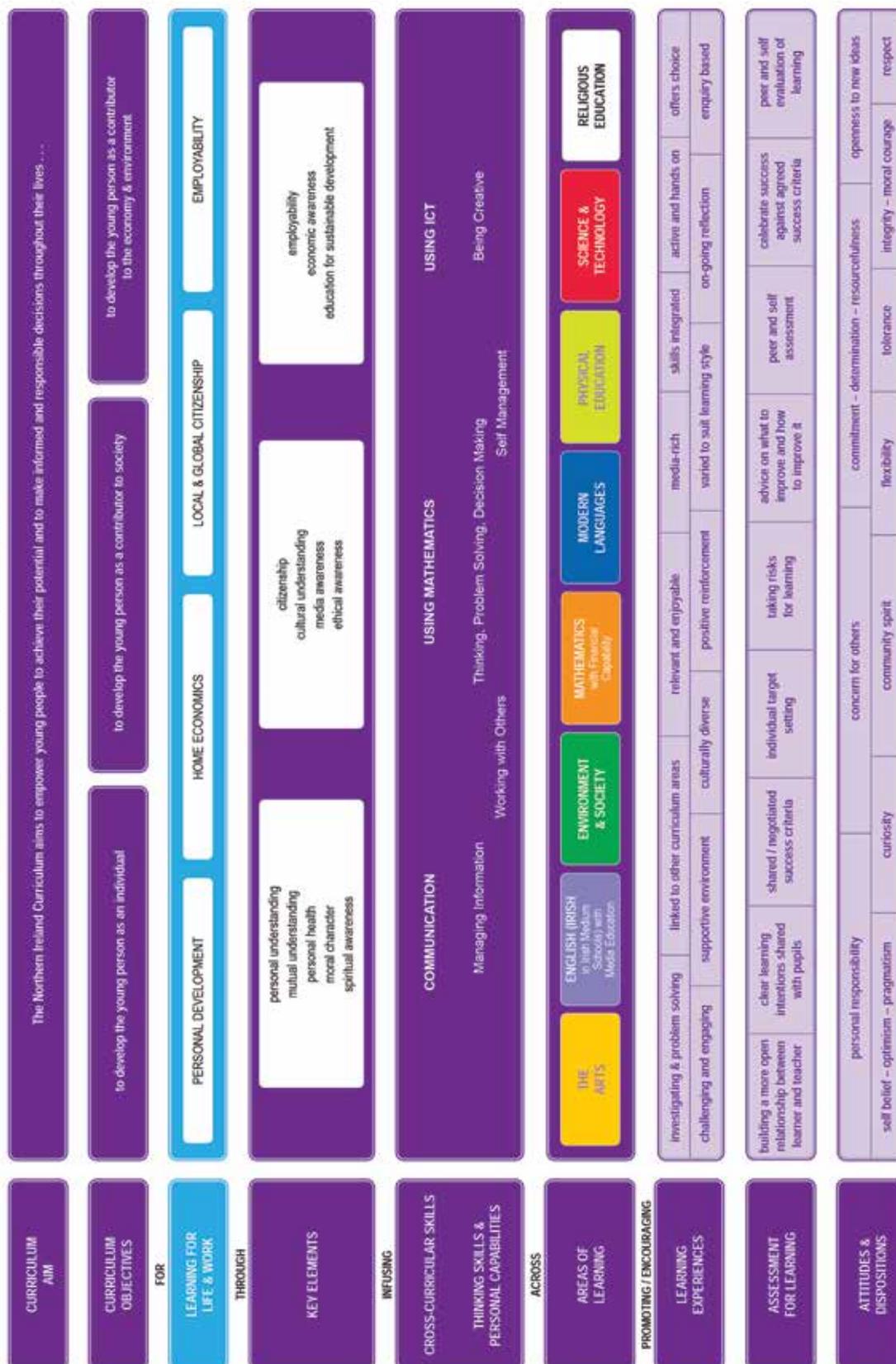
Stem cell research

War

## Appendix 2

### CCEA – The ‘Big Picture’ of the Curriculum at Key Stage 3

The “Big Picture” of the Curriculum at Key Stage 3



## Appendix 3

### Teaching controversial issues through key elements of the curriculum

Tables 1 and 2 provide examples of ways that teaching controversial issues can support pupils' learning in relation to the first two curriculum objectives and key elements.

**Table 1: Controversial issues: developing the young person as an individual**

Developing the young person as an individual	
Key Element	Teaching controversial issues supports pupils to:
Personal understanding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• develop a deeper understanding about important issues;</li> <li>• handle disagreement, acknowledge other viewpoints and resolve conflict;</li> <li>• develop an understanding of their emotions and those of others;</li> <li>• develop empathy;</li> <li>• manage their emotions and emotional responses better;</li> <li>• develop higher levels of self-esteem and confidence;</li> <li>• develop higher order thinking skills and learn how to become critically reflective thinkers;</li> <li>• develop communication skills;</li> <li>• clarify thinking and values;</li> <li>• learn to think for themselves; and</li> <li>• develop a sense of personal responsibility.</li> </ul>
Mutual understanding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• work with and learn from others, for example plan and ask questions, discuss ideas, and display empathy and respect for others;</li> <li>• develop communication skills, for example actively listen to the concerns of others, and give clear feedback considering an issue from a variety of perspectives;</li> <li>• build relationships with others;</li> <li>• understand that making prejudicial remarks may offend or embarrass others in the class;</li> <li>• develop respect for the views of others;</li> <li>• manage and resolve conflict; and</li> <li>• value the need for ground rules as a framework for discussion.</li> </ul>
Moral character	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• learn and understand agreed codes of behaviour;</li> <li>• show fairness, integrity and respect in dealing with others;</li> <li>• develop a sense of moral values;</li> <li>• weigh up potential actions and their consequences in order to make judgements; and</li> <li>• understand the impact and responsibilities that arise from their decisions.</li> </ul>

Table 2: Controversial issues: developing the young person as a contributor to society

Developing the young person as a contributor to society	
Key Element	Teaching controversial issues supports pupils to:
Cultural understanding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• develop a deeper understanding of cultural diversity;</li> <li>• self-reflect and raises awareness of their own cultural values, beliefs and perceptions; and</li> <li>• understand the positive and negative aspects associated with cultural diversity.</li> </ul>
Media awareness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• understand the positive and negative aspects associated with cultural diversity;</li> <li>• develop skills to critically analyse data and evaluate a range of sources;</li> <li>• assess the role and influence of the media in society; and</li> <li>• recognise bias, stereotypical views and standpoints which have been constructed for political, religious, social and economic agendas.</li> </ul>
Ethical awareness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• develop the capacity for ethical and moral reasoning;</li> <li>• be aware of ethical choices; and</li> <li>• make decisions based on ethical and moral reasoning.</li> </ul>
Citizenship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• develop an understanding and respect for diversity and inclusion;</li> <li>• understand how expressions of identity can lead to conflict;</li> <li>• resolve conflict through peaceful means;</li> <li>• understand that people have multiple identities;</li> <li>• develop an understanding and respect for human rights and the equal rights of others;</li> <li>• understand the causes and consequences of prejudice and discrimination in society;</li> <li>• influence change through discussion, negotiation and compromise; and</li> <li>• develop a sense of social responsibility.</li> </ul>

## Appendix 4

### Characteristics of quality teaching and learning in the classroom

Characteristics of Quality Teaching and Learning in the Classroom	
Create a safe learning environment	Teachers should create an environment that encourages pupils to share their views and participate in their learning. Teachers should build good relationships with and between pupils, based on trust, co-operation and respect.
Set high expectations	Schools and teachers should convey and set realistically high expectations that challenge and inspire pupils.
Acknowledge prior learning	Teachers need to take into account the personal and cultural experiences of different groups of pupils. They need to help pupils to make explicit what they already know and understand, and the skills they have developed. This will help pupils to identify what they need to do to make progress and help teachers plan the next steps.
Recognise the significance of informal learning	Teachers should support pupils to make connections between the formal learning process and pupils' informal learning. This may make their formal learning more meaningful.
Use a range of teaching and learning strategies	Teaching and learning strategies should: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• be learner-centred;</li> <li>• involve and engage pupils in the learning process;</li> <li>• provide a range of appropriate opportunities for pupils to acquire and develop skills and capabilities alongside knowledge and understanding;</li> <li>• include enquiry-based and active learning approaches that motivate, engage and challenge pupils;</li> <li>• encourage pupils to work both collaboratively and independently;</li> <li>• promote positive attitudes and dispositions to learning such as commitment, determination and the confidence to take responsibility for learning; and</li> <li>• enable pupils to develop their metacognitive ability.</li> </ul>

### Characteristics of Quality Teaching and Learning in the Classroom

<p>Take into account individual learning needs</p>	<p>Teachers should get to know pupils as individuals and gain a good understanding of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– their abilities;</li> <li>– their personalities;</li> <li>– what motivates them; and</li> <li>– how they learn best.</li> </ul> <p>Teachers should differentiate lessons in terms of levels of demand to meet individual pupil needs.</p> <p>Teachers should ensure that their lessons are well-structured and that they deepen and consolidate learning.</p>
<p>Use ICT to enhance learning</p>	<p>Teachers can use ICT in innovative ways to extend and enrich their pupils' learning experience.</p>
<p>Provide scaffolded support</p>	<p>Teachers should provide activities and structures of intellectual, social and emotional support to help pupils to progress in their learning. This helps pupils to gain confidence in their own ability and gradually to take greater responsibility for their learning.</p>
<p>Enable pupils to develop and apply their knowledge and understanding in different contexts or subjects</p>	<p>Teachers should engage pupils in learning about big ideas, key issues and concepts, key processes, subject narratives and discourses.</p> <p>Teachers should enable pupils to connect, transfer and apply their learning from one subject or context to another.</p>
<p>Enable pupils to develop their capacity for critical thinking and problem solving</p>	<p>Teachers need to provide pupils with motivating and challenging learning opportunities to use higher order thinking skills. This requires pupils to apply their learning to abstract concepts in unfamiliar contexts.</p> <p>Teachers can use effective questioning and, for example, interpret Blooms' Taxonomy (revised) as a guide for formulating questions.</p>
<p>Support pupils to acquire and develop Cross-Curricular Skills</p>	<p>Teachers should provide pupils with a range of opportunities to acquire and develop the Cross-Curricular Skills of Communication, Using Mathematics and Using ICT.</p>
<p>Illustrate expected standards</p>	<p>Teachers should provide model answers/responses to illustrate quality and standards and explain how the work demonstrates these.</p>
<p>Encourage learning through collaboration</p>	<p>Learning is a social activity. Teachers should provide opportunities for pupils to work together, to share ideas and thinking and to learn from and with others.</p>

## Characteristics of Quality Teaching and Learning in the Classroom

<p>Empower pupils to become independent learners</p>	<p>Teachers need to support pupils to gain confidence and develop the skills to manage and take responsibility for their own learning.</p> <p>Teachers need to enable pupils to make the connections between the Thinking Skills and Personal Capabilities and Assessment for Learning. Teachers can encourage pupils to engage actively in their own learning, for example by discussing how they learn and what they are good at and setting targets for improvement.</p> <p>Teachers should enable pupils to develop their metacognitive ability. They can encourage pupils to think about how they think and learn, reflect on their learning and apply this to new learning situations.</p> <p>Teachers should develop and use the language of thinking skills to discuss and promote learning.</p>
<p>Align assessment with teaching and learning and use it to improve learning</p>	<p>Teachers should align assessment with teaching and learning. This will ensure assessment validity as teachers will design assessment to assess pupils' performance against learning outcomes.</p> <p>Teachers should use assessment to help improve learning as well as to indicate the stage a pupil is at in their learning.</p>

Source: see *CCEA Guidance on Teaching, Learning and Assessment at Key Stage 4*, (2013)

## Appendix 5

### Controversial issues enquiry: effective questioning

Table 1: Examples of questions

Question	Purpose
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What makes the issue controversial?</li> <li>• What are the key issues?</li> <li>• What is the interrelationship between these issues?</li> <li>• What are causes and consequences of these issues?</li> <li>• What are the different views about the issues?</li> <li>• Who holds these views?</li> <li>• Why do they have these views?</li> <li>• What reasons justify these views?</li> <li>• What is the 'hidden agenda'?</li> <li>• Are the views biased or prejudiced?</li> <li>• What or who influences these views?</li> <li>• What is your position on ...?</li> </ul>	To encourage pupils to develop a deeper understanding about a controversial issue
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What are you trying to show?</li> <li>• What is your thinking/hypothesis?</li> <li>• What do you need to find out?</li> <li>• What information do you need to find?</li> <li>• What sources will you use?</li> <li>• How will you justify your selection of information?</li> <li>• What steps will you take to ensure your information is balanced and reliable?</li> <li>• What steps will you take to identify bias, prejudice, stereotyping and propaganda?</li> <li>• What further research do you need to carry out?</li> </ul>	To encourage pupils to plan research on a controversial issue
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What have you learned about this issue...?</li> <li>• What would you do differently next time?</li> <li>• What could you do to improve your understanding about ...?</li> </ul>	To encourage pupils to think, reflect and evaluate
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What do we mean by ...?</li> <li>• What do you mean when you say ...?</li> <li>• Why do you think ...?</li> <li>• What evidence supports your views or argument?</li> <li>• Have you considered alternative interpretations ...?</li> <li>• What was your thinking behind your approach?</li> <li>• What evidence leads you to think ...?</li> <li>• Have you taken time to review your thinking and work?</li> <li>• Have you thought about ...?</li> <li>• What are the strengths and weaknesses of your views or argument?</li> <li>• How did you reach your conclusion?</li> </ul>	To encourage pupils to clarify their reasoning and thinking

Table 1: Examples of questions (continued)

Question	Purpose
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What do you think about ...?</li> <li>• What do you feel about ...?</li> <li>• Why do you feel ...?</li> <li>• What did your friends feel about ...?</li> <li>• Did your friends feel the same way as you?</li> <li>• Where you sympathetic/empathetic to others' views?</li> <li>• Are you aware of how your views, behaviour and the way you express your feelings can affect others?</li> <li>• Were you able to manage your feelings?</li> </ul>	<p>To encourage pupils to think and reflect on their emotional development</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What have you learned about this issue ...?</li> <li>• What would you do differently next time?</li> <li>• What could you do to improve your understanding about ...?</li> </ul>	<p>To encourage pupils to think, reflect and evaluate</p>



