

Guidelines for dealing with sensitive or controversial issues in the classroom

Development education enables learners to recognise the interconnected nature of their lives and the lives of people in the developing world, by engaging them in analysis, reflection and action. A central feature of development education is the engagement of young people in open discussion about development issues, some of which may be controversial or sensitive socially, politically, and personally. Exploring such issues helps young people to improve their understanding and knowledge of others, as well as developing their critical thinking and interpersonal skills.

Teachers may be concerned that certain issues are too sensitive or controversial; for example, addressing domestic violence, child mortality or female genital mutilation. They may also be uncomfortable discussing an issue that might directly affect some of the young people in the classroom. However, such issues can be discussed sensitively and effectively by following these general guidelines.

Prepare: Create a safe, classroom environment by agreeing clear rules about discussion and interaction. Ensure that the students know that they are free to express their ideas in a way that is respectful of others. It is useful also that the students see the teacher is willing to facilitate and guide the discussion.

Explain and inform: It is important to explain any topic or issue you plan to introduce that is sensitive or controversial. Be explicit in giving factual information and ensure the students can distinguish between opinion and fact. It is useful to have a range of information, from a variety of sources.

Maintain focus: It can be very easy to lose direction during a discussion. When there is an environment of dialogue and discussion in which disagreement may occur, you may need to steer the discussion back to the topic in hand. Referring to items on a flipchart or board can be a good way to structure and refocus the discussion.

Balance: While facilitating the discussion, ensure that it is not one sided. When discussing some development issues, it can be difficult to maintain a positive balance and not be overwhelmed by the problems. Try to emphasise the solutions and progress being made in tackling these issues. Examine what young people can do, and be encouraging of their role in effecting change.

Be inclusive: Try to ensure each student is given a voice and that the discussion is not dominated by one or a few students. Teachers also need to try to avoid inappropriate personal disclosures by students. Intervene to direct the discussion if it is getting too personal.

Reflect: A useful follow up to a discussion of these issues is to ask the students to write an essay or research piece about the particular topic. This not only gives the students a chance to reflect on their discussions but reinforces their learning about the issue.

Other useful resources

➔ For further information and guidance about dealing with sensitive issues, please see www.curriculum.ie and <http://www.oxfam.org.uk/education/teachersupport/cpd/controversial/>