

What do I say, what do I do? – scenarios for discussion

Introduction

It's often useful if discussions of how to deal with controversial and sensitive issues refer to some specific events or scenarios. The stories in this paper are to do with ethnicity, culture, gender and sexual identity. Choose up to four of them and in relation to each discuss:

- ❑ **the background** – what you think may have happened beforehand, both immediately and over time
- ❑ **the follow-up**, distinguishing between the next few minutes, the next few days, the next few weeks.

Then, in the light of your discussion, begin formulating some general principles for dealing with episodes such as these.

My dad agrees with this

In a religious studies lesson a pupil produces a leaflet published by a far-right political party for a forthcoming local election. 'We owe it to our children to defend this country's Christian culture,' it says. And: 'Are you concerned about the creeping islamification of our precious country?' The pupil says to the teacher: 'My dad agrees with this. Do you, miss?'

Wouldn't begin to know

'I'm glad I'm a teacher of science and mathematics,' says a colleague, 'I wouldn't begin to know how to teach about things that are controversial – religion, terrorism, Iraq and Afghanistan, things like that.'

On the bus

A girl tells a teacher she frequently gets touched sexually by boys on a school bus and when she says she doesn't like it and tells them to stop they call her a dyke. Other girls on the bus don't defend her, but say they suspect she fancies them and they need to keep away from her.

How are we supposed to do that?

A newspaper report says schools should be doing more to prevent violent extremism. 'How are we supposed to do that?' asks a colleague. 'Do they expect us to set up special classes just for Muslims?'

Playing football

Boys playing football in the playground are heard calling each other Nigger and Paki. Whenever someone fumbles a pass or misses a tackle the others cheerfully rebuke him with words such as poof, gay, fairy and wanker.

I feel they don't like me

'No-one's ever called me a nasty name,' a pupil tells a teacher, 'but all the same I feel the other girls don't like me, and I think they're spreading rumours about me. I think it's because of my colour.'

Same as most teachers

'You only ever pick on black or Asian kids,' says a pupil to a teacher. 'You're racist, that's why, same as most white people.'

Easy to understand

In a citizenship lesson students note discrepancies in the take-home pay of women and men. 'It's easy to understand,' says someone. 'Girls are basically no good at the kinds of job that are well-paid. Or else they have babies and stuff and can't work as hard.'

Rather die

A girl gets teased because, say others, she's fat and will never get a boyfriend. 'I'll starve myself,' she tells a teacher. 'I'd rather die than put up with any more of this.'

Daren't tell anyone

The school has a system for receiving anonymous messages about problems and concerns. 'I'm gay,' writes someone. 'But I daren't tell anyone.'

Overheard

A colleague is overheard rebuking a group of boys who are talking together when they should be getting on with their work. 'You lot,' says the colleague, 'stop behaving like a bunch of girls.'

What happened, miss?

One day in 2010 a Year 7 pupil says to a teacher: 'What happened on September 11th, miss?'

Back door

A school governor proposes, following discussions with pupils and parents, that there should be some Islamic Awareness classes at the school on a voluntary basis. 'We'd just be letting Al Qaeda in by the back door,' says the chair. The other governors all seem to agree, or anyway not to bother.

Angry and distressed

'I hate, hate, hate Israel,' says a pupil during a classroom discussion, 'for what they're doing to us Muslims in Gaza. And do America and Britain tell them to stop it? No, they help and encourage them.' A Jewish pupil in the same class becomes very angry and distressed.

No need to obey

A pupil mentions her elder brother was giving her a lift the other day in his car. They came to some traffic lights, which were red. Her brother looked both ways, saw nothing was coming, and drove straight across with the lights still red. 'It's a kuff law,' he said. 'No need for us Muslims to obey it.'

Freedom of speech

Some Year 12 students announce they are going to organise a Draw a Picture of Mohammed Day. The headteacher rules that this is unacceptable. So the students draw up a petition saying that the head is denying their human right to freedom of speech. Many students sign it, also various people in the locality, and two of the school's governors, and a member of staff.

A new gang

A teacher in a primary school learns that some Year 5 boys in her class have formed a gang called the Pakistani International Gangstas, PIGS for short.

The Christians are coming

'The Christians are coming here on Saturday,' a Year 10 student tells a teacher, 'and we're going out to smash them. Will you support us, miss, or are you on their side?' It transpires the reference is to a forthcoming march organised by the EDL.

Not saying, miss

There's a class discussion of whether Muslim girls should be allowed to wear the face-veil at school. The teacher addresses a (non-Muslim) boy: 'What do think?' – 'Not saying miss.' – 'Why not?' – 'Cos if I told you what I think you'd put me in detention'.
