

Stuff Happens

so what do we do next?



The parliamentary bill leading to the Equality Act 2010 had all-party support in both the House of Commons and the House of Lords. There isn't complete consensus, however, between and within political parties, about what in practice the Act requires. Similarly there are uncertainties and disagreements in wider society.

This paper contains fictionalised descriptions of real conversations and incidents that have taken place over the last few years within or near schools. Choose up to four of them and with each consider possible actions and developments in 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 incidents such as these.

My dad agrees with this

A student brings to school a leaflet advertising a demonstration taking place locally next weekend. 'End the creeping Islamification of our precious country,' it says. The student says to a teacher: 'My dad agrees with this. Do you, miss?'

Doesn't appear to mind

A girl from Lithuania has joined the class. She is referred to by staff as Polish and addressed by other students as Pollywog. She doesn't appear to mind.

Same as most teachers

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

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.'

It won't be his fault

The elder sibling of a learning-disabled student says to a teacher: 'I'm really worried about him. Other kids tease him all the time and he gets no support from teachers. One day he's going to snap and he could hurt someone, and he'll be excluded and it won't be his fault.'

Political correctness gone mad

'Children are children,' says a colleague, 'and they're sometimes nasty to each other, it's a fact of life. So kids need to be tough, resilient. It's political correctness gone mad to use words about them like racist, sexist, homophobic.'

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.

Not saying, miss

There's a class discussion of whether a new mosque should be built close to the school. The teacher addresses a (non-Muslim) student: 'What do think?' - 'Not saying miss.' - 'Why not?' - 'Cos if I told you what I think you'd give me a detention.'

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.

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 about the rights of Christians?

At a parents' evening the head says students in the playground use the term gay too much as a casual insult. A parent stands up and says, passionately: 'We're a Christian family and we believe homosexuality is an abomination. What about the rights of Christians? Why doesn't the Equality Act respect the rights of Christians?'

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.

You'll be all right

The school has a system for receiving anonymous messages from students about problems and concerns. 'I told a teacher I get a lot of abuse from other kids because they think I'm gay,' writes someone. 'She said well you do appear to be gay. Stop acting so gay and you'll be all right.'
