



# How talking to children can inspire teaching about justice for 7–9s in RE

**Kate Bruning** teaches RE in Cleethorpes. She found that teaching justice in RE to 7–9s certainly needed to include a discussion about ‘It’s not fair!’ The children’s strong sense of justice and injustice makes for a good starting point in our RE teaching.



Kate Bruning

‘It’s not fair!’ We hear this claim regularly in our classrooms and our playgrounds.

And so often we dismiss it: ‘Go and play nicely ... Make sure you take turns ... I don’t want to tell you again about sharing with everyone.’

Yet taking the time to discuss this claim, of things not being fair, with children and to dig a little deeper can be a good starting point for some thoughtful and meaningful RE, and also an excellent introduction to work about justice. Ask children about what they perceive as not fair in their personal world and the floodgates open. They each have their own story to tell and their own experience to relate. Some perhaps more realistic than others, but important to the child. The key to using children’s talk like this is to ensure that the chat is only the starting point and that it is developed quickly into clear, direct RE teaching and learning.

To consider how these links between the children’s conversation and explicit RE could be developed, I spent 15 minutes with an enthusiastic group of Year 3 children to talk with them about what ‘It’s not fair’ means to 7- and 8-year-olds. My school has a high proportion of pupils needing free meals and attracting Pupil Premium funds, so for many life is already unfair. However, their understanding and empathy were striking, as well as their knowledge of the wider, more global issues of justice.

They were able to tell me about many things that were not fair. Here are their key ideas:

## ‘It’s not fair that ...’

- he got some chocolate and I didn’t
- the teacher didn’t believe me
- he got a prize for being good once, and I always work hard
- they won’t let me play

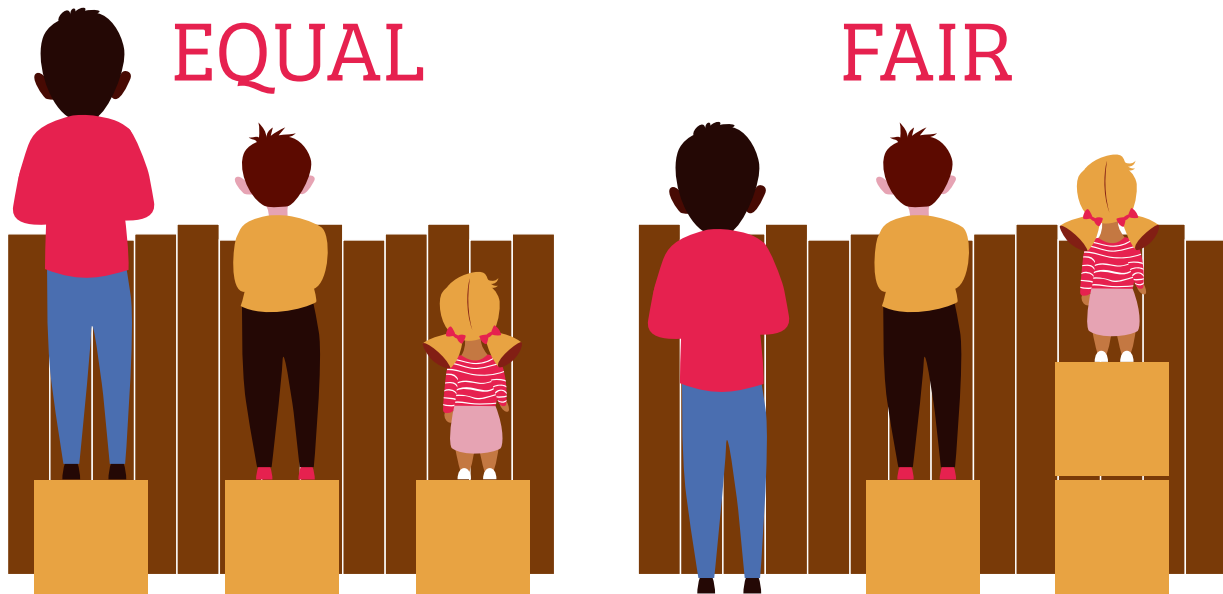
After considering what they have said, I have tried to show links between the children’s original statements and teaching about justice in RE. Of course, these links have to be somewhat generic due to the diversity of the different local agreed syllabi.

- Other people getting chocolate (or taking chocolate from the original owner, as was the case with my pupil!) would be a great starter for a topic on poverty and looking at distribution of wealth, as well as the work of charities such as Christian Aid or Islamic Relief. It could also be used to develop some drama based around stories from scripture.
- ‘The teacher didn’t believe me’: whatever the ins and outs of this story may have been, this example of unfairness provides lots of opportunities here for work about truth, and standing up for justice. There was a long and complicated tale associated with this about another child not saying what had happened, and the original child

therefore getting into trouble – a clear example of injustice, but also a lesson here about standing up for truth and the possibility of what might happen when we speak out. This could readily lead into work about the many examples of individuals who have done just that. There are, of course, all the ‘old favourites’ here: Martin Luther King, Mother Teresa and Malala. I think it is good practice, though, to look for less obvious examples, especially local people in the school community who have stood up for injustice because of what they believe.

- Being excluded, ignored or overlooked is a hard lesson to learn, and certainly a time when children (and adults) will state that it is not fair. This links with stories from scripture about caring for the unloved and unwanted in society. This could be a story of Jesus healing the lepers, and could further involve a study of something such as the Leprosy Mission. There is a lovely BBC video on YouTube (see Resources below) that tells the story of the Prophet and the Ants; a pleasant way to consider how everyone is valued and important in Islam and should not be left out.

Once the children had expressed the things that were not fair in their eyes, it was a small step – but actually a rather large jump in thinking – to ask them to talk about what things they knew about that were unfair for other people, things they may have seen on the news.



### 'It's not fair that ...'

- the animals are dying in the wildfire
- the police are shooting people
- there are homeless people

And it is here, I think, that we see the depth of thinking that our young children are capable of and the empathy that they are able to show. In a few minutes we went from a discussion about a big brother taking a chocolate bar that belonged to my pupil to a discussion on the injustice of police shooting people and the Black Lives Matter agenda.

### A tin of treats and a lucky dip! Specific activities to use to teach justice

A powerful starter activity that stimulated great conversation was as follows.

Have a tin of treats or prizes, and a set of tickets with some the children's names on them. Ceremoniously pulling ticket after ticket and allowing individual children to come and choose their prize makes for a great discussion around what is fair! A third of my Year 3 class got prizes, and we talked about how the two groups felt – those who got a prize and those who did not. Comments ranged from 'I'm really happy' to 'I feel guilty that I got a prize and my friend didn't.' We talked about who they thought should have a got a prize ('Me – I'm on the school council, so I'm responsible'), who did get a prize and maybe should not have (a child whose name was on the board for poor behaviour, for example) and the opposite idea: who would they have

given a prize to? This activity provided a wealth of material to link in with our unit.

A question to ask children to discuss is about whether *fair* means everyone has everything the same. Is *fair* the same as *equal*? Do we all need to have everything exactly the same, or do some people need different things to make things fair? There is a great picture that circulates regularly on social media and illustrates this really well: three children of different heights trying to watch a sporting event over a wall. They each stand on a box – which is equal: they all have the same. But the shortest still cannot see, and the tallest could see anyway without the box. The next picture shows the shortest standing on two boxes, and so they can now see. Not equal – but fair! I would suggest that this could be a good start for a lesson on the Islamic pillar of Zakat: everyone giving for those less fortunate, and Muslims who have wealth give more to those who do not have as much; a clear example of 'fair' over 'equal'.

Without justice, there can be no forgiveness; when I ask children to apologise to each other I make it clear that they know that they have done something wrong, and if they are really sorry, they will try not to repeat the behaviour. We talk about changing behaviour and not making the same mistake again.

Using this as a starter and linking to Isaiah (2:4), a contemporary resource is the statue of the Knife Angel. This sculpture is made from knives handed in as part of an amnesty. Isaiah states 'they shall beat

their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruninghooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more' (KJV). Asking the children to consider how the statue fits with this Bible verse and thus with the Christian understanding of how God wants people to live can be a creative way of looking at the Christian understanding of justice and forgiveness. I have asked children here to write poems reflecting their responses to the sculpture.

### Resources

An example of the three people on boxes illustration can be found at:

[interactioninstitute.org/illustrating-equality-vs-equity/](http://interactioninstitute.org/illustrating-equality-vs-equity/)

The Prophet and the Ants:

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_bN7KIMmwlc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_bN7KIMmwlc)

The Knife Angel:

[www.britishironworkcentre.co.uk/show-areas/the-knife-angel-official](http://www.britishironworkcentre.co.uk/show-areas/the-knife-angel-official)

### Also see:

- The Tree of Life at the British Museum: [britishmuseum.withgoogle.com/object/tree-of-life](http://britishmuseum.withgoogle.com/object/tree-of-life)
- *Let Us Beat Swords into Ploughshares*, a sculpture by Eugeniy Vuchetich in the United Nations Art Collection: [www.un.org/ungifts/content/let-us-beat-swords-ploughshares](http://www.un.org/ungifts/content/let-us-beat-swords-ploughshares)

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