

# What Do YOU Think?

To what extent does developing critical literacy help students to ‘think differently’?

As Pastoral Head of Year 8 at Chilwell School in Nottingham, Dan Williams was concerned that the ‘traditional’ approach to ‘Racism’ as a topic in PSHCE, in which students designed an anti-racist poster, was not, in fact, changing attitudes.

## What did he want to achieve?

Dan reviewed and redeveloped the PSHCE (Personal Social Health and Citizenship Education) scheme of work with the aim of making sure that students weren’t just told what to think, but thought about the issues for themselves. He wanted students to consider what influences how they think and the actions they take, and whether they appreciate other people’s points of view.

## How did he set about it?

Dan initially took up an offer from Vanessa Andreotti at the Centre for the Study of Social and Global Justice (CSSGJ) at Nottingham University to mentor him in developing critical literacy and using Open Spaces for Dialogue and Enquiry (OSDE) methodology. With additional support from Global Education Derby, he began a set of PSHCE sessions on prejudice, discrimination and oppression by using a PowerPoint cartoon about discrimination between the ‘red shoes’ and the ‘black shoes’ (taken from Mandy Coe’s ‘Red Shoes’ book) as a discussion stimulus.

In Session 2, he gave groups of students a selection of images related to prejudice and difference and asked them to find ways to group and categorise them. They explained and discussed their classifications with the rest of the class, before placing the pictures on a past / present / future timeline. He then gave the groups a set of words and phrases to place on a continuum: ‘fundamentalism / dogmatism / tolerance / respect / dialogue’ and a discussion ensued about where our society is on that line.

In Session 3, he gave the groups a storyboard cartoon about the meeting of three ‘hoodies’ and a young black individual, with six boxes; four with pictures and two with blank spaces at the end. He asked them to write two sets of speech bubbles showing what the characters were saying in each picture and then to fill in the thought bubbles for what they were actually thinking, before completing the last two pictures to show what happened next.

In the final session, the students were provided with pairs of opposite words (disabled/able-

bodied; white/black, etc.) and asked to link them. As well as finding the opposites, other linkages were made (rich/thin; stupid/poor; happy/able-bodied, etc) which led to discussion about the kinds of prejudices that exist in our society. Some of the links were anticipated but some were truly amazing. It proved to be a fascinating insight into young minds. Types of prejudice (racism, sexism, etc) were listed and the students were asked to rank the most and least prevalent in society and in the school. Racism was ranked high in society and low in the school, but other prejudices (weightism, sporting dis/ability) were added to the school continuum. Finally, an advertisement for a Sony PSP, which has been considered racist was analysed to bring in the influence of the media on how we think.

### **How well did he achieve his aims?**

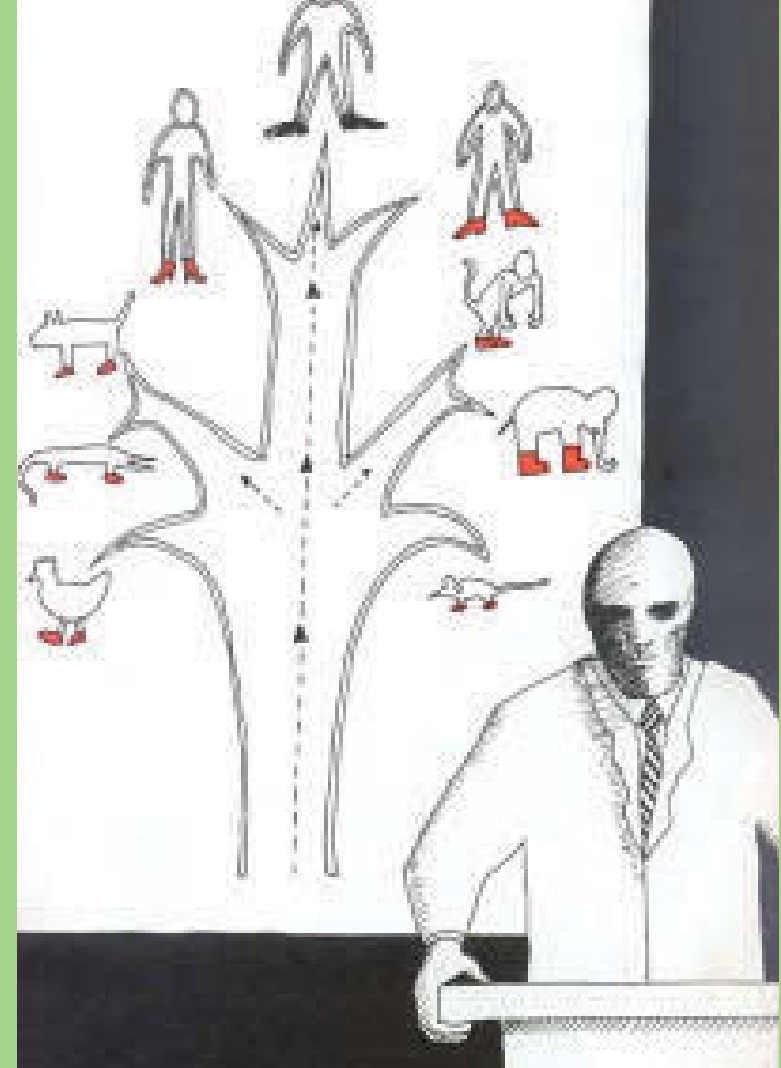
The storyboard session (Session 3) was also carried out with a control group who had no previous input on critical literacy. This group wrote the same comments in the speech bubbles and the 'what are they thinking' bubbles. The group who had participated in the previous two sessions filled their 'thinking' bubbles with many underlying assumptions and fears (for example: 'I have to say this to look hard in front of my mates'; 'my mum hates black people because she lost her job to one'). There was also a difference in the way some of them completed the storyboard, with the 'critically literate' group adding to the anticipated fight scenario comments such as 'with violence, we all lose' and even 'we have the power, but we're choosing not to use it'.

Dan believes beyond any doubt that there is evidence that he has achieved all he had hoped for in equipping young people to 'think differently'. The sessions allowed the students to think more deeply about what and who influences their behaviour and to be more aware that they have choices. In subsequent lessons, some of them even used the language they had been introduced to (tolerant, dogmatic, etc) to analyse responses.

### **What does he plan to do next?**

This set of sessions will be built into the Year 8 PSHCE scheme of work, and there are plans to post the activities on websites for use by other schools. The work is also having an impact within the school. The staff member responsible for CPD now directs other staff interested in developing critical literacy to Dan for advice. Dan has also led a session for trainee teachers at Manchester Metropolitan University and, also, student teachers are developing their own critical literacy sessions.





### Reflections:

- Thinking critically and critical literacy are essential in enabling students to gain a deeper understanding of racism and discrimination and develop self-awareness and understanding of what influences their behaviour and that of others. OSDE can be a valuable methodology to promote this.
- Given the time and space, critical and reflective teachers continually reassess the impact of the methods and materials they use, and find alternatives.



### More information:

- Visit: [www.osdemethodology.org.uk](http://www.osdemethodology.org.uk) for methodology to encourage critical engagement with global issues and perspectives.
- The PowerPoint activity Dan used in his first session is available at: [www.osdemethodology.org.uk/units/secondary/redshoes.htm](http://www.osdemethodology.org.uk/units/secondary/redshoes.htm).
- Mandy Coe's Red Shoes book is available from: [www.mandycOE.com](http://www.mandycOE.com).