

The fairest teacher of them all

By Jason Buckley

Albert worked in the city, earning good money.

But as he walked from his first-class train compartment to work, he noticed there were people in London who had very little money at all, because they were sitting on the streets asking him for some of his.

Sometimes he felt guilty about having so much when they had so little. So he sometimes gave them a few coins.

Albert's job was to invest the money of rich customers to help make them even richer. Sometimes he felt it was unfair that they were incredibly rich when he was just comfortable.

So he sometimes overcharged them, knowing they had so much money they wouldn't notice.

One day, Albert decided he was fed up with the whole business of people being so unequal. He was going to get a job where you could make a difference to that.

He went back to university and trained to become a teacher. And when he started teaching, and came to your school, he was determined that he was going to treat all of you equally.

So he made sure he learned all your names at the same time ... the brightest, the naughtiest and the quietest.

He smiled at all of you the same when he saw you around the school.

He made the same effort to get to know each of you.

He spent the same time helping each of you with your work.

Every time any of you answered a question, he said the same thing: 'Well done, that's excellent.'

He made sure he set you all the same work ... and gave you all the same time to do it.

Whenever someone did something wrong, he set you all the same detention.

Whenever you did some tests, he gave you all the same grades.

At parents evening, he said the same things about all of you.

And at the end of the year, he gave every single one of you the same report.

Albert was pretty pleased that he'd done such a good job of treating all his students equally.

So he was upset and puzzled when every single one of you said, in the same angry way, the same thing, 'It's not fair, you treat us all the _____. '

The Fairest Teacher of Them All?

This story stimulus often leads to interesting questions about fairness and equality.

Warm ups

Perhaps the best way to warm up for it is 'arbitrary discrimination'. Pick out three or four pupils according to an arbitrary trait, such as 'name begins with J' or 'is wearing a hairband'. Treat these pupils with especial kindness at the start of the lesson – asking them to decide whether your bag of Minstrels taste better crunched or melted, for example. Meanwhile, be severe with the others, who will soon notice, and, with luck, complain that you are treating them differently.

An alternative/additional warm up is the 'stand by' exercise included here. Space the four sheets around the circle. Pupils have to choose which of the four is the most unfair, and then give their best reason for choosing it.

The Stimulus

The story makes exactly the opposite point to the 'arbitrary discrimination' warm-up: sometimes unfairness arises precisely because people are treated the same. The last word of the story is deliberately left blank: prime the pupils that when you give them a signal, they all have to say what they think is the final word of the story – practice them chorusing a word in response to the signal before you start.

It helps if you slow down during the last section of the story, so they have time to take in the shift from sensible to ridiculous.

Question formulation and airing

You can try the concept compass to see what connections it prompts pupils to make between ideas of fairness and equality. Or you could use it as a tool for question airing, to see how the questions asked relate to the concepts and to one another.

Themes and questions

The most likely questions are around fairness and you can probe into what sort of differences make it right to treat people differently, such as needs, and which ones don't, such as appearance (or, at least, those aspects of appearance that can't be changed).

You might also get questions about teaching. Why become a teacher instead of a wealthy banker? What makes a fair/good teacher? If so, to avoid potential awkwardness, it's a good idea to share your dilemma as facilitator and get the community to agree some rules about not making the inquiry personal.

You might also get questions about the gap between rich and poor, or whether crimes matter if no-one notices.

Last Words

If you go round the circle, the last people to speak might have nothing new left to say. You might ask the community how you could make last words fair and equal. Or they might decide that doesn't matter, or would take too long to decide.