

Schools urged to teach children how to spot conspiracies and fake news

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Young people are as engaged and interested in current affairs as ever, but social media is siloing their opinions and making fake news hard to spot, and schools are the places to tackle this, according to a conspiracy

theory expert.

Glenn Bezalel is Deputy Head (Academic) at City of London School, where he teaches Religion and Philosophy. He also researches [conspiracy theories](#) at Cambridge University. His timely book "[Teaching Classroom Controversies: Navigating Complex Teaching Issues in the Age of Fake News and Alternative Facts](#)" is about teaching controversial topics, and is intended as a 'one-stop shop' to help classrooms grapple with the most challenging moral issues of the day.

The book offers specific guidance to [teachers](#) on how to handle discussions about the trickiest of issues in the public sphere including Holocaust denial, climate change skepticism, rising anti-vax sentiment, and what 'being woke' means.

Freedom of speech, [fake news](#) and conspiracy theories have become hot topics in their own right. Responding to concerns about the proliferation of online bots and misinformation, Bridget Phillipson, the UK education secretary, recently announced a school curriculum review [to help pupils spot fake news and conspiracy theories](#).

While some teachers may be uncertain about how to tackle challenging issues in the classroom, this book argues that they are precisely the people to do it. Bezalel says that when teachers are able to forge [strong relationships](#) with their [students](#), schools are the best place for students to learn about contentious topics, including with people who have differing opinions and experiences.

"Teaching Classroom Controversies" includes tailored guides to show teachers how to take a pluralistic outlook on contentious topics in a way that shows [young people](#) how to engage critically with issues and to view them from different perspectives.

Bezalel says, "As a teacher I'll readily admit that my biases are firmly in favor of young people and the generation of students I have the privilege to teach in my [classroom](#). However, there is something new, something quite disturbing, about how we deal with issues of controversy in today's world. Disagreement very quickly turns into delegitimization and exclusion.

"There is no going back. Social media is here to stay and controversies aren't going anywhere. For many in our supposedly 'post-truth' world, opinions have been elevated above facts.

"We are simply losing out by not equipping our students with the correct tools for thinking about controversy. I can't think of a better forum than the school to raise such issues in a purposeful and relatively safe environment. By exposing young people at the appropriate age to competing ideas, we are helping them to refine their intellectual stances so that they can enter into the debate with confidence."

Bezalel has found that reason alone isn't enough to capture the complexity of moral dilemmas, and urges teachers to consider the emotional perspectives of their students as well as the logical arguments that different issues invite. He hopes that the book will enable teachers to create an atmosphere in classrooms where a culture of "interthinking" can arise. This is where students can engage collaboratively and respectfully in a manner that goes beyond any individual's own reasoning.

More information: Glenn Y. Bezalel, *Teaching Classroom Controversies* (2023). [DOI: 10.4324/9781003298281](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003298281)

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