



Belief Circles Game

“The aspects of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity. (One is unable to notice something—because it is always before one’s eyes.)”

Wittgenstein, L. (1958) Philosophical Investigations. New York: Basil Blackwell & Mott, Ltd, p 129.

Rationale: What are belief circles?

Belief Circles are an experimental strategy used to scaffold and structure conversation about personal beliefs among small groups of participants. The recommended maximum number of participants is eight although it is possible to play this game with smaller or larger groups. Circles have no top or bottom, no corners or beginning and no end. Everyone is equal in a circle.

In classrooms this strategy is designed to make space for people to *speak personally* from within their own commitment stance. Participants speak about their religious beliefs or worldview, reflecting on their own lived experience and their own ideas, values and commitment as it relates to a discussion topic. The game has modest expectations. It simply creates a space and a place for listening to people speaking personally about their worldview without being offensive or defensive. It aims to foster learners’ appreciation of the range and complexity of people’s personal beliefs, curiosity in the variety of their values and convictional perspectives and respect and acceptance for people’s different beliefs, values and commitments. It can be difficult to talk about what is most important to us. The

belief game is a scaffolding device for learners' expressions of personal values, worldviews and belief identities in the classroom. It normalises and fosters confidence in reflecting and talking about felt and lived beliefs. Through inviting learners to voice what matters to them and encouraging turn-taking and active listening it also connects learners to the voices of others. Just taking time to really listen and speaking is a powerful activity. The Belief Circles activity is supported by materials on Padlet and TEC ODL sites where learners listen to a wider community of people who also speak about what matters to them e.g. Atlas of European Values, Soul Pancake, Said Mentak interview etc.

On the perimeter of each belief circle the teacher/group writes eight topics for discussion. When the dial is spun and lands on a randomly chosen topic, participants are invited to think and respond personally to the topic. The strategy is presented as a game in order to foster a relaxed interactive environment which encourages respectful dialogue (i.e. listening and conversation) around personal beliefs in a secure, environment that recognises the multiplicity of possible responses and perspectives in any group. It encourages participants to be confident in articulating their personal responses through informal conversation confident that their beliefs will be taken seriously. Of course children who are not used to this format may find it difficult to play the game initially. Once they are familiar with the format however they usually respond.

Topics for discussion written on the belief circle should be learner appropriate. Some learners may be open to speaking about their beliefs or worldview by using formal religious or faith commitment language although this is by no means inevitable or necessary. Others may wish to speak about their beliefs and identities in terms of what is important to them, without ever connecting to any formal religious or belief framework. Some may find it difficult to articulate what they believe. Sometimes confusion is a prelude to clarity. They may be inhibited or uncertain when talking about their beliefs. The word 'belief' may be alien. If the term belief is unhelpful an alternative way of discussing beliefs is to invite learners to chat about 'What really, really matters to you?' The circular formation is designed for intimacy, audibility, visual contact, and to encourage positive interaction with peers. Many children are familiar with Circle Time. Belief Circles foster inter-belief dialogue as a distinctive higher order pedagogy, with different levels of meaning, as well as affective, cognitive and relational dimensions that foster co-operation, communication and self-confidence.

This game aims to:

- Provide a safe space to think about personal beliefs and identity.
- Foster participants' confidence in expressing their beliefs.
- Create a secure environment where personal beliefs will be taken seriously and will not be ridiculed.
- Facilitate participants' respectful engagement with a variety of belief perspectives.
- Negotiate points of difference and commonality.
- Acknowledge that there are potential moments of disagreement in any discussion about beliefs and that participants can disagree without being disagreeable.

Belief Circles Game

STEP 1 Preparation for Playing the Game

Establishing Safe Perimeters for Playing the Belief Circles Game

Belief circles take place from within a context of respect. We respect other people's beliefs. This is a safe space. However there is no carte blanche for the exploration of beliefs in this game. **The laws of the country** apply in any discussion on belief circles. If I say I believe stealing is a good way of making a living then my belief is undermining this. Similarly a **human rights framework** applies so that the Belief Circle game does not give a voice to anyone expressing xenophobic, sexist, racist, homophobic anti-Traveller beliefs etc. Finally it is key to note that this game takes place in an **educational context** and it is important to note that certain topics are educationally inappropriate and may be unsuitable for discussion e.g. belief in certain sexual practices. In all of the above it is key to note that when we disagree we don't walk away from this disagreement. We negotiate and explore what we agree on and what we do not agree on but we are always guided by a Human Rights framework, a legal framework and our educational context.

Explore guidelines for playing the game:

Guidelines for playing the game:

- Everybody is invited to speak but nobody is forced to speak.
- Silence is a valuable form of participation and communication.
- Everyone speaks about their own views... "I think" or "I believe" or "I feel"....
- Everybody is invited to speak for an equal amount of time (e.g. 2 minutes – timer speaking object if desired).
- Everyone in the group gets a turn to talk (clockwise rotation with talking object).
- Everybody agrees to listen actively to the person who is talking and not to interrupt.
- Nobody criticises or ridicules another person's beliefs (e.g. "you're wrong"..."That's ridiculous"...).
- Nobody tries to convert other people to their personal beliefs or to share with anyone outside the circle what somebody has said (confidentiality).
- One person volunteers to start the belief game by spinning the dial on the belief wheel to reveal the topic for discussion.

Note some belief wheels may be blank for participants to negotiate and nominate topics they would like to discuss. Ensure these are learner appropriate. A range of possible topics is given in this pack. Teachers might select topics that are most relevant for their students' learning needs. Teachers can contribute more topics. Newspapers can be used to select contemporary events and themes. When participants have agreed to the rules of the game, a volunteer starts the discussion by spinning the dial on the belief wheel until it randomly lands on a topic for discussion. Some topics can be very sensitive or developmentally inappropriate and so it is important that the teacher filters these.

STEP 2

The group engages in the Belief circle Game. Once a topic is selected everybody has a first go at speaking for one minute. Then participants are invited to speak again for one minute on the topic after hearing what everyone else has said on the topic. Participants always speak about their own beliefs.

Before the game ends the participants are asked to give a very brief verbal response to the following questions:

- Can you say something you like about somebody else's belief?
- Can you say something you heard that made you think differently about your own belief?

Remember you can disagree without being disagreeable.

STEP 3

When everybody in the circle has a go at talking a volunteer hands out a blank piece of card and a pencil to each participant. The volunteer then reads the prompt questions and invites participants to jot down a response (can be visual or written etc.) to one of the questions below:

1. What do you notice about what matters to our group?
2. What did it feel like to agree with somebody's beliefs?
3. What did it feel like to disagree with somebody's beliefs?

Invite participants respond through text and image to one question above. After 5 minutes the cards are gathered, shuffled and placed blank side up on the floor. Participants are invited to pick up a card and going around the circle again they read out the response that is written on their random card.

Negotiating moments of disagreement

Before we play the beliefs game we might explore how good it is that we're not all the same. Imagine if we all liked the same food, loved the same TV programme, supported the same football club, enjoyed identical hobbies? Our differences make us distinctive. They make us us.

Identify ways that we are different. Explore that when people are different and have different ideas and tastes then it is inevitable that we are going to have disagreements. I prefer Gaelic football to Soccer, Swimming to cycling, drawing to reading or playing music, dogs to cats.....pop music to House, Chinese food to Indian. Seeing things differently and having different ways of being in the world is part of what it is to be human. Hate spiders. Love spiders. Eat meat. Vegetarian. Vegan. Consult with class how we negotiate

disagreements. How do you think that people should respond to other people's opinion when they disagree with them? Before you get into a belief circle negotiate the rules of engagement and forms of effective disagreement and unhelpful forms of disagreement. Use the class as a resource to explore ways of disagreeing with somebody that doesn't insult them or hurt their feelings. "You're stupid. You're wrong. That's ridiculous." What ways might we explore our disagreements? Point out that we need to take these moments of disagreement seriously as these are opportunities for us to really learn about ourselves and others. We don't run away from disagreement. We stick with it, acknowledge it and try to work through it in an effective manner. Of course if disagreement is intense and deeply emotional it might be good to take time out, rethink and get a bit of distance from our passionate responses.

As a group/class we need to decide how we're going to deal with difference of opinion and belief before we play the beliefs game. Let us identify strategies things that we can do to make our space a safe space to explore our belief differences.

When we disagree with somebody we might:

Clarify calmly: Ask the person questions about what they think or believe and give them a chance to think, speak and explain.

Open my mind: Listen to the reasons why somebody sees and feels something differently to me.

Imagine myself through their eyes: Try to imagine their perspective from their point of view and my own perspective from their point of view.

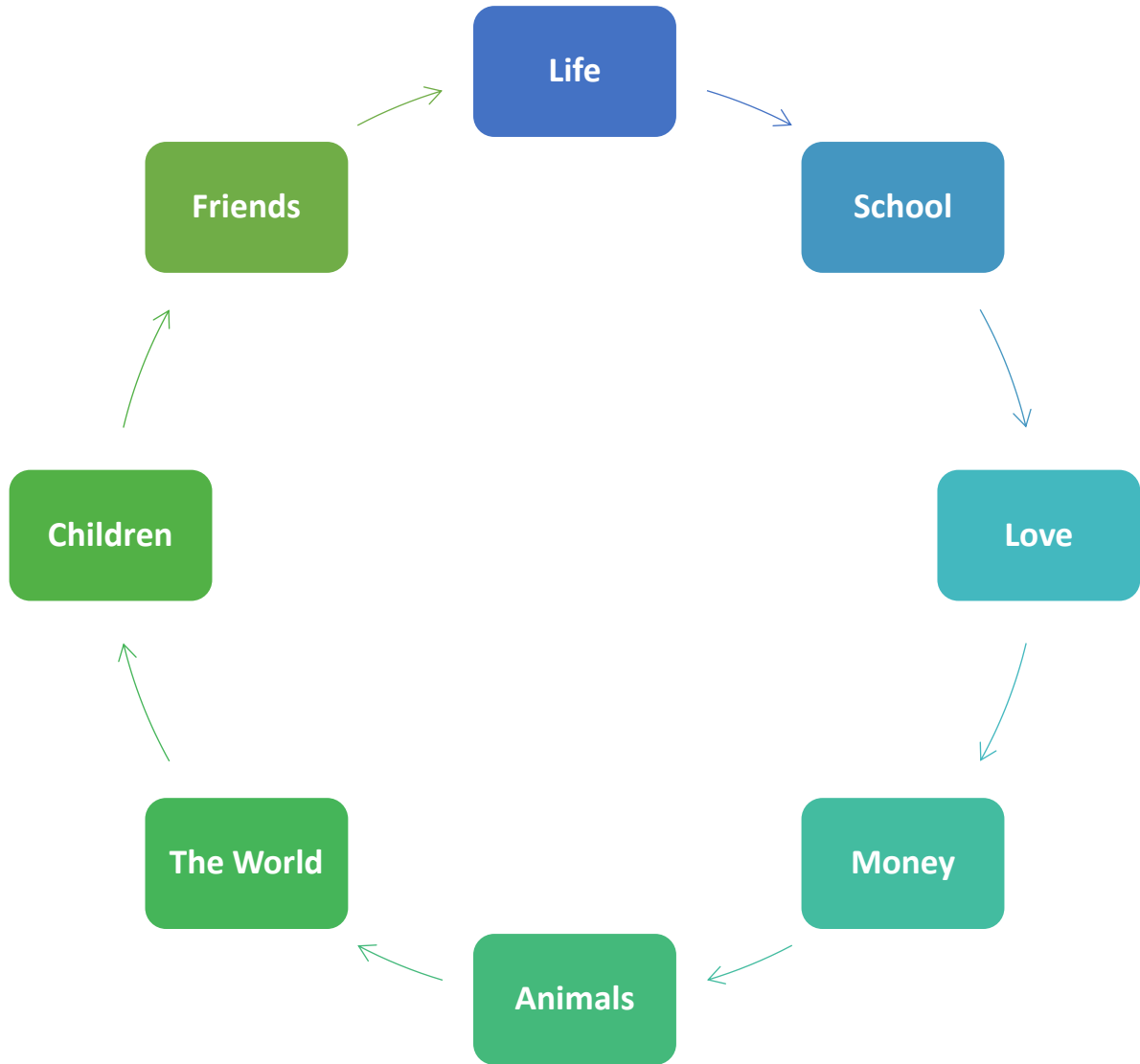
Take turns. Keep calm. Use language that will not offend or hurt somebody else. Take the difference seriously and really try to think about it together. Is there any common ground? Give a structure for this difference that is measured and fair. You see.....I see that.....We both see....

Take time to think and feel: Agree to take time to think and come back at a later stage of this lesson or a subsequent lesson to what seemed strange or difficult to accept.

Don't rush to judge: Give them space. Focus on listening to the person and try not to rush to a judgement. Talk about the aspects of their viewpoint that you disagree with without making it a personal attack on them and giving your reasons for seeing things differently.

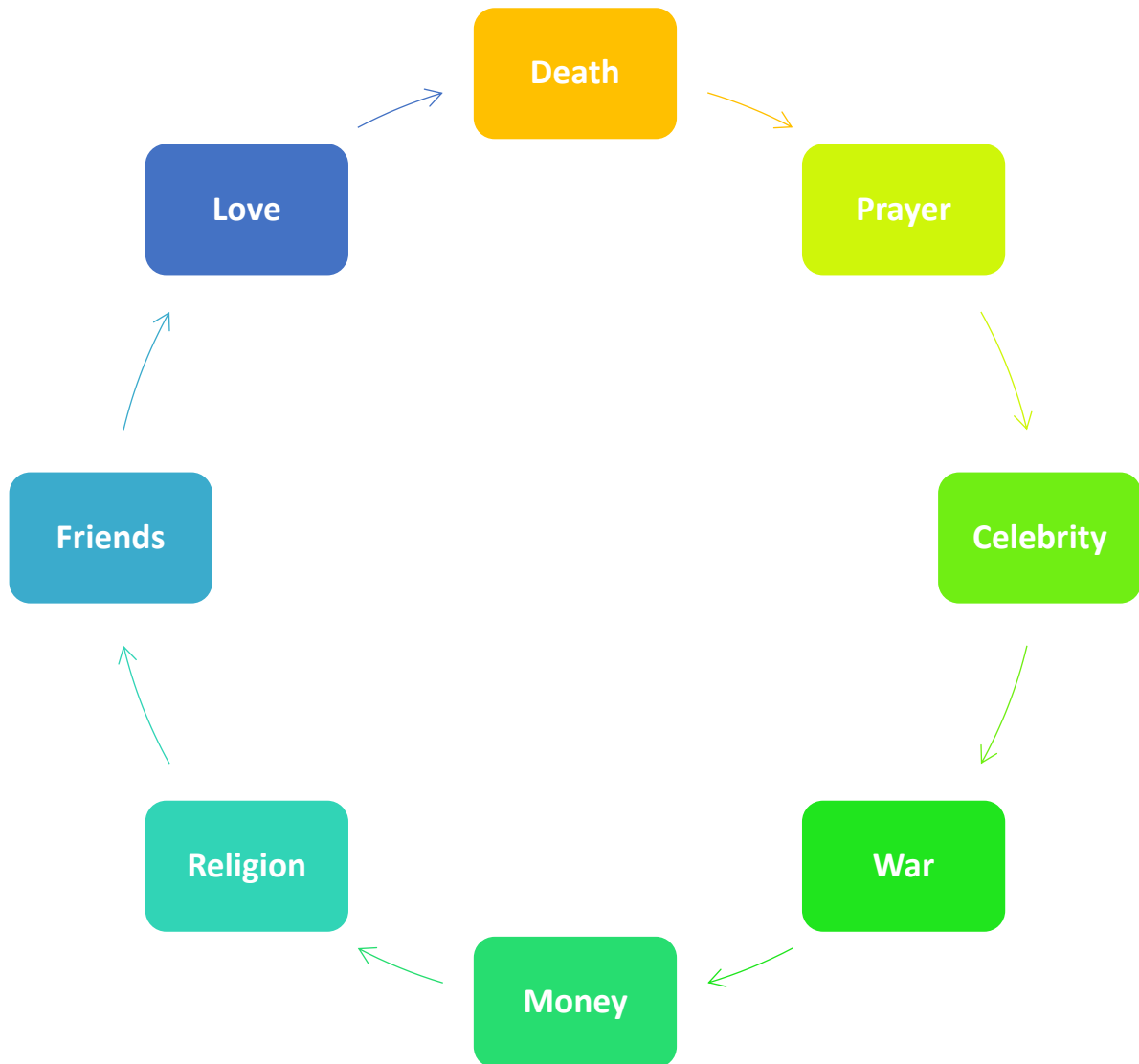
Respecting that difference is part of what it means to live in the human community. Different opinions and ideas and beliefs make life interesting. Elicit that when you believe something different to me it is not a value judgement or an attack on my beliefs. Difference of belief is not a threat. It is a healthy sign of life. So what kinds of things can we do to make sure that we can disagree about our beliefs in a very safe and positive manner? Beliefs are very emotional as well as cognitive, instinctive and tied to tradition and family, and can be intimate and personal. Sometimes if somebody has a belief different to mine I feel that they are undermining my belief. Encourage participants not to see somebody else's strong belief as a threat to their own.

Possible Belief Circle Topics



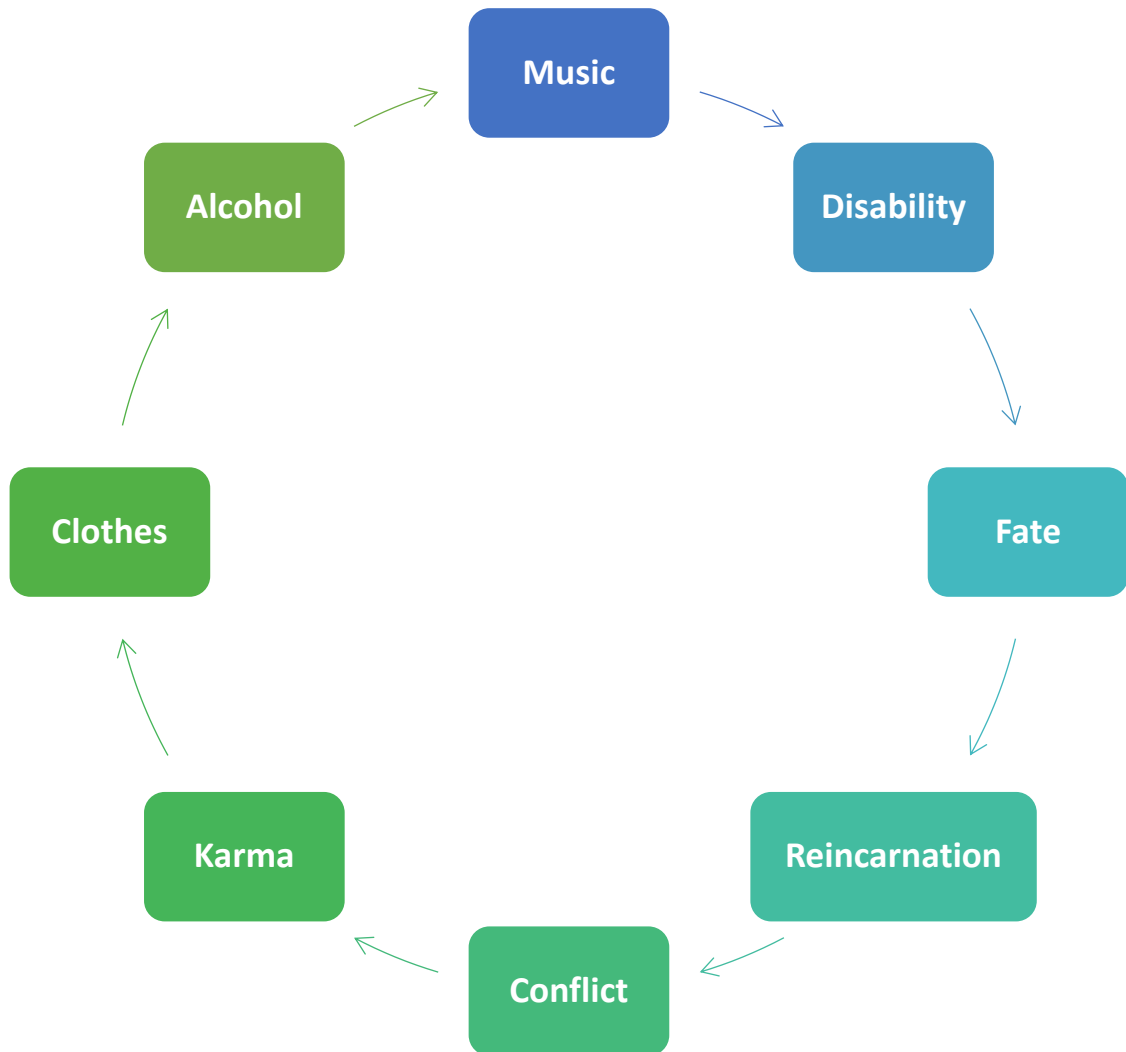
Pack A - Younger Children

Possible Belief Circle Topics



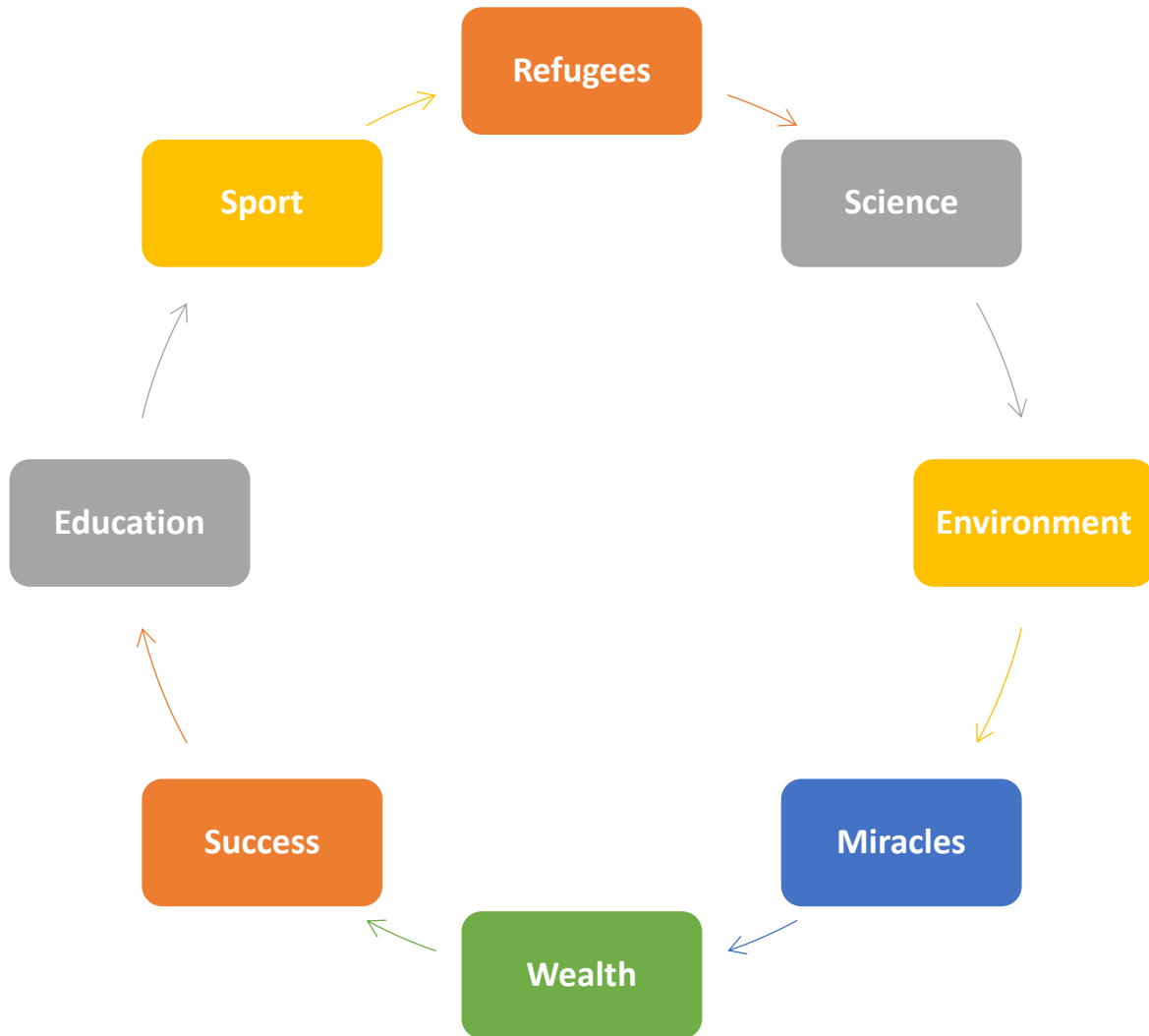
Pack B - Older Children

Possible Belief Circle Topics



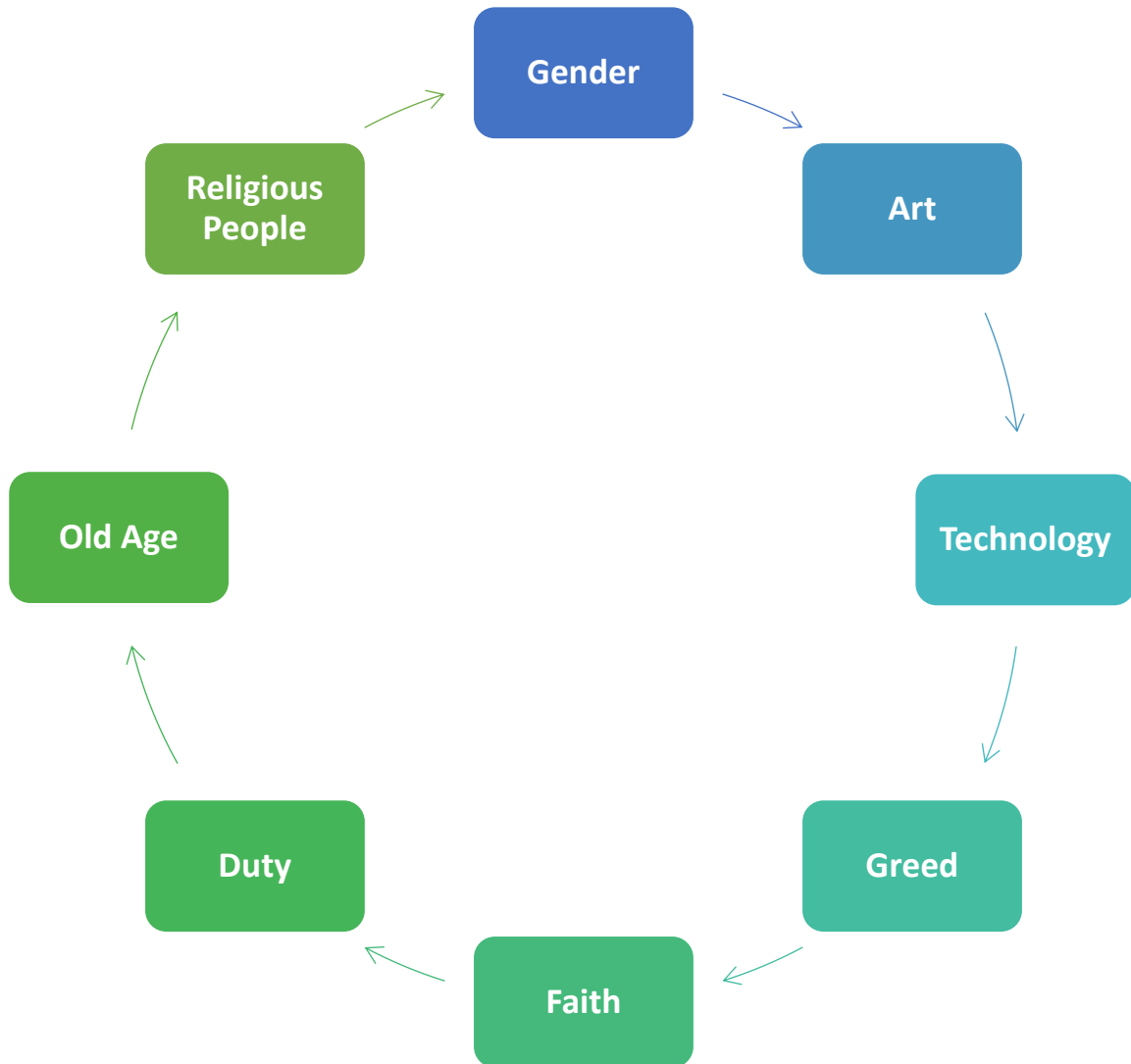
Pack C – Older Children

Possible Belief Circle Topics



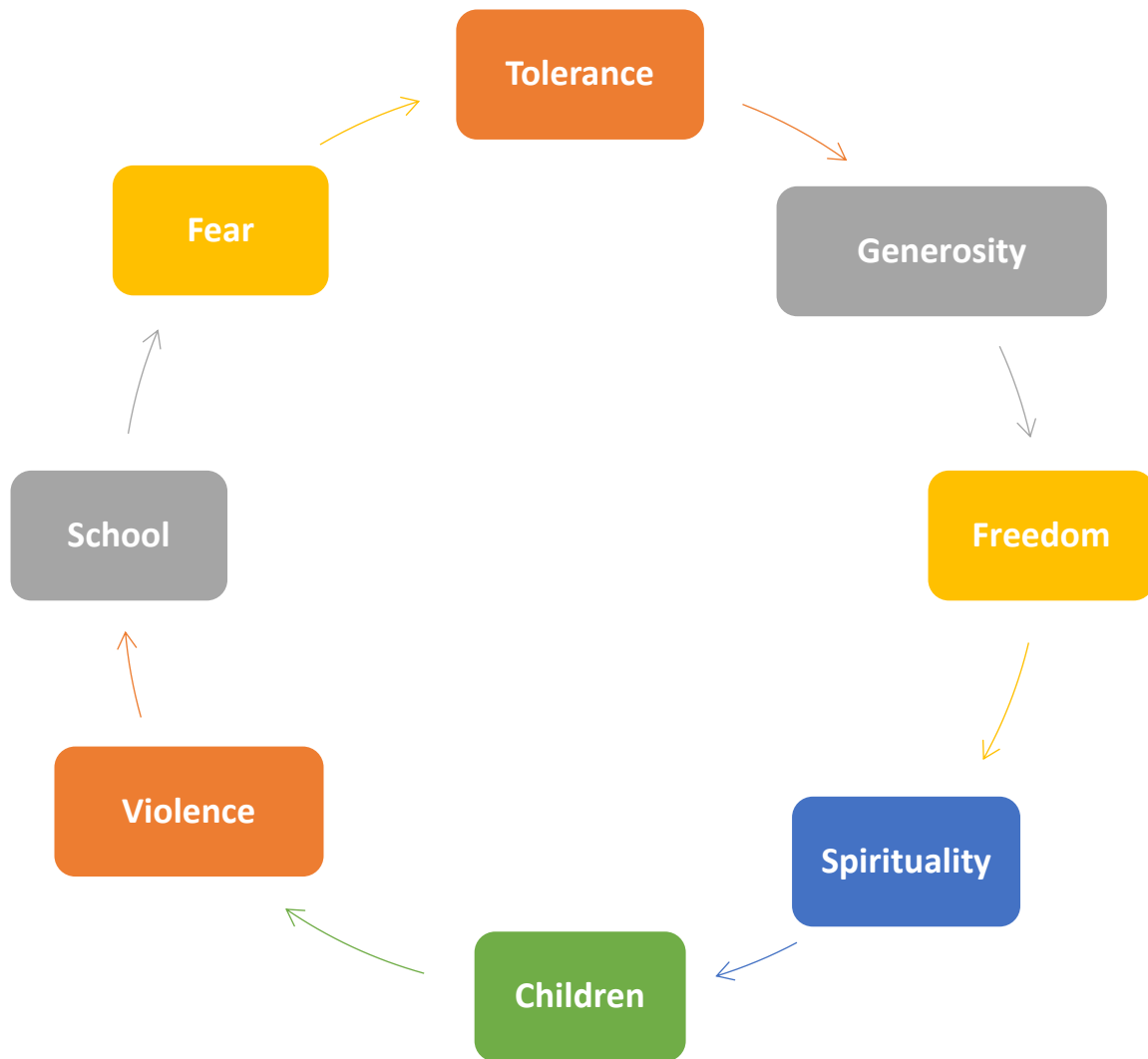
Pack D – Older Children

Possible Belief Circle Topics



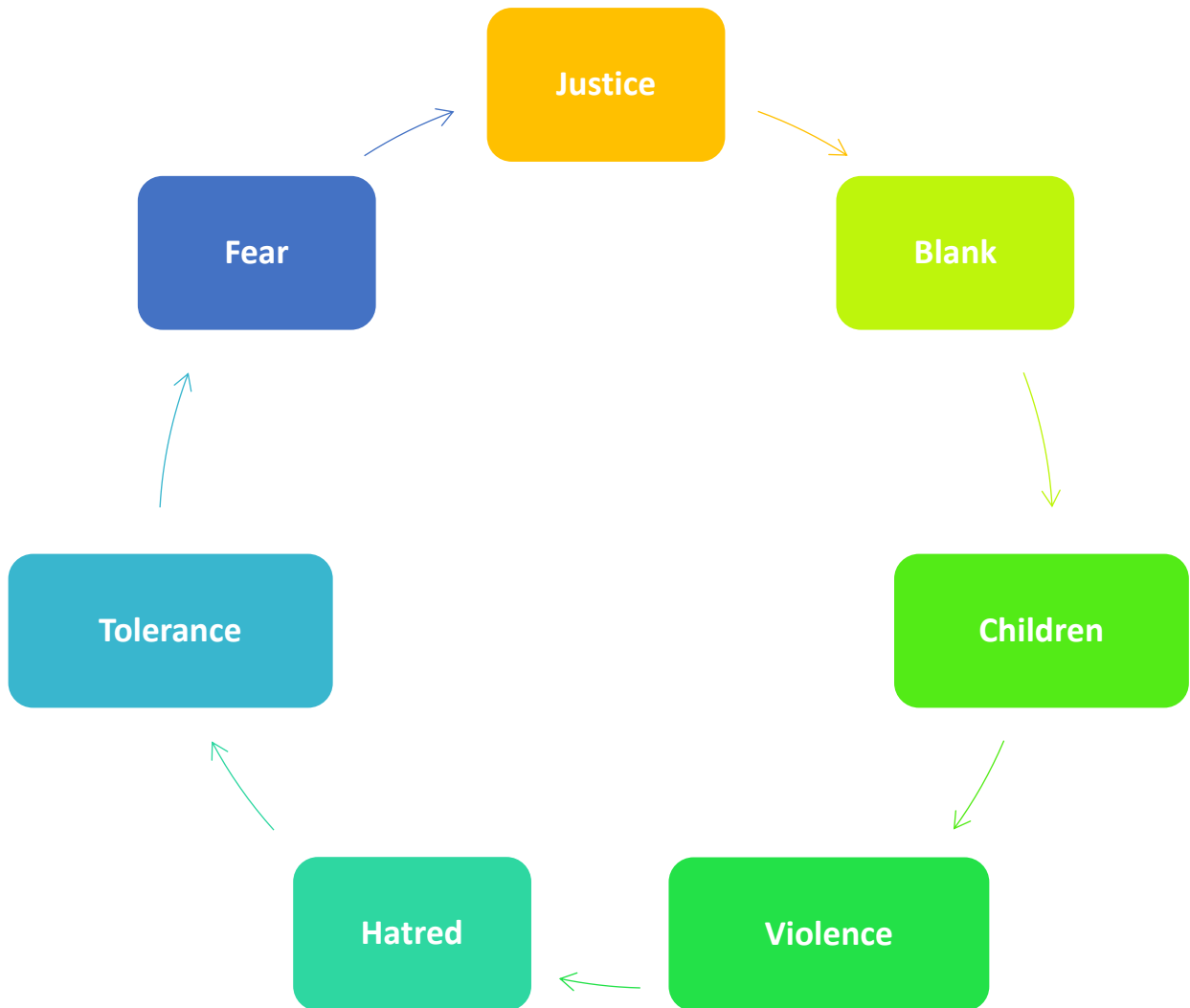
Pack E – Older Children

Possible Belief Circle Topics



Pack F – Older Children

Possible Belief Circle Topics



Pack G – Older Children

About: A brief overview of our project

The Enquiring Classroom (TEC) is an Erasmus + project that works with educators to explore a range of creative arts-based methodologies that support dialogical and enquiry based approaches to learning in schools.

Its five strands consist of:

- Philosophical Enquiry
- Lived Values
- Interpretative and Dialogical Approaches to Religions and Beliefs
- Arts-based methodologies
- Scenario-based learning and ICT

TEC explores creative and engaging approaches to pedagogy that seeks to put the voices of children and young people at the heart of educational practice. It focuses on creating the conditions for curious, imaginative conversations by building learning communities that foster a sense of interest and curiosity in the world and in others. Its aim is not to propose a single approach to navigate complex questions but to work with multiple approaches that are attuned to the different rhythms and experiences of classroom life.

This project has been funded with support from the European Commission under the Erasmus+ programme. It is a collaboration between the following partners:



About the Authors

Prof. Aislinn O'Donnell



Aislinn O'Donnell is Professor of Education in Maynooth University. Aislinn has developed a number of creative research and teaching projects that seek to introduce philosophy to settings like the prison, probation projects, and drug projects. Aislinn is interested in exploring innovative and experimental approaches to teaching philosophy, fostering cross-disciplinary dialogue between philosophy and other subject areas, such as contemporary art, and developing pedagogical strategies to help us to reflect upon ethics, inclusion, diversity, and the global refugee crisis in educational institutions and society.

Dr. Patricia Kieran



Patricia Kieran teaches Education about Religions and Beliefs at Mary Immaculate College, University of Limerick, Ireland. She is keenly interested in inter-belief dialogue and her current research focuses on the manner in which learners might explore deeply personal, complex and sensitive issues surrounding religions and beliefs in a multi-belief context. Her work focuses on teaching creatively, using religious artefacts in the classroom to explore complex religious themes, and on the representation of religions and beliefs in curricular programs.

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