

Fairness and Equality Assembly

I would like us to think about fairness and equality this morning. To illustrate the theme, here is the sort of problem a Head Master often faces. Three pupils have done something wrong – let's say they decided to skip lessons one afternoon and go to sit by the lakes. They have all done the same wrong thing, so they should all get the same punishment, right?

But what if one of them has a medical condition, which means that the child is impulsive and cannot control themselves in ways the other children can? What if another of the children has done this before and has already been given a final warning not to step out of line again? What if the third child is going through personal difficulties that mean they are particularly vulnerable at the moment?

Maybe it doesn't make sense to give the same punishment for the same action after all. Something more thoughtful and complex might be needed. If we want the pupils to flourish in the same way, perhaps we might have to treat them unequally. In philosophical terms, the trade-off is between 'equality of treatment', when each pupil is treated in the same way but important differences between them are ignored, and 'equality of care', when each pupil is

The main thing is to keep trying, and keep thinking. It might surprise you to discover how many obvious and simple things in the world, things that you take for granted, are actually pretty complicated. And if, here at school, we sometimes seem to get it wrong, it might be that we are applying a different concept of fairness to the one you have in your mind. Of course, with such a complicated matter, we might just have got it wrong.