Handling Controversy within a Primary Context: An Evaluation of Current Research

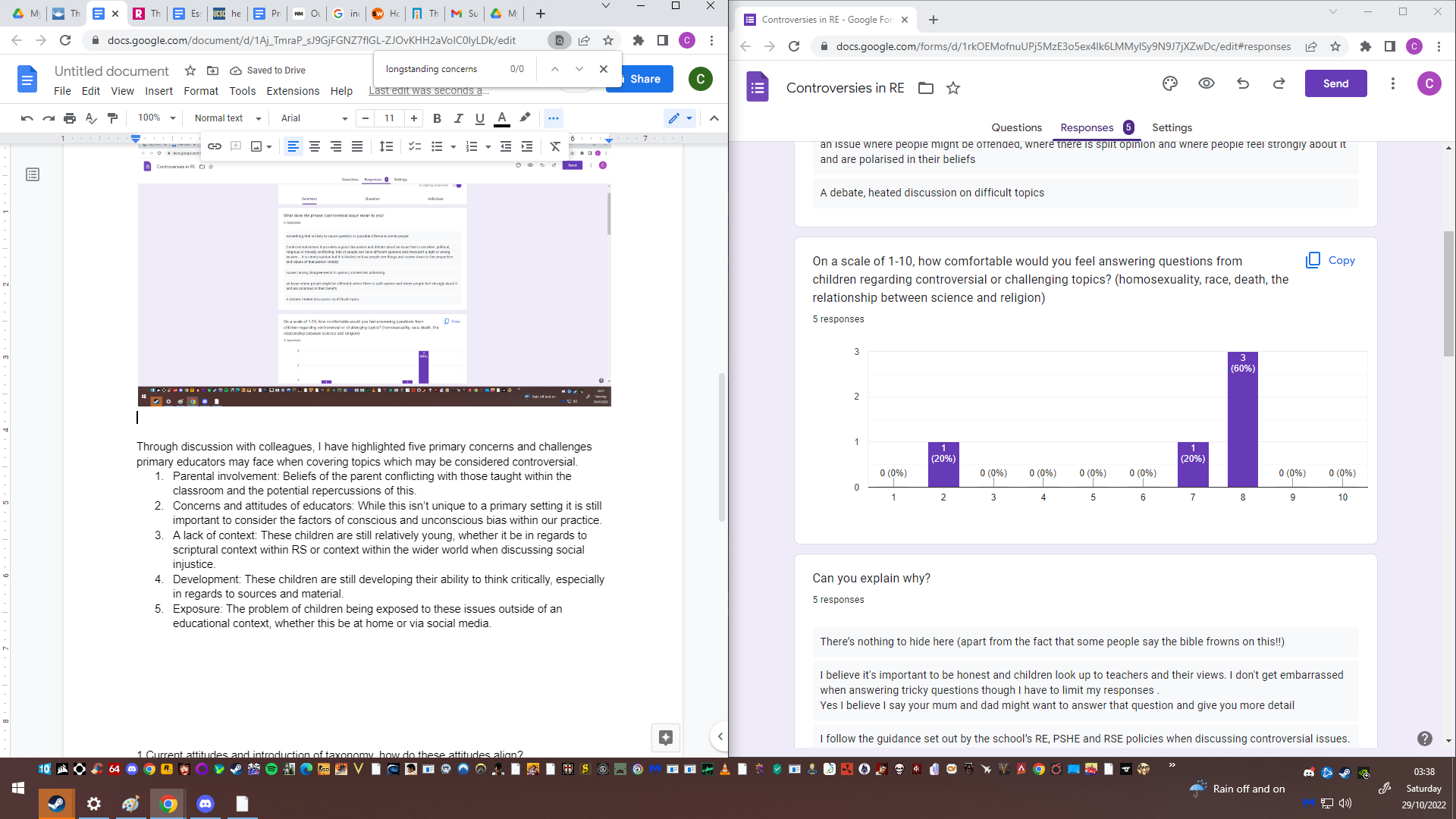
Two years ago, the death of George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter movement dominated news sources around the world, sparking a national debate regarding the way in which our curriculum handles the topics of black history, migration and the British Empire. This, in turn, amplified the voices of many students who were increasingly concerned that what they were learning in school did not reflect the world in which they live (Purdy-Moore, 2021), it is becoming clear that there is a growing need to address these social issues in the classroom. However, this raises a number of important questions: How do we decide which topics to discuss? How can we ensure that educators remain impartial within their teaching? From what age should we discuss social issues with children and should parents have the right to remove their child from those discussions? This piece of writing will aim to explore those questions. We will begin by defining the term ‘controversial issue’, we will then explore attitudes and approaches taken by a series of educators currently working in a church school, then we will discuss the challenges faced when covering these topics with younger children, and continue to explore the importance of discussing challenging issues.

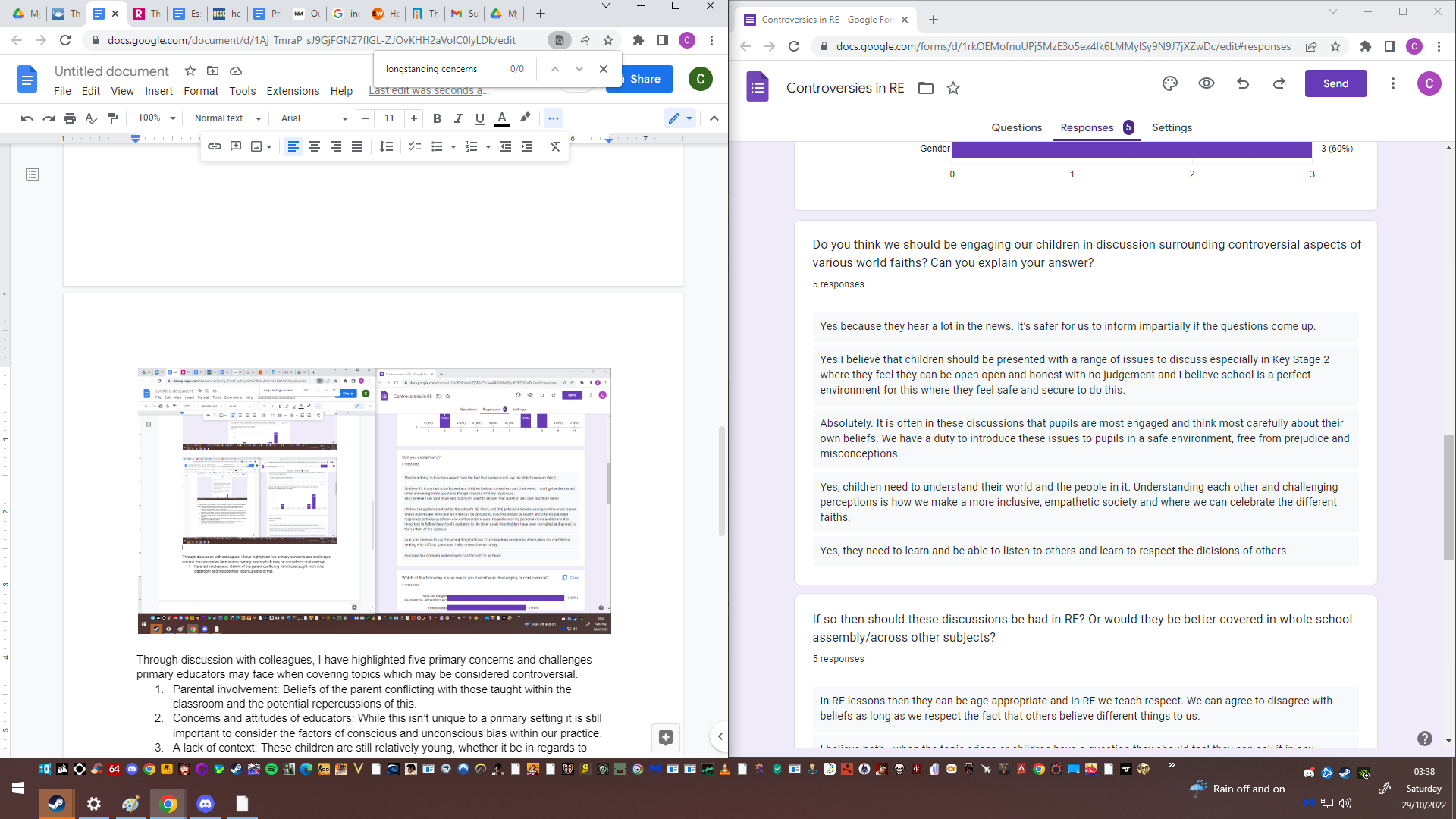
## What is a controversy?

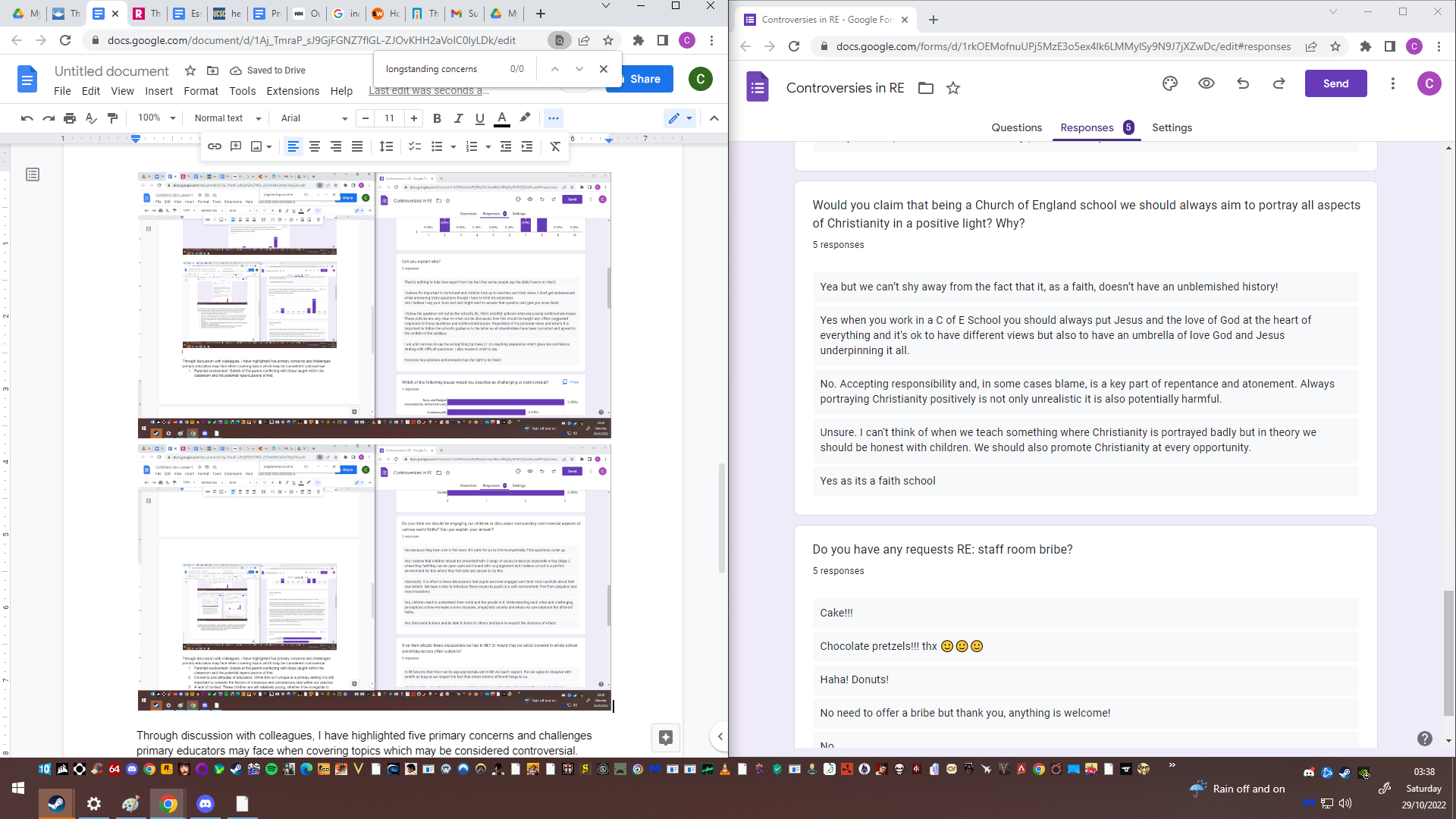
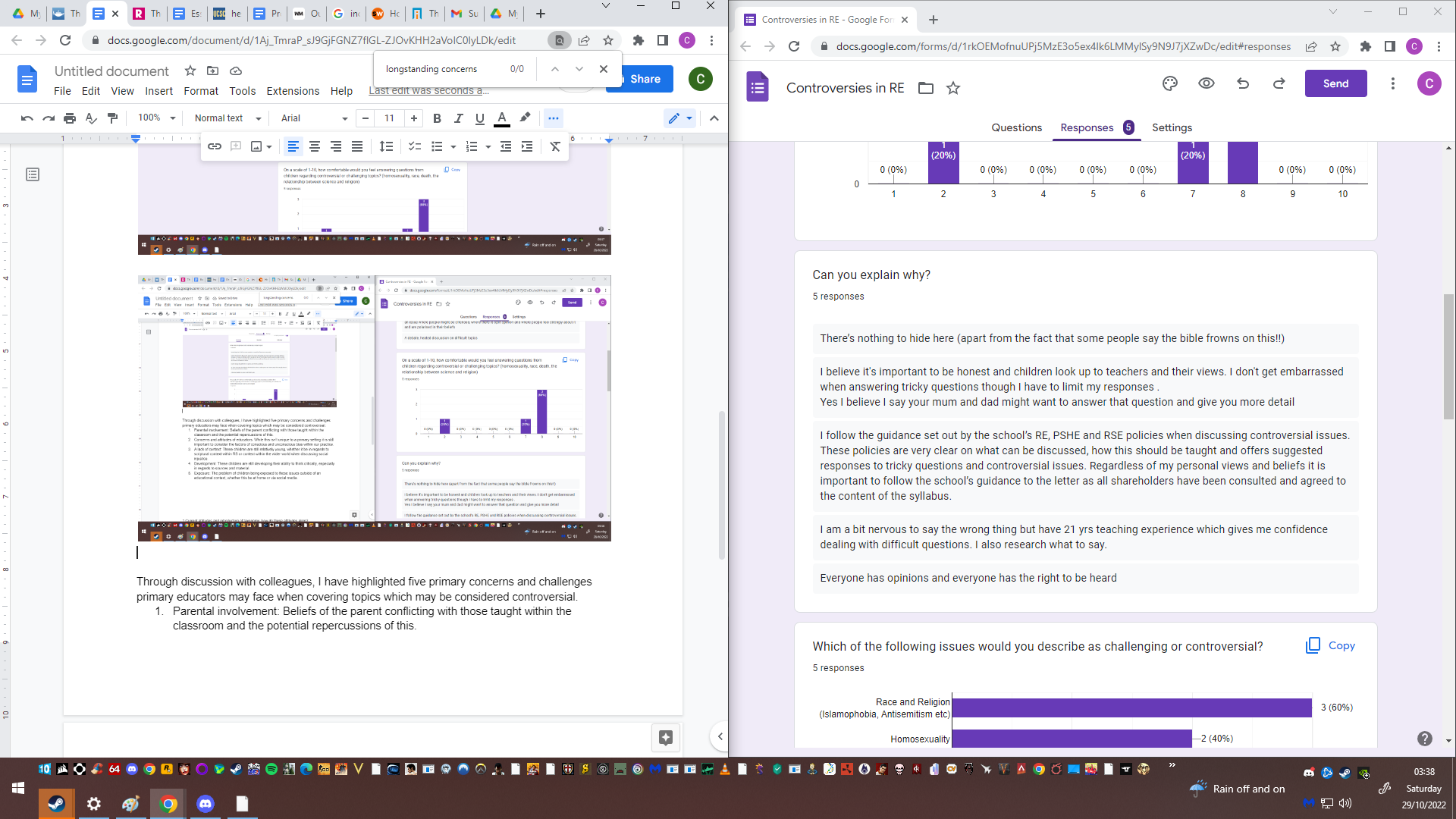
There is some disagreement among researchers regarding the definition of ‘controversy’. Stradling (1984) argues that Controversial issues are those in which communities are clearly divided, wherein different groups offer conflicting explanations and advocate conflicting solutions whereas Hand (2008) suggests that schools should hold the policy of ‘teaching as controversial those matters on which contrary views are not contrary to reason’. While Stradling provides a sound definition, I would argue that there are many issues in which communities are divided which should not be taught as controversial. Take for example the growing ‘Anti-Vax’ movement. For the purposes of this evaluation, I will be favouring Hand’s epistemic criterion.

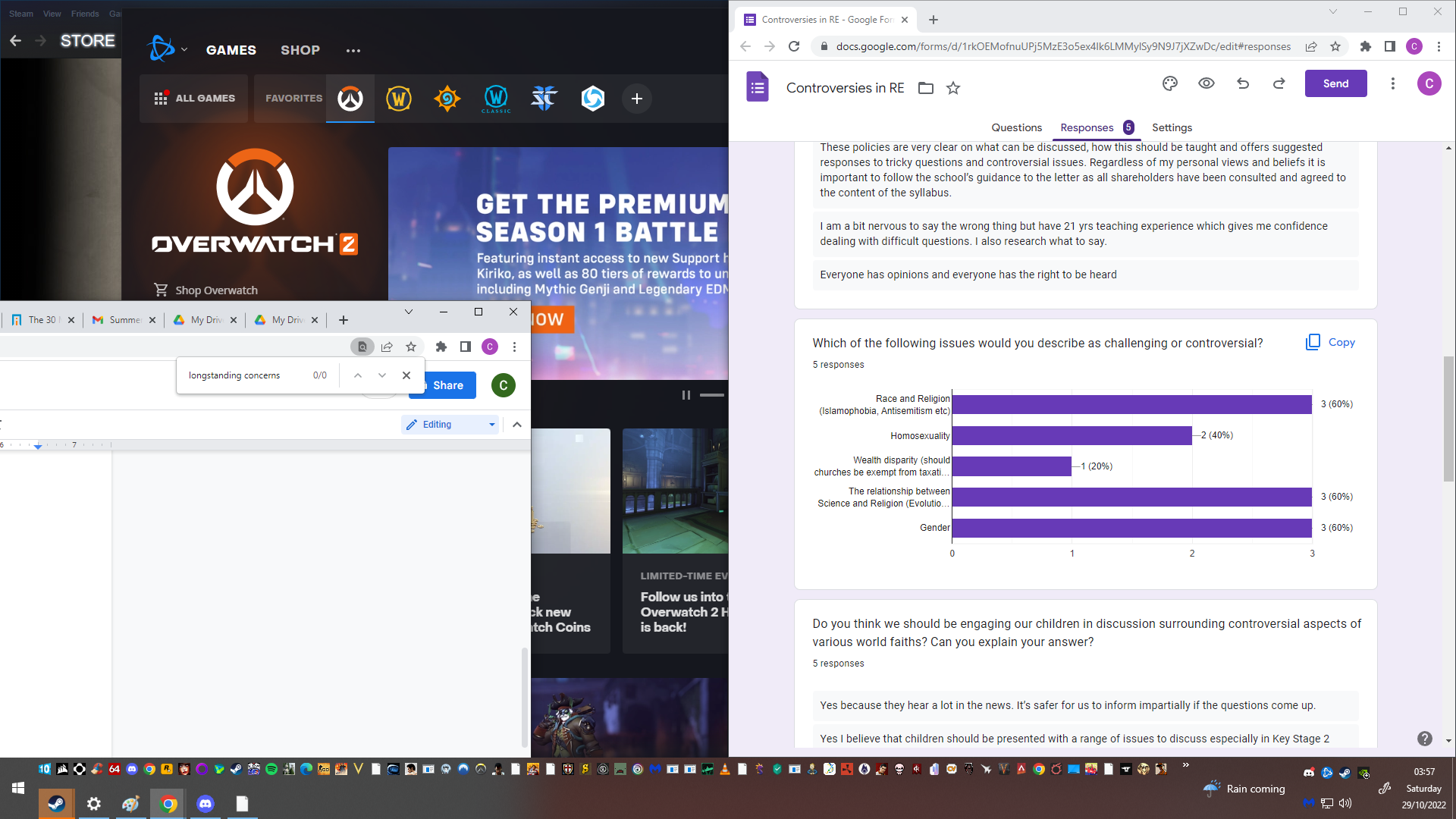
## What do teachers at my school think?

When I began researching for this project, I decided it would be valuable to gather data from practising educators within my school. Listed below are the questions and responses:







## Analysis

I would like to explore these responses using a taxonomy introduced by Hess (2003) in which she suggests that educators take one of four approaches. The first of which being Denial, the refusal to believe that an issue is problematic or controversial, for example an educator refusing to teach the death penalty as controversial due to their belief that it is inherently immoral. The next approach is Privilege, an acknowledgement that an issue is controversial but with a desire to promote one particular side. Avoidance is a refusal to teach a topic. In her research Hess found that a large number of educators refused to teach Roe V Wade, when questioned one woman stated that she was a devout catholic and would not be able to bring herself to promote a balanced argument for abortion rights, therefore she avoided the topic entirely. The final approach is Balance, ensuring that both sides get a fair case, this would be our preferred approach although Flesner (2020) identified that the approaches most commonly observed within their study were those of denial and avoidance. Looking at the responses from my own school we can see that while they are supposedly willing and confident to tackle these issues, they may not always identify them as a controversial topic, this suggests a denial approach in certain areas with responses to question three suggesting privilege when covering religious controversy.

## Five Primary concerns

Through discussion with colleagues, I have highlighted five primary concerns and challenges primary educators may face when covering topics which may be considered controversial.

1. Parental involvement: Beliefs of the parent conflicting with those taught within the classroom and the potential repercussions of this.
2. Concerns and attitudes of educators: While this isn’t unique to a primary setting it is still important to consider the factors of conscious and unconscious bias within our practice.
3. A lack of context: These children are still relatively young, whether it be in regards to scriptural context within RE or context within the wider world when discussing social injustice.
4. Development: These children are still developing their ability to think critically, especially in regards to sources and material.
5. Exposure: The problem of children being exposed to these issues outside of an educational context, whether this be at home or via social media.

Interestingly, these issues were almost all highlighted by Hess (2003). Specifically, the first and second problems, finding that teachers regularly indicated an anxiety regarding the politically charged nature of controversy, highlighting fears that they may be accused of indoctrination and lacked that education and training to take on controversy in the classroom. This was mirrored in a study by Holden and Hicks (2007) which found that undergraduate student teachers were much less secure in their ability to discuss global issues. They found that these teachers were concerned for their own role, the reaction of parents and appropriate strategies for the classroom including how to deal with children’s responses. She finds that these accusations of indoctrination typically arise in one of two ways, the first being that the practitioner is seen to be promoting one side over another, interestingly the second arose when the simple mention of a topic within a classroom would be problematic in itself. For example, a teacher holding a class debate regarding the US invasion of Iraq and whether they should have pulled their troops earlier may have raised complaints from more conservative parents, who viewed the existence discussion itself as a form of leftist indoctrination. Suddenly the anxieties of early career teachers seem much more reasonable, when the mere mention of a topic may bring scrutiny. This is made more challenging by the objectiveness of what may be considered to be controversial, it is important to consider that public opinion shifts dramatically over time. Hess (2003) identifies with this, stating that “selecting subjects for issue discussions can feel like hitting a moving target”. A century ago the topic of women's suffrage was incredibly contentious, now we view the right to vote as universal. As recently as a few decades ago, the mention of climate change may have been met with some resistance, now we are actively seeing the devastating effects in the forms of wildfires, earthquakes and floods.

Wood (2007) states that teaching and learning takes place within a context of high levels of legislation. In this spirit the Department for Education (2022) did release guidance this year, entitled ‘Political Impartiality in Schools’, which urged a stance of impartiality in all issues. This reminded teachers that they are to prohibit the promotion of partisan political views and take steps to ensure a balanced presentation of opposing views. Interestingly it also puts the onus onto teachers to identify which issues fall under the category of political or controversial. This is immediately problematic, while teachers are expressing fears of discussing certain topics they now have the added responsibility of deciding whether they constitute the label and treatment of a controversial issue. As previously discussed, this is inherently subjective and likely to change as public opinion shifts, putting the expectation on them is likely only to add to the issue and increase the frequency of avoidance responses.

## The challenge for practitioners

Having established that practitioners feel as if they have been inadequately prepared, are being faced with limited support from the Department for Education and feel as if they will be challenged by both parents and other members of staff. It would seem appropriate to ask why they would run the risk of having these discussions in the first place, why is it so important? James and Stern (2018) posit “In effective RE, pupils can come to an appreciation of diversity of expression and participate in dialogue about these in their society” and while these issues aren’t entirely isolated to RE, I believe that this effectively summarises the primary reason for these discussions. Westheimer and Kahne (2003) ask the question “what kind of citizen are we educating towards?”, by having these challenging discussions and promoting the skills of reasoning and enquiry we are educating towards a generation of the socially and ethically conscious. OXFAM (2018) published guidance for teachers covering controversial issues, in which they listed the numerous benefits to the children. These discussions give young people chances to explore their own values, developing skills such as information processing, creative thinking, evaluation and reasoning. Referring back to our potential challenges, we already begin to see a solution for challenge four; some children may not have developed the ability to think critically, but they will not be able to grow that skill unless we afford them a change. We also see a solution to our third challenge, by exposing children to these issues we are giving them the tools they need to navigate them. Another point raised in the document is that children are eager to learn about these issues. . A study by Think Global (I. Wybron, S. Vibert, and J. Smith, 2017) found that young people are highly motivated to tackle controversial issues including discrimination and many feel they have a role to play in “bringing society together”, but are not sure how to take action. As practitioners, educators and caretakers it is our duty to ensure that these children know how to take action. To ignore controversial issues is to ignore the realities in many young people’s lives. Children in our classrooms may themselves have been marginalised for their religion, sexual orientation, disability, social group or for any number of other reasons. To ignore these issues is to do them a disservice. Finally, referring back to challenge five, these children are regularly exposed to a myriad of issues through the lens of social media. Over the last decade children within the United Kingdom have been witness to an unprecedented number of challenges; from the COVID-19 pandemic to the current Climate Crisis, the looming threat of war in Ukraine to widespread awareness of social injustice leading to the creation of movements such as Black Lives Matter and the Women’s March. Recent research by Childline (C. Davies, 2016) suggests that the 35% annual increase in children seeking help for anxiety was, in part, due to increasing concerns about global affairs viewed on social media. This even extended to children under five, reporting that they had heard about complicating or upsetting events at home or in the playground. If children are aware of these issues and actively concerned, it is only appropriate that we provide a safe and open place in which to discuss them fully.

## Conclusion

In summary, allowing children to explore challenging or controversial issues is incredibly beneficial in supporting their personal development but also their emotional and mental wellbeing, giving marginalised children a chance to feel heard and understood. The issue arises when pressure is put directly onto the practitioner, additional support, training or guidance would be effective in ensuring these issues are handled appropriately and consistently within schools.

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