

GATEWAY DOCUMENTS 2.1 AND 2.4

Demonstrating respect for cultures and religions

Adopting an impartial stance while teaching

WHY IS THIS RELEVANT TO *REsilience*?

- Openness and even-handedness are the keys to teaching contentious issues well. If students sense that the teacher is favouring an opinion contrary to their own they may become disinclined to engage with the work. It should be clear to all students and staff that the subject is religious *education* not religious instruction, and that it aims to be of educational worth to all students whatever their religious or philosophical background. A core principle of RE, and indeed of British democracy, is that of respect for the rights of all people to hold and express their own beliefs and opinions.
- Teachers may feel this requirement for impartiality is a problem for them when facing an issue on which they hold strong views and beliefs. There is a distinction between personal views and professional practice and this is an important area for them to explore with colleagues.

KEY QUESTIONS

How can this help teachers and students to increase their understanding of contentious issues?

In order to teach contentious issues effectively teachers need to think through *how* they will cope with their own personal beliefs and opinions in the classroom. The meaning of words is important in the context of RE. Two terms in particular are often used when referring to teachers' personal involvement with the issues they deal with in the classroom:

- **Neutrality** means not siding with any specific point of view;
- **Impartiality** means lack of favouritism.

RE teachers, like everyone else, are likely to have strongly held beliefs of their own. They are likely to be committed to particular religious or non-religious beliefs. Quite apart from their religious persuasion or non-religious beliefs, they will invariably hold opinions, sometimes strong opinions, on the issues they teach. Few people are 'neutral' on matters such as abortion or euthanasia; or on *REsilience* issues such as racism or terrorism either

in principle or in specific contexts. However, as a professional the teacher will aim to explore a range of views.

The issue of neutrality thus poses particular challenges for teachers of RE. A core principle of RE is respect for the rights of all people to hold personal beliefs and opinions. It can though, in some circumstances, be difficult for some teachers to accept that their view is one of many and has no more right to dominate than that of any pupil in the classroom, even if the teacher's view is informed by much greater depth of knowledge and experience.

Impartiality is the setting to one side of personal commitment, not its eradication. It is an important factor in relation to students' learning because:

- teachers are in a position to impose inappropriate influence on young and developing minds.
- secondary school students are at the early stages of working out their personal beliefs and values (which will grow and develop throughout their lives). They need to feel that their opinion is as worthy of being heard as that of the teacher.
- the teacher's role is to manage discussion on serious issues by encouraging students to think through a range of opposing arguments. A teacher expressing his/her opinion could sway the debate and give the impression that the alternative view is 'wrong'.

What classroom challenges might arise in RE?

- There are times when the principle of impartiality may become a challenge or will be inappropriate; examples might include impartiality on matters which are against the law or in breach of the school's code of conduct, but this should not preclude serious discussion about whether certain laws or aspects of a code of conduct are unjust or inappropriate and in need of reform.
- Students might mistake a teacher's neutrality or impartiality for a lack of commitment. This could suggest either that the issue is not important or that it doesn't matter what they think about it.
- Students should learn to make a distinction between two principles. On the one hand, people have a right to hold, and express, and argue in a spirit of dialogue for whatever opinions and beliefs they have. On the other hand, it is morally inappropriate and often illegal to express hate or threats, or seek to enforce patterns of behaviour even if people strongly believe them to be right. They also have to appreciate that bad beliefs may lead to bad actions.
- One point of view may dominate, lessening the confidence of the minority to speak out.
- A student's attitude may cause genuine concern.

How can teachers address such challenges?

In dealing with such situations, the teacher should consider the following options.

- Taking steps to ensure that the RE classroom is a place where students know that religious or non-religious beliefs and the cultural backgrounds of all in the class will be respected. The 'Transforming RE' report from Ofsted (2010) noted that '*Pupils usually saw the value of RE in terms of how it contributed to their understanding of and respect for religious and cultural diversity. They often commented on how it helped them to understand others and contributed to a more harmonious society*' (p.16).
- Applying the usual principles of discussion to require that students' views are based on argument and evidence, or that students are honest with themselves and others about some beliefs being based on religious faith or on emotional response.
- Explaining that the teacher's job is to help students think about the issues on the basis of the available evidence. The fact that he or she doesn't express an opinion does not mean she or he does not have one. However, a teacher may at times express and argue for an opinion, perhaps as a 'Devil's advocate' to unsettle a cosy consensus, or to support students who are struggling to articulate their own arguments. Also there may be times when students already know the views of teachers and challenge them to defend them, or complain of the unfairness of a teacher encouraging them to speak candidly whilst refusing to do so him or herself. In such circumstances the teacher can model best practice in demonstrating a willingness to consider carefully and respectfully contrary views.
- Where one point of view is dominant, rather than the teacher countering it themselves the students in the class might be asked to suggest alternatives.
- Finding an opportunity to discuss a matter away from the whole class situation. Students may sometimes express extreme views to shock rather than in seriousness.
- Using an activity such as an agreement continuum line to make sure a range of views is explored. (i.e. The teacher asks pupils to form a line showing how far they agree or disagree with a particular statement such as 'Lying is always wrong' - those who totally agree stand at one end, those who totally disagree stand at the other, and the rest of the students arrange themselves between the two points according to the strength of their views. The teacher can then ask two students at different points on the line to say why they chose to stand where they did on the issue.)
- The teacher may find it reassuring to reflect on his/her biases and identify ways of acting impartially while remaining committed. The *Code of Practice for Teachers of RE* (see below) has been drawn up and exemplified with the specific aim of helping teachers to clarify these issues. Where a teacher finds it genuinely difficult to overcome deeply held personal beliefs or other impediments to impartial teaching, this should be shared with colleagues and it might be possible to organise a swap of classes between teachers for a particular lesson or unit of work. Heads of department and other senior managers may want to initiate such arrangements as everyone benefits, but most

especially students, when teaching is well-informed, enthusiastic, and unencumbered by personal difficulties with the subject matter.

NEXT STEPS

Signposts for further reading

Cooling, T (2006) *Is Passionate RE Dangerous?* RE Today Summer 2006

Cooling, T. (2008) *Controversial Issues in RE*, RE Today Summer 2008

Brown, A. and Broadbent, L. (eds.) (2002) 'Indoctrination and Commitment', in *Issues in Religious Education Teaching*, Falmer/Routledge

Signposts for further resources

<http://www.citizenshipfoundation.org.uk/main/news.php?n783> Guidance on dealing with the BNP and other radical groups in school

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2010/apr/13/bnp-school-debates-general-election>
Article on whether far right parties should have a platform in school debates

<http://www.religiouseducationcouncil.org/content/view/138/80/> The Religious Education Council for England and Wales. A Practice Code for Teachers.

www.osdemethodology.org.uk Open Spaces for Dialogue and Enquiry (OSDE) The OSDE methodology offers a set of procedures and ground rules to structure safe spaces for dialogue and enquiry about global issues and perspectives focusing on interdependence. It aims to promote the development of independent and critical informed thinking, enquiry skills and systems thinking, and responsible and accountable reasoning and action.

Signposts for further action

Explore the principle and exemplifications in the *Code of Practice for Teachers of RE* in order to develop a shared understanding of the distinction between neutrality and impartiality.

Any discussion in the RE department about how to handle impartiality in the teaching context could usefully become a whole school issue. It would be interesting to discover whether it received the same interest among teachers who are often thought to teach certainties (e.g. science) as among humanities and social studies teachers. This may relate to a whole school ethos in terms of ground rules for discussion as well as training for teachers in techniques such as P4C and OSDE.

Avoiding indoctrination. Teachers are not allowed by law to promote partisan political views in the teaching of any subjects in schools. The Education Act 1996 sets out the statutory requirements which require school governing bodies, headteachers and local authorities to take all reasonable, practical steps, to ensure that, wherever political issues are brought to the attention of learners, this is done in a way which offers a balanced presentation of opposing views.