



GATEWAY DOCUMENT 2.2

Displaying sensitivity to the home backgrounds and the beliefs of pupils

WHY IS THIS RELEVANT TO *REsilience*?

The RE curriculum deals with religious, moral and social issues that touch people's lives. RE also deals with people's deeply cherished ideas and beliefs. The ethos of RE embodies the principle of respect for all members of the student community and offers a safe place for them to talk about their religious and philosophical beliefs. It is all the more important that this space should be available when work involves contentious issues like those included in *REsilience*.

KEY QUESTIONS

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

- Prior knowledge of the school's religious profile is particularly important when teaching *REsilience* issues. For example, work on Israel/Palestine is likely to have particular sensitivities for Jewish and Muslim students. Similarly, the background knowledge and feelings of Muslim and non-Muslim students need to be taken into account if you include *jihad* or Al Qaeda in the RE curriculum. The continuing dispute over the sovereignty of Kashmir has the potential to create friction between Hindus and Muslims, as did the destruction of the Babri mosque at Ayodhya and subsequent riots in 1992; the attack on the Ram mandir that now stands on the site of the Babri mosque in 2005 had a similar impact¹. It is important for schools, and particularly teachers of RE, to be alert to world and national events and consider their possible implications for the school and local community.
- Students will often be happy to tell the teacher and class about their religions or beliefs but they should not feel obliged to do so. Young people are more likely to be willing to

¹ A 2009 report blamed Hindu Nationalists for the destruction of the masjid, and a court judgement of Sept 30, 2010 ruled that the site should be split, with the Muslim community getting control of a third, Hindus another third and the Nirmohi Akhara sect – also Hindu - the remainder. Control of the main disputed section, where the mosque was torn down, was given to Hindus – Muslim groups are expected to mount an appeal. (see Gateway Document 4.3c for more about this)

engage with contentious issues if they feel their own points of view are taken seriously within the wider school context. Evidence of this would include sensitivity to students' religious needs and sensitivities concerning such things as food and fasting, dress, the use of images (particularly of humans and animals), religious festivals, and the curriculum.

- Additional care is needed when checking activities that are not fully in the control of the teacher like theatre in education visits and taking a class to a place of worship.
- Local intelligence will provide some of the information teachers need. In particular, it is worth keeping an eye on local media for reports of events involving religious and cultural issues that may be raised in the classroom or cause interest or concern within the school community.

What classroom challenges might arise in RE?

When contentious issues are being discussed the most likely difficulties are:

- students from specific religions feeling uncomfortable or under threat where the issue concerns a controversial aspect of their faith. This is not a negligible issue as the report on faith bullying indicates (see below);
- parents wishing to withdraw their children from the study of particular topics in the RE curriculum;
- students and their parents who hold extreme views objecting to the positive and respectful stance taken towards all religions and to non-religious worldviews;
- students and their parents being more knowledgeable on detailed aspects of their religion than the teacher;
- reports (for instance of terrorist attacks) in the local and national press inflaming relations between groups of students.
- as well as religion, school students may have loyalties to particular ethnic, cultural or linguistic communities and be deeply affected when persecution or other misfortune befalls members of their community: often teachers and other staff who work particularly in the area of teaching English for speakers of other languages, or with ethnic minorities, are knowledgeable about such matters.

How can teachers address such challenges?

Teachers should be aware of the possible difficulties and will need strategies at hand to deal with them should they arise. For example:

- If the department is open with parents about the content of the RE curriculum, there will be no surprises. Plans may be published in the RE space on the school website, included in a list of topics for the year pasted in students' books and changes of topic recorded in students' school diaries.

- The school will wish to be open about the purpose of RE and the attitudes it aims to promote. Parents who disagree with the principle of an objective stance being taken towards all religions and ethical non-theistic worldviews have the right to withdraw their children without giving a reason. Teachers can invite them to talk the matter through but they can refuse.
- Where students or their parents have particular and relevant knowledge on a specific aspect of their religion, they might be invited initially to share it with the teacher with a view to a whole class session later if appropriate (e.g. a parent, who is a Buddhist involved in a pro-Tibetan campaign, talking about the principle of ‘doing no harm’ and how this might be interpreted by Buddhists in war situations).
- Reports of terrorist attacks, where the media report religion as a reason, are not uncommon. Teachers will use their discretion in deciding which of these events have a particular local resonance. If an event is being widely discussed around the school it would probably be good to suspend planned lessons and invite discussion of the event in the informed and well-managed surroundings of the classroom.
- Students should have an opportunity to make contributions from a personal point of view if they want to, but this should not be expected as a matter of course.

NEXT STEPS

Signposts for further reading

Ipgrave, J (2004) *Including pupils’ faith backgrounds in primary religious education*, Support for Learning 19 (3). Looks mainly at primary context but includes useful general principles.

Miller, Joyce (2009) Children’s experience of identity and belonging, in Ipgrave, Jackson and O’Grady, *Religious Education through a community of practice. Action research and the interpretive approach*, Waxmann.

Smith, Greg (2005) *Children’s perspectives on identity and belonging*, Joseph Rowntree Foundation and National Children’s Bureau

Signposts for further resources

General resources

<http://www.religiouseducationcouncil.org/content/view/138/80/>

The REC’s *Every One Matters in the Classroom. A Practice Code for Teachers of RE* sets out some principles and examples designed to support teachers in taking account of both their own beliefs and those of students in the RE context. They provide a user friendly resource with potential for use by all teachers. They are also helpful as a focus for discussion with parents on the principles underlying a school’s approach to RE.

A local authority’s Minority Ethnic Achievement Service or equivalent may hold useful information on school populations including material on religion and belief.

Resources for the classroom

Us and Them DVD and workpack, Clear Vision Trust

Beatbullying (2008) *Interfaith Report*. This report suggests that large numbers of young people have been bullied, sometimes violently, because of their faith. The report gives recommendations to reduce the risk to students. It is available to download at <http://www.ekklesia.co.uk/node/7991>. <http://www.beatbullying.org> is the Beatbullying website and includes information about its work more widely as well as a 'Beat faith bullying' lesson plan.

Signposts for further action

- Teachers of all subjects will want to be sensitive to the home backgrounds of pupils. RE teachers can contribute to whole school action on this by providing specialist information about the nature and implications of religious beliefs. These may not be widely known.
- There may be local authority policies or guidelines on particular issues, such as religious dress and Sikh pupils, and arrangements during Ramadan for Muslim pupils who are fasting.