

Engaging appropriate speakers with different beliefs and religious perspectives

WHY IS THIS RELEVANT TO *REsilience*?

REsilience encourages styles of teaching and learning that value questioning, enquiry and thinking as well as learning specific content. The value of encounters with members of faith and belief communities is that students have a chance to ask questions about how beliefs are applied in practice and the implications for everyday life. Meetings with people can be interactive, can illustrate diversity and can give students the chance to ask questions that are rarely dealt with in textbooks

KEY QUESTIONS

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

- If effective, encounters with RE visitors can nurture students' empathy and understanding. Students' knowledge and understanding of religious and non-religious beliefs and practices may be enhanced through opportunities to ask and raise questions about a contentious issue.
- A knowledgeable visitor from a particular faith or belief perspective may bring a depth of understanding and experience to the discussion of a controversial issue of which they and their community have direct experience.
- RE visitors are likely to be well aware of the diversity of views from within their own religious or belief perspective and thus offer a more wide-ranging understanding of an issue.

What classroom challenges might arise in RE?

- Some schools are able to call on local speakers from many different belief backgrounds. Others find themselves in a less culturally diverse environment where this is more difficult to arrange. Nevertheless, it is important that all students – wherever they live – have an opportunity to listen to and question those from a wide variety of belief backgrounds and to develop some understanding of those whose worldviews they may not be familiar with.

- Communication with parents and carers is important. Parents need to be assured that visits by members of faith or belief communities are an integral part of the teaching and learning programme. This requires good communication, keeping parents informed of who is visiting and why, in the same way as for all other parts of the curriculum.
- Practical and cost implications for the school need to be addressed. Inviting speakers or youth theatre groups to explore ethical issues, for example, may be expensive. Schools may have a policy of asking for donations from parents but find they are unwilling to give for such projects, believing there are more important things the school should be promoting in the curriculum. Perceived value for money can be increased when visits are used to engage in cross-curricular work (for instance a theatre in education visit may involve students working in RE, English, Citizenship, and PHSE as well as Drama).
- Teachers have to be alert to the tendency of some speakers to be less than candid about aspects of their religion they know to be problematic for outsiders. Also, many speakers from religious communities will not be expert in all aspects of their religion or the different branches of it. Care obviously needs to be taken in the selection and briefing of a guest speaker, and where they are inexperienced in communicating aspects of their religion with outsiders they might appreciate help from a teacher in structuring their talk or taking on the necessary protocols (e.g. prefacing statements of doctrine with “we believe ...”).

How can teachers address such challenges?

- By developing protocols for visitors and students. Teachers will need to plan beforehand an outline of what is going to happen before, during and after the visit. They should consider cross-curricular opportunities to develop skills, concepts and processes across the areas of learning. If controversial speakers are brought in, teachers need to ensure that a full range of views is represented to balance the discussion or argument.
- By ensuring that all are informed. Teachers need to make sure the speakers are aware of the requirements of the local Agreed Syllabus or equivalent and understand that their role is not to proselytise nor to attack any religion or belief (the *REC Code of Practice* could be useful to illustrate the context). Parents need to be informed about the visit and its educational purpose.
- By ensuring that a teacher is present throughout, in line with school safeguarding procedures. The teacher should chair or facilitate the session so s/he can steer away from or towards issues constructively. A visiting speaker should not be expected to do the classroom management; it is the teacher’s responsibility to ensure a productive learning environment is maintained.

How to find appropriate speakers

- Some local authorities have a bank of speakers that are available to schools. It may be fruitful to look on the local authority website and/or contact the local authority RE Adviser for details of speakers.
- Each SACRE has representatives from faith and belief groups. Contact the clerk to your local SACRE to ask for links.
- Local interfaith bodies, such as an interfaith council or forum, may be able to recommend speakers. See <http://www.interfaith.org.uk/local/directory.htm> which lists all local groups and their contacts details.
- Contact the National Association of Teachers of RE for information. See www.natre.org.uk and www.retoday.org.uk.
- Three Faiths Forum can arrange speaker panels and give advice. See www.threefaithsforum.org.uk for contact details. There is also a useful section on the 3FF website about how to make the most of having a faith visitor in school
- It may sometimes be appropriate to ask parents, or teachers, or governors to take on the role of visiting speaker. In such cases it is important to make sure that they are clearly briefed about what they are being asked to contribute and that they are happy about what is expected in terms of their own knowledge and their confidence to speak and respond to questions.
- Established organisations can sometimes provide suitable contacts. Teachers will need to research thoroughly any organisation that provides a speaker, or seek an 'approval' confirmation from a trusted source (such as a local authority or diocesan RE adviser) to ensure that the speaker is an appropriate person for the learning purpose.

NEXT STEPS

Signposts for further reading

The LOTC website itself is a useful source – 'Sacred Space' is the RE section.

<http://www.lotc.org.uk/>

Signposts for further resources

<http://www.globaldimension.org.uk/speakers> : provides suggestions of global organisations that will offer speakers across a range of subjects related to RE and other areas of the curriculum.

www.theredirectory.org.uk : Developed by Culham Institute for the RE Council of England and Wales, the RE Directory is designed as a 'first stop' reference point for all who are interested in Religious Education.

<http://pow.reonline.org.uk/> RE Online has links to people of faith who will answer students' questions. This may be a helpful resource in areas where it is difficult to bring a person into the school.

www.lambeth.gov.uk/sacre/docs/LambethOpeningthewindow.doc Helpful guidelines from Lambeth SACRE on many aspects of inviting faith community representatives into schools/taking students on RE visits to places of worship.

Signposts for further action

In some mono-cultural or rural communities it can be difficult to get visitors or speakers from a wide range of faith and belief groups. This can limit the range of experiences available to students. Schools need to consider how to create opportunities that can help to encourage the valuing of diversity and the promotion of social integration. There may be cost implications. Video conferencing may be a cost effective solution.

Engage the School Council to establish protocols and routines for visitors coming into school. These may include, for example, having students to meet and greet visitors, having students lead the debate/discussion, having students introduce the speakers and having students to see to the well-being of the visitors.