

Religious Education



Video case study 1: Developing compelling learning experiences within and beyond the classroom in religious education

Responses to violence: encountering views in the local community

Students investigated the problem of violence in society by exploring a variety of religious and non-religious views as represented in the local community and from a selection of appropriate websites. They considered questions of whose advice they could trust in putting together a package of materials in answer to the key question: who benefits more from forgiveness, the forgiven or the forgiver? The conceptual focus was on Strand A of the Newham Agreed Syllabus (also in the Non-Statutory National Framework for RE): *beliefs, teaching and sources*, and Strand F: *values and commitments*.

School profile

Total number of learners	1495
Age range	11–16
Specialist status	Specialist Arts school Status; Training school
Level 5 and above in Key Stage 3 tests 2007	51% English 65% Maths 49% Science
Five A*-C at GCSE 2007	45%
Special educational needs	515

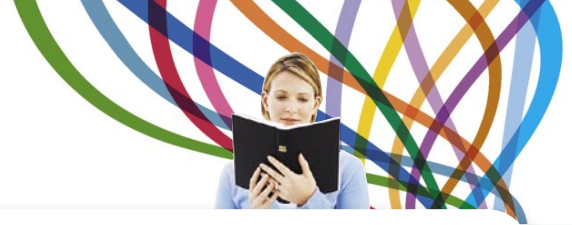
Our school

Brampton Manor School is an 11–19 comprehensive in a multicultural area of London that has been transformed in the last few years, with a new leadership and management team growing the capacity of staff and students to work together towards higher levels of attainment. Although the school was placed in special measures by Ofsted in 1999, the most recent inspection considered that the school was now ‘good, with outstanding features’. Amongst the outstanding features were the leadership and management of the school, learning and teaching and the personal development of the students. Religious education was one of only two subjects in the school highlighted by inspectors for special praise, since results at GCSE were above national averages. There is a high proportion of pupils with learning difficulties or disabilities and a large number who speak English as an additional language. The school receives a high intake of mid-phase admissions, most of whom have special education needs or have English as an additional language.

What were we trying to achieve?

When students arrive at the school, their level of attainment in RE is very varied. Although some students demonstrate ability at levels expected by the Newham Agreed Syllabus, the vast majority work below level 4, and so have not demonstrated the ability, for example, to make links between the beliefs, teachings and sources of different religious groups and show how they are connected to believers’ lives. Evaluative and empathic skills too, are underdeveloped, with students falling short of the ability to ask questions about the moral decisions people make and to suggest what might happen as a result of different decisions, including those made with reference to a variety of beliefs and values. The RE department felt that some compelling learning experiences could be designed that would challenge students to improve their achievement in RE so that many could demonstrate increased confidence in the different conceptual strands of RE and at higher levels too.

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What differences did we want to see in our learners?

In terms of **knowledge, understanding and skills**, we wanted students to investigate and explain the differing impacts of religious beliefs and teachings on individuals and communities, particularly the local community. We wanted them to reflect and evaluate their own and others' beliefs about the issue of how best to respond to cases of violence, and to express their own beliefs and ideas in the light of their findings.

In terms of **attitudes and behaviour**, we particularly wanted students to develop their willingness to learn from others, even when others' views might be different from their own. In addition we wanted students to become increasingly sensitive to the impact of their ideas and behaviour on other people. We hoped we might notice examples of this increased sensitivity in student interactions both in and out of the classroom.

How did we organise learning to achieve our aims?

How did we set about making a change?

In order to engage and motivate students we responded to the 'student-voice' groups that expressed an interest in, for example, different styles of learning experience and in designing their own questions for further investigation. They also expressed an interest in finding out more about their own local communities, so we worked out ways in which they might meet representatives of different communities within the local area.

Many students were shown by a recent study in the school to prefer kinaesthetic styles of learning. Students enjoyed meeting people from the world outside school and they also enjoyed using technology in their work. In order to accommodate this, we built an investigation of sources of authority into the learning that would involve at least one visit to a place of worship in the local community and a visit from a person representing a particular religious/belief community.

Whether we visited a mosque, temple, synagogue, gurdwara or church was not vital. More important was that we set the visit in the context of the aims of the sequence of lessons. The students themselves wanted to investigate attitudes to violence in different community groups and how the idea of forgiveness might be involved. The point of making a visit to a place of worship was not simply that it would be a memorable experience, but that they would see for themselves how the community, its buildings and resources might be relevant to its attitudes to the community. For example, it might be possible for students to grasp the importance of community support in any difficult undertaking, such as showing forgiveness to a violent offender.

We felt that a visit to a local gurdwara for example, could be a compelling learning experience for students in that they would be able to discover at first hand how the nature of the building itself reflects attitudes of the Sikh community to strangers and those in need. They would hear answers from original sources, and this would prompt further questions in context. Students could explore their feelings, and become more familiar with what may have been unknown. Through the visit we hoped that students would reach a higher level of understanding of Sikh perspectives on community issues.

Guidance on visits to places of worship is given at: <http://pow.reonline.org.uk/>.

Bringing representatives of different religious/belief communities into school was thought to be valuable by the students because they wanted to hear a 'real', i.e. authentic, voice of faith in the classroom. We hoped that this would be informative, help develop understanding, and might also challenge students to reflect on their own commitments.

We invited a member of the local Muslim community to speak to students and answer their questions. We provided him with the educational aims of the session(s) and asked students to work out their questions and expected answers. We also provided our visitor with advice on *Religious Believers Visiting Schools: guidance and a code of conduct* downloadable from www.natre.org.uk/free.php



Students also thought about consulting a range of internet sites, and we asked that they should pay attention to the reliability of the authorship of sites, and adopt a critical approach to the context from which views might be expressed.

To enable students to know when they were making good progress in RE through this sequence of learning, we involved them in setting the criteria for assessment in relation to higher levels of attainment indicated in our agreed syllabus and as appropriate to challenge each student.

What changes did we make?

The changes we wanted to make to our approaches to learning and teaching involved much more of a focus on the key concepts recommended in the locally agreed syllabus. This reflects the recommendations of the non-statutory national framework for RE and the new non-statutory programmes of study.

There were minimum changes to the timetable, though sufficient time had to be found to enable a visit to take place to a local place of worship and for space to be found on the timetable to include a visitor to classes to answer the students' questions on the topic in hand.

In terms of staff, cooperation from colleagues to manage the visits and visitors was crucial. All those teaching RE, including those with other specialisms, were involved in the planning process, ensuring aims were clear and all were able to provide the focus for the students' learning. As an RE team, our approach was to involve students at all points of the development of the project. They expressed their views on what the goals of the project might be, how they might best go about finding the information they needed and how they would work out their own questions for the investigation.

There was, from the beginning, a concept-based approach to the planning of the learning experience. Using our locally agreed syllabus, we settled on two concept areas, one linked more to Attainment Target 1 (learning about religion) and one linked more to Attainment Target 2 (learning from religion). These were '**beliefs, teachings and sources**' and '**values and commitments**'. We thought these areas matched best the area of the programmes of study we wanted to address, namely the different responses to violence taken by various groups and individuals within local communities. We could then help students investigate these and their own responses with reference to a variety of religious and non-religious sources – students would work out which sources might be most reliable, and why – and in relation to the underlying values being expressed by the respondents. We then designed a key question that would engage student interest. We came up with 'Who benefits most from forgiveness, the forgiven or the forgiver?'

The means of differentiating the work appropriately would be through careful selection of small groups working together to support each other, with higher and lower ability students often working in the same team. Space would be given for individual responses and contributions to the final written piece, with additional structuring offered to those who needed it.

When it came to assessment, this approach, using concepts for our planning focus, would enable teachers and students to measure their progress against the levelled statements of attainment in the agreed syllabus. Teaching colleagues and students themselves contributed criteria for the success of their work, for example, that students' behaviour around the school might take more account of the alternatives to violent responses to violent incidents. Students hoped that they might better understand different religious and non-religious responses to such concepts as 'forgiveness'.

We would make use of ICT in RE lessons, enabling teachers to display materials on the whiteboard, and students to investigate relevant websites, design questionnaires for use in the local community and present their findings. Much work would take place in classrooms, but there would also be a visit to at least one place of worship.

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The project would involve students in the investigation of several cross-curriculum dimensions, particularly through addressing issues of identity and diversity. Links could also be made through these key concepts with history and citizenship.

Developments in the new locally agreed syllabus take account of the non-statutory national framework for RE in including more emphasis on study of local communities. Through this sequence of learning, students would also have the opportunity to practise a number of personal, learning and thinking skills, particularly those of being creative thinkers (generating their own questions and ideas), independent enquirers (planning and carrying out their own research and considering the influence of circumstances, beliefs and feelings on decisions and events) and reflective learners (setting goals with success criteria for their development and work).

How well have we achieved our aims?

What differences are evident? What impact have we made on our learners?

Students are now using their imagination and enhanced knowledge and understanding of religious/belief perspectives in their work. They are, for example, asking higher quality questions and suggesting more complete possible answers to those questions from a variety of perspectives.

In terms of *knowledge, understanding and skills*, students have been able to demonstrate their investigative skills and many more are able to explain the differing impacts of religious beliefs and teachings on individuals and communities, particularly the local community. Most students reflected and evaluated their own and others' beliefs about the issue of how best to respond to cases of violence, and a majority were able to express their own beliefs and ideas in the light of their findings.

In terms of *attitudes and behaviour*, students have been willing to learn from others, even when others' views might be different from their own. For example, some students listened carefully to views expressed by Sikhs and Muslims and said they had seen a different side of the issue of forgiveness. In addition students have in general become more sensitive to the impact of their ideas and behaviour on other people. Staff have noticed several examples of this increased sensitivity in student interactions both in and out of the classroom.



Department for Children,
Schools and Families

Qualifications and
Curriculum Authority

National College for
School Leadership

Secondary National Strategy

Specialist Schools and
Academies Trust

Youth Sport Trust



National
Curriculum

Working in partnership to support
delivery of the new National Curriculum

Part of the 14–19 education and skills programme