

Planning RE using the pan-‘Berkshire’ RE syllabus.

Some teachers have had little or no access to planning-related training since the publication of the most recent RE syllabus in the local authorities that used to be a county known as Berkshire. As a consequence there is still considerable uncertainty about how best to use the document to draw up school RE schemes of work. These notes are intended to provide some guidance.

The syllabus looks as it does because all the interrelated bits of content have been set out in a format that demonstrates the character of RE which the syllabus is encouraging. Two factors have influenced the format in which it was published:

- Enquiry and exploration: during the development of the syllabus, working parties of teachers turned the theme titles outlined for each key stage in the QCA/DCSF Non-statutory Framework for RE (NSNFRE) into questions in order to establish the principle that religious education should be about exploring ideas, enquiring into religious and belief traditions rather than the simple acquisition of religious knowledge.
- Breadth of study: it was decided to group the themes/questions to ensure that each religion studied was approached in a broad and balanced way ie pupils would need to engage with key beliefs and teachings (blue sections), how key beliefs and teachings are applied in the everyday life of believers (yellow sections) and how key beliefs and teachings are expressed in symbolism, art and worship (mauve sections). This notion reflects the strands of *Learning about religion* within the level descriptions as set out in the grid on pages 15-16 (ie ‘what people believe’, ‘what people do’, and ‘how people express themselves’). These three groupings were colour coded (which of course is not obvious if you just have a black and white photocopy of the document!) to help users focus on these three strands of enquiry.

In the introduction to each key stage section of the syllabus (p25, p51, p82) there are an important few paragraphs about how questions in different coloured sections relate to one another and will rarely be studied in isolation. For example: the story of the nativity is taught in KS1 when partially answering the ‘blue’ question *Why is the story of the life of Jesus so important to Christians?* (p30) and also needs to be covered when answering the ‘mauve’ question, *How and why do Christians celebrate important times in the life of Jesus?* (p45). It makes sense, therefore to plan a unit of work which addresses both questions together. Similarly in KS2 all three of the following questions, each from a different colour section can be explored together if combined in a new question, ‘Why is the Langar an important part of Sikh religious life?’: *What do Sikh scriptures teach about God, the world and human life?* (p58); *How is Sikhism practised and passed on in families and communities?* (p67); *How do features of gurdwaras illustrate key Sikh beliefs?* (p77). Studying the beliefs of a religion without exploring how they are put into practice is a difficult abstract endeavour in primary schools. On the other hand exploring how religious people live their lives without reference to their beliefs makes no sense. It makes planning a great deal easier, therefore, if schools see the questions in the blue sections of the syllabus as questions which run through every unit of work and give meaning to questions from other sections. Planning can start from questions in the yellow and mauve sections, grounding all enquiry in human experiences, whilst referencing all these experiences to beliefs (blue sections) which underpin lives of faith and belief.

The examples above and in the syllabus, indicate that questions often need to be reworked into viable units of study for use in classrooms. In the KS1 example given above, the two questions addressed will only be partially answered because the focus of a unit of study will be on the nativity story and Christmas celebrations. Similarly, by focusing on the Langar, the

proposed Sikh unit of study only partially answers the three syllabus questions identified. However, in neither example does the syllabus require an exhaustive answer to its questions. It is a good idea to both combine and chunk questions into manageable units of study.

Learning from religion

Although the syllabus contains *learning from religion* style questions, the examples given are not mandatory and they are easy to overlook. In so doing it is easy for planning to disregard this essential element of successful RE courses. Ideas set out below are intended to help teachers successfully include this aspect of RE in their planning.

First of all it's important to say that learning from religion is not something tacked on to learning about religion. Michael Grimmitt first wrote about learning from religion in 1987 when he said that RE must give pupils 'the opportunity to acquire skills which enable them to use their understanding of religion in the interpretation of their own personal experiences.' This aspect of RE is about making all the religious and belief related stuff which is the body of knowledge of the subject relevant to pupils. It should invite them to evaluate religions and beliefs critically, evaluate the truth claims made by religions and belief systems. Michael Grimmitt called this 'impersonal' evaluation. However, pupils should also be engaging in 'personal' evaluation of their own responses to the material explored and whether it has anything to say to them as they wrestle with making sense of life, themselves and issues of right and wrong (three strands of *Learning from religion* in the grid on pages 15-16).

The following outline is a method of planning which will ensure that pupils both learn about and from religion/beliefs at appropriately challenging levels of difficulty:

- Decide on what questions/topics from the syllabus are to be covered
- Formulate the question title of the unit of work (which can be refined later)
- Identify a key concept of significance to members of the faith community(ies) being studied encapsulated in the question
- Ensure this is a concept which can build a bridge between the religious material and the experiences of pupils being taught
- Decide whether to start the series of lessons with the concept from the perspective of pupils or with the religious material from which the concept can emerge
- Devise tasks, activities, experiences which engage with both elements AND are appropriately challenging as indicated by the level descriptions.

Let's consider how this process might look in relation to the topic examples considered at the start of this paper and how the focus on both strands of RE can help to fulfil Michael Grimmitt's aspirations for pupils' learning and personal development.

KS1 topic: Christmas

- Question title: How and why do Christians celebrate the birth of Jesus?
- Key concept: Celebration. This will work as a bridging concept because all pupils have experiences of celebration.
- Starting where the pupils are: what does it mean to celebrate? Do you like celebrations? What do you celebrate? What sorts of things do you do when you are celebrating? Begin to extend this to include experiences of others eg Can you think of celebrations other people have? How do they celebrate them? (Using all the ideas gathered, pupils could plan a celebration including appropriate food, gifts, cards etc)
- Enquire into religious context: Christians have a special celebration at Christmas. What are they celebrating? What is the story they are remembering about Jesus? How do they remind themselves of this story? What do they do to celebrate the birth of Jesus? How are the things they do connected with the story of Jesus' birth? Why do Christians think it is important to remember and celebrate the birth of Jesus? (To explore this pupils could enact a nativity play, design Christmas cards with a Christian message, take part in a carol service etc)

- Evaluation and reflection: Do you celebrate Christmas? Why/why not? How are your Christmas celebrations similar/different to/from Christian celebrations? What do you think is best about Christian Christmas celebrations and your Christmas celebrations?

KS2 topic: Sikh Langar

- Question title: Why is the Langar an important part of Sikh religious life?
- Key concepts: equality and service
- Starting from an enquiry into the langar: looking at pictures and/or film clips of the langar ask questions about what is going on? Who are these people? What are they doing? How are they seated? How are they served and by whom? Can you detect who are the people of status in this picture/film? etc – questions that help pupils see the concepts of equality and service in action in the langar. Explore Sikh teachings on equality and service and discuss how these are demonstrated in the langar. What do you think might be the impact of the teachings about equality and service on Sikh life? What do you think of a society which tries to live by these principles? Why were these principles so important to the Sikh gurus who established the principles of the religion?
- Pupils evaluate and reflect on their own thoughts and experiences of equality and inequality. Is it a good idea to believe that all people are equal? Is it possible to treat all people as equal? Does the context make a difference? How does it feel to feel superior to others? Inferior to others? How can we serve others? Can everyone serve? Can everyone be served? How do these principles apply to your dealings with others? To ways in which you would like to relate to others?