



RE: from shock and horror to awe and wonder

Most of the trainees said they had no idea how to teach RE in an effective way

Strengths and weaknesses

There has been, quite rightly, much concern about the quality of Religious Education over the last few years. Ofsted has reported on weak teaching, low expectations, lack of subject knowledge and training, uncertainty about assessment and weak subject leadership.

A number of significant developments have begun to address these concerns over the past few years. These include the GCSE Model Syllabuses (SCAA 1994), the National Framework for RE (DfES/QDC 2004) and a partnership between the DfES and the RE Council for England and Wales, a body comprised of representatives from membership organisations across the full range of faith communities and RE-linked professional bodies (including ACT), entered into initially in March 2006.

Recently, RE has been increasingly under the spotlight, and areas of both strength and weakness are being highlighted. There is general agreement that, if the quality of provision in RE is to improve across the board, one of the areas that must be addressed as a matter of some urgency is the training of teachers in RE at all levels, both in ITT (initial teacher training) and in CPD (continuing professional development). These issues are currently being addressed at the highest level, and, as a result, positive changes should be introduced in the near future.

We consider the importance of catering for a variety of learning styles

Certainly, my own experience as a primary teacher, RE co-ordinator, headteacher and now an initial teacher trainer visiting a wide range of schools to observe and report on the trainee teachers' developing practice, is that many teachers at primary level are afraid of RE and often fight shy of teaching it if at all possible because of this. This may be due to a lack of subject knowledge and training – a point reported on by Ofsted.

Q&A

I teach the RE module on the Primary PCGE Programme at the University of East London. Because I was concerned about an apparent lack of knowledge of all aspects of RE amongst the trainee teachers commencing our programme, I decided to conduct a small-scale research project of my own in order to gauge the true extent of the situation.

All 235 Primary and Early Years trainees commencing the Primary PGCE Programme in 2006 were asked to complete a brief questionnaire survey. The questions were designed to assess the trainees' current subject knowledge of world faiths and of the legal framework for RE, and to probe their personal perceptions and experiences of RE. The trainees happily completed their questionnaires and were more than willing to discuss the issues raised.

The results of the questionnaires confirmed my hunch that most of the trainees did have concerns about teaching RE, as they had little prior experience or knowledge of the subject. It was clearly one of the curriculum subjects that they would be expected to teach that caused them the most anxiety as they were facing a year of university-based training and school placements.

Most of the trainees said they had no idea how to teach RE in an effective way. Only a very small minority had any knowledge or understanding of the legal framework for RE and few had ever observed an RE lesson. However, the majority of trainees did not feel that their own faith or adherence to a particular religion, or lack of such, would be a hindrance to them in the effective teaching of RE.



Barbara Todd has lived, worked and worshipped in East London for over 25 years. She gained the NPQH through the Institute of Education and subsequently became a junior school headteacher. Barbara is currently the Partnership Tutor and a Senior Lecturer in Education at the University of East London.

Barbara is married to Adrian, a chemistry and maths teacher, and they both form part of the leadership team of an Ichthus link fellowship in Leyton, called GateWay. They have two university-aged children: Emily and Joel.

Valuing the subject

As one involved in the provision of ITT in RE, I have been keen to foster a can-do approach to the subject in my university classes. My aim is to inspire the trainees to want to teach RE because it is relevant, exciting and fun. Content and methodology are explored in a hands-on way with activities intended to engage them and which could be used to similarly engage children. I repeatedly tell them that RE should not be taught as a series of comprehension exercises; something which sadly happens all too often in schools.

After considering what RE is and why it is a subject of value to both children and wider society, we start exploring and extending subject knowledge by researching world faiths using the excellent range of resources we have available to us at the university. For example, small groups of trainees are asked to work together to make a booklet of one of the six main QCA world faiths that 'they know the least about', eventually presenting what they have learnt in a 'circle time' format. Without exception, they find this an enriching experience.

Cracking concepts

A series of activities such as making a prayer tree, looking at religious works of art, handling artefacts and listening to, and reflecting on, excerpts of Christian music through the centuries helps make the point that RE lessons can – and should – be both varied and interactive. We consider the importance of catering for a variety of learning

RE lessons can – and should – be every bit as much 'fun' as the rest of the curriculum



Small group work helps 'crack' religious concepts



RE is explored through a number of hands-on activities

styles; we discuss planning and teaching so that children are 'learning *about* religions' and 'learning *from* religions' in every lesson; we work together to unpack religious themes using a 'concept cracking' approach; and we try to remember that RE lessons can – and should – be every bit as much 'fun' as the rest of the curriculum.

Visits to local places of worship are also a popular part of our ITT programme. The Cornerstone Centre, an Anglican church next to the school where I used to work, is used to hosting school visits with children of all Key Stages. Now it opens its doors to my university students, offering tours of the premises, a talk about what Christians

believe and what goes on in churches, an opportunity to handle artefacts *in situ* and try out activities suitable for RE lessons.

I encourage the trainees to make sure that they get a chance to teach RE lessons during their block teaching practices, and I like to observe the trainees, for whom I am particularly responsible as their 'professional tutor', teaching RE if at all possible. Recently I was thoroughly inspired by watching one of my trainees teach RE to a class of Year 4 children in a large inner-city multi-cultural school. This well-paced lesson, exploring the theme of the world we live in, made excellent use of beautiful images of nature and of cataclysmic natural events, such as floods, storms and mudslides, projected onto the interactive white-board. Children's responses to the images ranged from shock and horror to awe and wonder. Paired discussions, brainstorming and the writing of 'prayers for our world' followed. The lesson ended with the trainee teacher reading a thought-provoking reflection to a spell-bound class which, by then, was totally engaged in the whole process. And not a comprehension passage or a work sheet in sight!

■ Barbara Todd

RE should not be taught as a series of comprehension exercises

Ofsted says ...

Ofsted (2007) *Making sense of religion: a report on religious education in schools and the impact of locally agreed syllabuses*.

'Some progress has been made in enhancing the provision for [RE] in recent years. Pupils' achievement has improved. Developments nationally have contributed substantially to this improvement, but the overall quality of RE is still not consistently high enough.' (p1)

'Recent world events have raised the profile of [RE] significantly and schools have new responsibilities to promote community cohesion. Those with responsibility for RE therefore have the task of ensuring that children and young people are able to make sense of religion in the modern world and issues of identity and diversity.' (p1)

Key findings

Pupils' achievement in RE in primary schools improved over the period 2001–02 to 2005–06 (inclusive). In 2004–05, achievement was 'good' or better in 46% of schools and 'satisfactory' in about 50% of schools. Inadequate achievement in RE in primary schools is rare.

The impact of the National Strategies on RE in primary schools has been largely positive. However, whole-school development rarely focuses on RE. The subject depends heavily on the expertise and enthusiasm of individual teachers, and pupils' achievement is therefore inconsistent.

Pupils' achievement at KS3 is very inconsistent. In 2004–05 it was 'good' or better in 61% of schools and 'satisfactory' in 31% of schools. More recent survey visits have found achievements in RE to be 'good' or better in only 40% of schools and 'satisfactory' in about 50% of schools.

Substantial improvement in full course GCSE and A Level results over the past five years.

Short course GCSE results have remained static, with around half of the pupils entered achieving A* to C grades.

More schools now meet the statutory requirements for RE at KS4, in part because more pupils follow accredited courses in RE at GCSE.

Compliance post-16 remains very limited.

In secondary schools, weaknesses in planning the RE curriculum frequently undermine the effects of fresh thinking about teaching and learning which the strategies have brought.

There are not enough accredited courses to meet the needs of students between 14 and 19 years across the ability range.

Primary initial teacher training (ITT) courses provide very little training about teaching RE; later professional development does not compensate for this.

The curriculum and teaching in RE do not place sufficient emphasis on exploring the changing political and social significance of religion in the modern world. As a result, the subject's potential to contribute to community cohesion, education for diversity and citizenship is not being fully realised.