

Developing Encounter in RE

WESTHILL/NASACRE Awards 2011/12 Herefordshire SACRE

Research has demonstrated that encountering people of different faiths is one of the most effective ways of breaking down barriers and overcoming prejudices and misconceptions. The Westhill/NASACRE project run by Herefordshire SACRE bears this out in the experiences of pupils, teachers and faith community representatives.

The Context

Young people living in Herefordshire have very few opportunities to meet people from faiths and beliefs other than Christianity. Herefordshire is not ethnically or religiously diverse. The 2001 national census indicated that there are 63 Sikhs, 105 Hindus, 130 Jews, 174 Muslims, 347 Buddhists, about 447 in other faiths and over 138,000 Christians in the whole of the county with a population of some 175,000. The county has no Synagogues, Mosques or other purpose built places of worship except for Christian-churches.

Whilst there is a great deal of diversity in Birmingham, pupils at the Al-Hijrah School have few structured opportunities to meet people of different faiths. The project aimed to bring together pupils from Birmingham and Herefordshire to explore the theme of “Where is the meaning in my life?” from Christian, Jewish and Muslim perspectives, as well as non-religious viewpoints expressed by students.

The Project

The project had three parts:

- training visitors from a range of faiths and worldviews to develop some compelling and collaborative activities for students to explore different faiths and beliefs;
- a KS4 conference for students of different faiths and ethnicities;
- and a case study of the conference written up on the NASACRE website to guide other schools in providing a multi-faith partnership conference.

The Training Day

On 3rd October 2011, representatives from a range of communities gathered together at Holmer Primary School, Hereford, to develop workshops that would draw the most out of pupils in their encounters with people of different faiths and beliefs. Stephen Pett, RE Today Services, worked with representatives from Baha’i, Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Humanist, Jewish, Muslim and Sikh communities, together with Kate Mayglothling, Head of RE at Wigmore High School, Hereford, and Joyce Mackley, secretary of the Herefordshire Multi-faith Development Group and administrator of the project.



Those present tried out five activities which modelled an interactive approach to engaging pupils in workshops, including materials and strategies such as:

- encountering stories and stimuli that make pupils stop and think;
- activities enabling pupils to handle texts and explore different interpretations;
- exploring a range of viewpoints from believers within and beyond the faith communities;

- enabling pupils to articulate responses through a variety of means of expression;
- helping pupils to apply the lessons from their encounters into their everyday lives;
- reflecting on the impact of their encounter for their school and local communities.

From these activities, the group agreed [five principles](#) to follow when planning workshops in schools:

- a) Aims:** be clear about what you are trying to do
- b) Stimulus materials:** choose a stimulating, thought-provoking resource
- c) Active learning:** make sure you get students to be actively involved in processing the ideas, not just passive recipients
- d) Pitching it right:** Level 5 and above for Y9 up – looking at the varying impact of belief, exploring a range of interpretations, asking pupils to demonstrate personal insights and understanding
- e) Applying the lessons:** what opportunities are you going to give to allow students to consider the impact of your ideas for themselves?

Representatives had brought some materials from their own traditions – something that was meaningful in their lives. They spent some time looking at how they might use these objects, stories, texts, images or songs to engage an audience of pupils, to provoke questioning and develop understanding. Stephen Pett then gave them [three model outlines](#) for a workshop session, and they collaborated in developing their own workshops. For the four representatives who were going to be the workshop leaders at the multi-faith encounter conference at Wigmore High School, this was a particularly fruitful session.

Whilst some were a little daunted at the demands being placed upon them, all agreed that it helped them to see how to draw better responses from pupils and avoid the tendency to think that a workshop should be dominated by the visitor talking at the pupils. It was noted that this is particularly important if schools are paying for faith representatives to lead workshops.



Feedback was highly encouraging, including this comment from the Humanist representative:

Humanists always feel a little on the defensive when it comes to matters RE. After all, why should non-religious people be involved in religious education? Certainly this remains the impression given in the case of SACRE meetings, where Humanists can sometimes only attend in an 'observer' capacity.

However I must report that 'this odd one out' perception was certainly not borne out during the training day at Holmer School. I was made to feel very much an inclusive member of the group. The presentation by the course leaders constantly put the emphasis on the importance of comparative RE rather than Religious Instruction. Interaction with other group members was friendly and co-operative and there wasn't the least sign of friction. If this congenial training day spirit could be transported to a wider audience, society would be a much better place as a result.

I have no suggestions for any improvements to course methodology. Materials were very appropriate and presentation was highly professional.

A big thank you to all.

Another faith representative commented on what went well:

- *Hearing different suggestions about how to engage groups and encourage individual ideas – especially filling in the survey/questionnaire and passing 3 times to others to maintain anonymity.*
- *Importance of smaller group work and enabling everyone to participate (e.g. passing to left etc)*
- *Importance of changing approaches around – avoiding getting stuck in doing things all the same way.*
- *Importance of looking at games and different ways of presenting information/everything*
- *Importance of clearly planning – aims and objectives – timing etc.*

The KS4 conference

Tuesday 17th October: Muslim and Roman Catholic pupils from the Al-Hijrah High School, Birmingham, and St Mary's RC High School, Hereford, converged on Wigmore High School, a rural comprehensive set in the beautiful countryside of North Herefordshire. Various last minute obstacles had been overcome, such as one school pulling out two days earlier due to the announcement of an Ofsted inspection. Detailed preparation and planning had been completed, including a sophisticated labelling system which grouped the pupils for small discussion groups and larger activity groups, ensuring a mix of pupils from different schools and with different beliefs.

Wigmore head teacher Andy Shaw led an assembly to welcome the visitors, linking the need for such positive encounters to the recent world population total reaching seven billion. Head of RE, Kate Mayglothling, then outlined the day, introducing the theme of "Where's the meaning in my life?" and challenged the pupils to make the most of the opportunity ahead of them. Ice-breaker activities immediately had the hundred Muslim, Christian, atheist and agnostic pupils talking and working together.



The [programme](#) for the day enabled mixed groups to attend four workshops, with one Jewish, one Christian and two Muslim workshop leaders. Each speaker built on their experience at the training day and had developed an interactive workshop to explore where the meaning is in their own lives.



Dain Pritchard focused on words and music in his exploration of what was most meaningful in his Christian life. By asking pupils to consider what were the most important things to have in a relationship, he revealed how he sees his Christian life as being about a relationship with God rather than following a list of do's and don'ts. To deepen understanding of what this would mean, pupils analysed Isaac Newton's hymn, Amazing Grace, finding resonances between Christian and Muslim ideas of God. Pupils considered what a Christian might write in a hymn or song to God,

before Dain performed one of his own songs.

Jane Silver-Corren asked pupils to consider a range of values and to see which might relate to Judaism, Islam and Christianity, with the conclusion that there are many values these faiths hold in common. Pupils looked at their own top three values, such as freedom, health and hope. Jane talked about ways in which food was very important to her, illustrating this with *chollah* and getting some pupils to do a brief re-enactment of the opening



prayers for *Shabbat*. Drawing comments from the pupils, Jane showed ways in which food plays a significant part in many celebrations in different faith traditions, highlighting similarities and differences between her Jewish practice and other traditions.



Salma Kaka explained the things that gave her meaning in life: the Qur'an, her family, and peace and happiness. With a pupil activity to introduce each one, she explored how the story of Mary in the Qur'an inspires her, and how her role as a mother, daughter, sister and mother-in-law brought both respect and responsibility. Using a human bar chart activity, pupils found out the group's views on what brought them peace and happiness – ranging from drinking on a Saturday night, to desiring fame, to prayer. Salma talked about how her

morning prayer is the time that grounds her every day, bringing her peace and happiness for the day ahead.

Razwan Ul-Haq presented some of his sophisticated calligraphic art to get pupils to grasp that what we see when we look at art and in life is informed by our presuppositions, by our frame of reference. He explained that his frame of reference is formed by God, science and art. Pupils explored each of these areas: they mapped values and activities onto a Venn diagram to show which might be part of a religious or a non-religious life, or both. They discussed some statements about religion and science, and then had a go at doing some art to express the meaning in their own life. Raz showed how his artwork reflected the meaning in his life.



Gathering all of the pupils together for a final session, Kate Mayglothling continued the opportunities for dialogue between people with different beliefs by giving them the Values Game to play (see *Looking Inwards*, *Looking Outwards* ed. Joyce Mackley, and *Opening up Respect* ed. Fiona Moss, both from RE Today Services). They were then asked to put together a brief presentation on what they had gained from the day. Some brave groups spoke in front of the gathered pupils and teachers: one rap presentation included the line, "Now we know about different

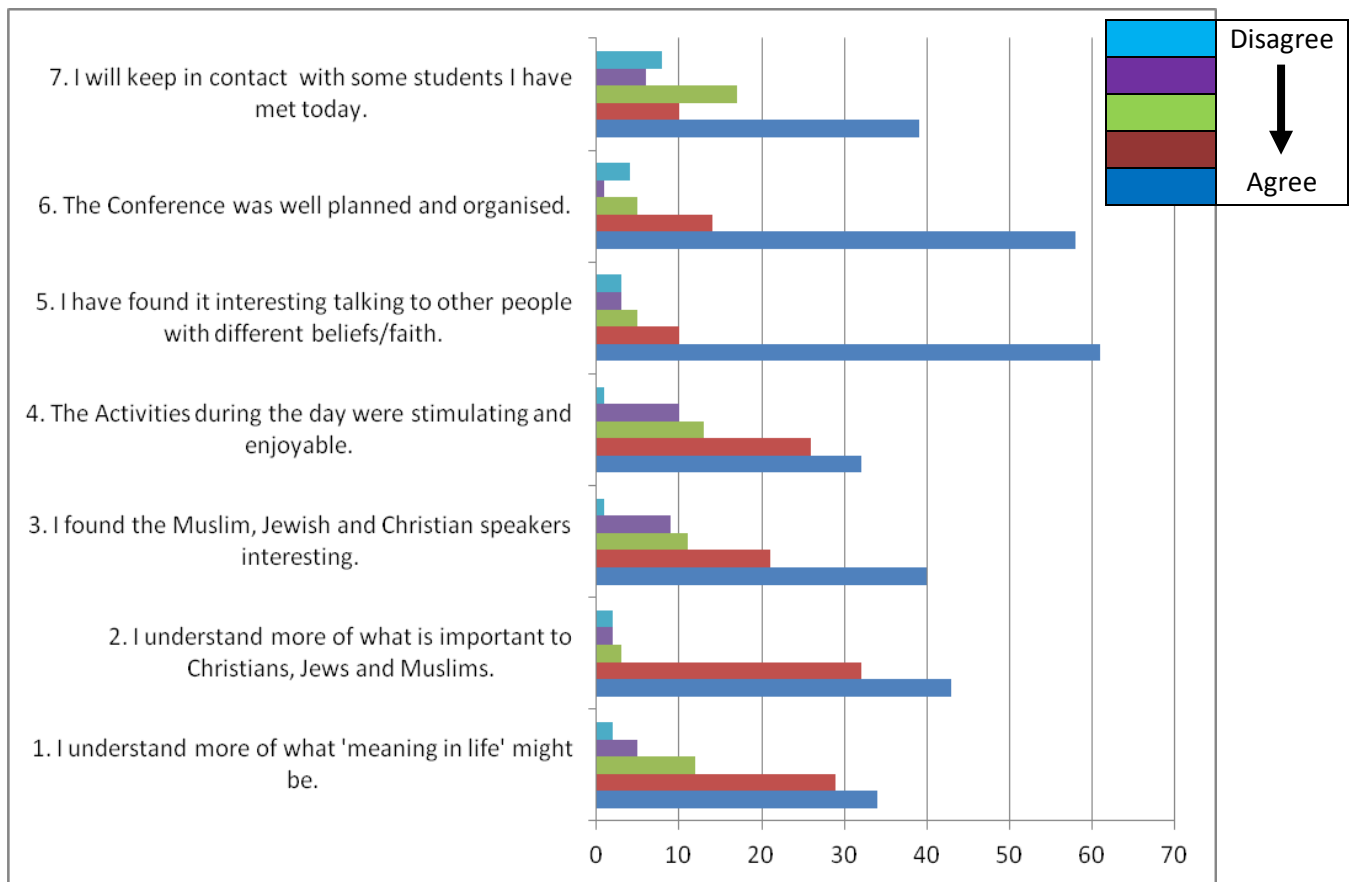
religions we make different decisions"; another group said that they recognised that there were many more things linking them than separating them; another used the term "harmony" to sum up the message of the day.

Epilogue

As the pupils from St Mary's and Wigmore dispersed, the pupils and staff from Al-Hijrah High School joined together with the visiting Muslim workshop leaders in their midday and afternoon prayers in the school hall. This moment of calm was a reminder of how some of the ideas and practices spoken about throughout the day wove like a ribbon through the lives of many of those present.

Stephen Pett
RE Today Services
October 2011

Pupil feedback from the day:



Thanks to:

- Westhill Trust/NASACRE for supporting this project.
- Herefordshire SACRE for backing interfaith encounter in Hereford.
- Staff and pupils at Wigmore High School, Hereford, for hosting the conference. Particular thanks to Kate Mayglothling and support staff at Wigmore for organising and running the day.
- Tristram Jenkins for his interest and participation in the project.
- Joyce Mackley and the members of the Herefordshire Multi-faith Development Group for their continued passion for interfaith dialogue and encounter in Herefordshire schools.
- The [faith representatives](#) for attending the training day, and for the four who contributed to the conference at Wigmore.
- Stephen Pett, RE Today Services, for leading the training day.