

Transforming RE in a secondary school: The Bankfield School

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Brief description

This case study shows how a secondary school transformed staff and students' perceptions of RE by reinvigorating teaching, the curriculum and the profile of the subject across the school. It may also be useful for a school that is reviewing provision for spiritual, moral, social and cultural development (SMSC).

Overview – the provider's message

'Our school motto is "Bringing out the best". This, together with our mission to ensure that "No child is unknown" is at the heart of our school ethos. We believe that everyone should be valued, differences should be celebrated and our community is stronger as a result.

Students' learning in Social and Religious Studies (SRS) is crucial in terms of reinforcing our ethos and connecting to other aspects of whole-school provision, such as Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL) and collective worship. We believe it is essential that through all lessons, assemblies and other activities we provide the time for reflection so that we all share the same values and appreciate each other's beliefs. In this way, we aim for our students to have the skills, tolerance and understanding which will equip them for their adult lives as they take their places in society.

Carole Owen, Headteacher

The good practice in detail

‘In the past I had a stereotypical view of religion. The information we got just seemed detached from life. But now it's much more relevant. SRS has opened my eyes to how important religion is in people's lives.’

The starting point

When Andy Ackers took over the leadership of RE in 2009 he identified the need to raise the profile of the subject across the school and improve the quality of the lessons.

It was clear through discussions with students and staff that RE was not always successful in engaging students. Indeed, the name of the subject tended to put some students off and GCSE results needed to improve. There was a pattern of parents withdrawing their children from aspects of the RE programme. Andy explains: 'Many parents in the area no longer see religion as an important part of life and see their experience of RE in school as no longer relevant and applicable, so they question why their children should be exposed to this.'



Carole Owen and Andy Ackers

In discussion with Carole Owen and the senior leadership team, the need emerged to review some aspects of the wider culture of the school which were potential barriers to the subject's success. These included the understanding of the contribution that the school as a whole, and RE in particular, could make to the promotion of community cohesion and students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development (SMSC).

The review resulted in three key strategic priorities:

- raising the profile of SMSC across the school and developing links between RE and the wider life of the school – the collective worship and tutorial programme, and other subject areas
- creating a vision for RE and embedding this vision in a new curriculum
- changing the model of learning in RE lessons.

Raising the profile of SMSC and community cohesion

It was quickly apparent that there was no consistent shared language about SMSC and community cohesion across the school. While there was confidence that much good work was going on, it was not identified or shared as well as it might be. There was an appreciation that the wider life experiences and perspectives of many of the students were quite limited, particularly their appreciation of cultural diversity. There was also a need to develop their confidence and maturity in handling more personal aspects of their lives.

The RE department, supported by the headteacher, took the initiative in promoting a shared language about the [key features of SMSC](#). Departments were invited to carry out an [audit](#) of their contribution and provision for SMSC. The discussion and sharing of practice arising from the audit helped to secure a much higher priority for SMSC in the life of the school and recognition of the importance of these wider aspects of personal development. A similar activity helped to raise the profile of community cohesion throughout the school.

As one teacher said: 'It helped us to recognise how SMSC was about the whole curriculum and we developed a shared language. SMSC became a part of our lesson planning. Previously it was not really part of the everyday language of the school. We came to see how different aspects of school life linked together including tutor time and assemblies. It helped us provide much stronger evidence when [Ofsted](#) inspectors came and this was reflected in the outstanding judgements for SMSC and social cohesion.'

For RE, the exercise meant its value was highlighted across the school. Rather than being seen as marginal, RE was recognised as a key area which could take a lead in promoting the renewed priorities of the school.

Part of the outcome of the audit was the identification of a wide range of cross-curricular links, such as Black History month and Holocaust Memorial week, through which RE could develop its profile in school. RE continues to work closely with the collective worship and tutorial programme to ensure that the focus on values is embedded at the heart of school life.

Creating a vision for RE and embedding this vision in a new curriculum



Crucially, the search for a renewed vision for RE was not carried out in isolation but flowed from the focus on developing an awareness of SMSC across the school community. If RE was to succeed, it needed to take its starting point from the wider priorities of the school.

As well as talking to students about their experience of subject, the department team involved students, Andy explains: 'On resetting the vision for the subject, we established our new name, slogan and a set of key aims to reflect what we wished students to achieve at the end of their learning journey with us.'

RE became Social and Religious Studies (SRS). 'We start from the social context of the students' learning to aid their understanding and engagement', says Andy. 'Then we move into the study of religions and how this impacts on students– personally, locally, nationally and globally showing the valuable contribution religion can make and how it may challenge their social context. We also produced a slogan to fit the learning journey: [One world where we all fit in.](#)'

The RE curriculum was re-designed to take this vision forward. Each year group has its own key question, prominently displayed in classrooms, to drive the learning, with GCSE taking the lead from Year 9 onwards.

- Year 7: Where does community fit?
- Year 8: How does religion fit in locally, nationally and globally?
- Year 9: Where do we look for meaning; in God? In the world? In suffering? In others?
- Year 10: Where does religion fit in; to conflict? To society? To medicine?



‘We can now see the relevance of SRS. The jigsaw displays in the classroom really help us understand how religion fits in’

Shifting the model of learning in RE lessons



The third strategic priority to transform RE was to improve teaching and learning. Andy explains that, 'to deliver this learning journey effectively it is important to foster a learning environment that is student-led and supported by as many different teaching styles as possible. SRS has to be both enjoyed and experienced by the students. It is paramount that the students lead lessons through their experiences and ideas to enjoy and achieve. The use of information and communication technology and new teaching methods were

introduced within the delivery of SRS centred on an accelerated learning approach. All objectives along the journey were based around "What, Why and How". Lessons were split into "Connect, Activate, Demonstrate and Consolidate" learning. We incorporated SEAL, Personal Learning and Thinking Skills and emotional intelligence into the lessons in the firm belief that **students learn in different ways**'.

The learning environment is accessible, positive, fully interactive and driven by students and staff in partnership. Lessons embed many of the best features of student-centred learning. The department is now leading the development of teaching and learning across the school and has a significant impact beyond the subject itself.



The students' views

‘The classroom is just so lively and colourful; students who are religious are much more confident to express their opinions.’

‘We are treated maturely as equals and our views are really valued.’

What next?

The changes have been successful. Examination results are improving and students' attitudes are very positive. The resistance of some parents towards RE has gone. The next stage of the journey is consolidation. 'We now need to embed the vision across the whole department', says Andy. 'We are working well as a team, but we need to keep our curriculum under review to make sure that students are getting real depth of understanding of religions and beliefs. We want to raise the standard for the more able and work more closely with parents. And in the current climate we need to review the way we accredit learning in RE to make sure students get the best deal.'

‘We are now so involved in our learning, we have real opportunities to express our opinions. SRS is so much more personal now.’

Provider background

The [Bankfield School](#) is in Widnes in the borough of Halton near Liverpool. It is smaller than average size. The student population is almost entirely White British. The proportion of students entitled to free school meals is about twice the national average. The proportion with special educational needs and/or disabilities is above average. The school has been a specialist science college since September 2004. It achieved High Performing School Status in 2008 which led to Applied Learning and Gifted and Talented Lead School Status from September 2009.

Are you thinking of putting these ideas into practice; or already doing something similar that could help other providers; or just interested? We'd welcome your views and ideas. Get in touch [here](#).

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