
MATERIALS USED TO TEACH ABOUT WORLD RELIGIONS IN SCHOOLS IN ENGLAND

*Robert Jackson, Julia Ipgrave, Mary Hayward, Paul Hopkins, Nigel Fancourt,
Mandy Robbins, Leslie Francis and Ursula McKenna*

*Warwick Religions and Education Research Unit
Institute of Education, University of Warwick*

Introduction

This research brief summarises the findings from a study commissioned by the DCSF and carried out during the academic year 2008-9 by the Warwick Religions and Education Research Unit to investigate the materials used in schools to teach about world religions as part of Religious Education (RE) (Jackson *et al.* 2010). The religions specified by the DCSF for this study are regarded as the principal religions practised in Britain as noted in *Religious Education: The non-statutory national framework* (QCA 2004), namely Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism and Sikhism. The research questions which the study sought to answer were:

1. What materials (books, ICT resources and other materials) are available to maintained and independent schools for teaching about and learning from world religions?
2. What materials are schools using in practice to develop an understanding of world religions?
3. What is the content / nature of these materials used by schools and how does this relate to current school regulations - in particular maintained schools' duty to promote community cohesion and the independent school standard to assist pupils in appreciating and respecting their own and other cultures?
4. How are these materials used by teachers in the classroom to enhance learning and to promote community cohesion?
5. What are the key factors for schools to consider when determining which materials should be used to teach world religions?

The study includes an evaluation of the published materials readily available to schools (including books published since 2000), consideration of the contextual and pedagogical factors that influence their selection and use in schools and classrooms, and examines the materials' contribution to learning. A particular focus has been on their contribution to education for community cohesion both in terms of their ability to enhance young people's understanding of the principal religious traditions in British society, and of the messages these materials may convey about inter communal and inter religious harmony. Investigation of the use of these materials widened the study to encompass a broader understanding of the character of RE in a wide range of English schools (including maintained and independent, primary and secondary) and the schools' varied responses to the community cohesion agenda.

Key Findings

Materials Available

- There are a wide range of religious education books to support teaching about the six principal religions, particularly for Key Stages 1, 2 and 3.
- Many resources presenting the six principal religions are available on-line. Some are available commercially but many video clips portraying aspects of the religions are freely available.

Materials Used by Schools

- Much of the material used in RE lessons is generated by the teachers themselves using a mixture of electronic, print and other resources many of which were not specifically produced for RE purposes.

Content and Nature of Materials

- Many RE books were described by reviewers as attractive and engaging, presenting an immediately positive image of the religions.
- In content and approaches to learning, books used for KS3 are closest to RE as understood in the Non-Statutory National Framework's attainment targets of 'learning about' religion (having an accurate knowledge and understanding) and 'learning from' religions (gaining insight through reflection and discussion).
- Academic reviewers and faith consultants pointed out a high number of errors and points for criticism in the coverage of religions.
- Books used for KS4 and post-16 relate closely to examination specifications.
- At examination level, most publications relate to popular options in the areas of philosophy of religion and ethics, and social issues. Few recent books offer in depth study of particular religions (except for Christianity).

Religious learning in schools and Community Cohesion

- Case studies showed that school responses to the community cohesion agenda are various including learning about differences, developing the idea of community within the school, transforming life chances, community partnerships and social action. In different schools links are made between RE and all of these areas.
- The development of personal and social values, of positive attitudes towards those of other religions, and of critical thinking (in Religious Education), was given higher priority than knowledge about religions by the majority of teachers in the case study schools.

Background

The inclusion of Christianity and the 'other principal religions' practised in Britain in RE became a statutory requirement in the 1988 Education Reform Act (ERA) although this had been an increasing practice since the 1970s. RE syllabuses for maintained schools are determined at a local level.

Since September 2007, there has been a requirement for schools to promote community cohesion, partly through curriculum subjects such as RE and citizenship. Although the community cohesion advice is not directed towards independent schools, they are required to help their pupils to appreciate and respect their own and other cultures in a way that promotes tolerance.

This research project brings together these two requirements on schools in the first systematic enquiry into the materials available to schools, their use within the context of RE teaching and learning, and the contribution they make to community cohesion.

Methodology

Strand 1: A three phase review of materials

Phase 1 consisted of an audit of available books (produced since 2000) and ICT materials used to teach RE in schools (Hayward and Hopkins 2010). In addition, a review of a sample of available materials was conducted by experts and consultants drawn from academia (one for each religion), professional RE specialists (one for primary, one for KS3 and one for KS4 and post-16) and faith groups (one for each religion). Phase 2 comprised a review of additional

materials by the experts and consultants, including materials identified in the qualitative case studies and the quantitative survey.

Phase 3 consisted of an analytical review of the Phase 1 and 2 reports from the panel of experts and consultants in order to identify issues and recommendations. This was conducted by group co-ordinators and an ICT expert.

The total resources reviewed were:

Primary (KS1/2) - 43 Books,
30 Websites / e-resources

Lower secondary (KS3) - 37 Books,
32 Websites / e-resources

Upper secondary (KS4) - 21 Books,
30 Websites / e-resources

Strand 2: Qualitative Case Studies

These included interviews with teachers and groups of pupils, pupil focus groups, lesson observations and a review of school policy documents. They were conducted in 10 primary schools and 10 secondary schools. These were selected from a variety of school types including maintained and independent schools and schools with or without a religious character, across the government regions, and including urban and rural settings. The ten primary schools included two independent schools. The secondary schools included one independent school and one Academy. The rest were maintained of one type or another. Half the case study institutions were schools with a religious character. Of these schools with a religious character, 4 were voluntary aided primary (2 Church of England, 1 Roman Catholic, 1 Jewish), 1 independent Muslim primary, 4 voluntary aided secondary (1 Church of England, 1 Roman Catholic, 1 Muslim, 1 Jewish) and 1 Christian Academy.

Strand 3: A Quantitative Survey

This consisted of a postal and online survey involving a nationwide random sample of 2,723 schools of all types. The low response rate (23%) did not permit the kind of analyses originally intended and the composite picture based on the responses achieved does not permit generalisation from these results to all schools.

Detailed Findings

Materials Available

- Books on world religions available for primary schools include information books, story books and mixed media resources.
- In content and approaches to learning, books used for KS3 are closest to RE as understood in the Non-Statutory National Framework's attainment targets of 'learning about' and 'learning from' religions.
- Books for KS4 and post-16 students relate closely to examination specifications. Some focus on information. Others support options in philosophy of religion, ethics or biblical studies rather than world religions. Few resources support those wishing to follow options in the study of a particular religion in depth (Christianity being the exception).
- There are many types of resource on-line, ranging from fully written materials (e.g. on commercially available websites), to 'gobbets' of materials in video, audio, textual, animated and image format.
- E-resources include those produced by: commercial companies, sometimes attached to traditional print materials; faith communities; government or quango support agencies and local authorities; teacher education organizations, teachers, advisers and consultants; Standing Advisory Councils for Religious Education (SACREs).
- On-line materials give access to 'insider' sources such as people, sacred texts or (images of) artefacts.
- As well as websites there are the 'traditional' e-resources of film, video, DVD, radio and television which deal with religions.
- Although there are a large number of resources freely available on-line, teachers' pedagogical skills are needed to turn most of these into useful teaching and learning tools.

Materials Used by Schools

- Electronic resources are becoming increasingly popular in RE, particularly with the introduction of interactive whiteboards and the ready availability of free video clips online.

- Many of the materials used in class were generated by the teachers from the wide range and variety of resources (including books and online resources). This trend means that the quality of the materials, and of the students' learning through them, is dependent on teacher knowledge, skill and commitment.
- There were many examples from the Case Study schools and evidence from the Survey of the extensive use of 'first-hand' resources such as visitors to the school, outside visits and artefacts.
- In the case study schools, teachers were more likely to acquire individual books as resources rather than sets of books.

Content and Nature of Materials

- Books used for KS4 and post-16 relate closely to examination specifications. Examiners are often involved in the writing of GCSE materials; publishers frequently used this as a selling point.
- At examination level, most publications now relate to popular options in the areas of philosophy of religion and ethics, and social issues. There are few recent books to support pupils and teachers wishing to study a particular religion in depth (with the exception of Christianity).
- Many of the RE books available were described by reviewers as attractive and engaging, presenting an immediately positive image of the religions.
- Illustrations are often visually attractive. Where problems emerged they tended to relate to gender, ethnic diversity, stereotyping, or a poor or insensitive choice of visual and / or caption. On occasions the pictures and mismatch of captions to pictures were deemed to be offensive to people of the religion being portrayed.
- There is a mismatch in many of the activities in KS3 and KS4 books, between challenging questions and tasks, and a lack of information and in depth knowledge of the religions to enable pupils to answer or carry them out.
- External influences (syllabus and examination requirements, the influence of other religious and non-religious perspectives, national agenda), rather than

the internal logic of the particular religions, often structure the representation of RE print materials.

- In published materials the lack of consultation with scholars in the field is evident in the high number of errors and points for criticisms in the coverage of religions (of some more than of others) and in the lack of attention to deeper issues of spirituality and theology. The issues that were specific to particular religious traditions are discussed below:
- The presentation of Islam conveys a rich and attractive picture of a living religion that has a place in British society as well as in the wider world. Accounts of the religion were sometimes rather simplistic, however.
- Although the portrayal of Hinduism is often engaging, there were found to be examples of carelessness over details and confusion about Hindu beliefs and teaching were real issues, for example an attempt to explain Hindu thought with the terms '*henotheism*' and '*pantheism*' was considered to be misleading.
- Sikhism tends to receive a superficial treatment focusing on the externals of the religion (e.g. buildings) rather than on its power for transformation in the lives of the individual or its contribution to wider society.
- The relative weight given in the materials to minority white British, and to majority migrant communities, is an issue in the portrayal of Buddhism. As a non-theist tradition, Buddhism can be drawn into the current theist v atheist debate in a way that may skew its interpretation.
- Reviewers noted the inadequacy of the coverage of Judaism in thematic texts and series is marked, especially at secondary level. In particular many of the resources do not engage with the long tradition of Jewish thought over the last 2000 years.
- In several resources Christianity comes across as the default religion, giving it both too much assumed presence and too little actual attention. There are implicit assumptions in some resources, that they are addressing pupils with a Christian background. At the same time there is a reluctance to engage with the real core of the Christian faith such as belief in Jesus as God incarnate.

- The areas of personal and moral development, social and cultural understanding, community cohesion, global understanding and spiritual development are rarely given specific mention in RE materials (although they appear more often at KS3 than other stages). They depend on teachers' ability to draw out any wider implications around these themes.
- It is more common for textbooks to consider controversial issues which may be examined from the perspective of different faiths, rather than those issues where the roots of controversy lie between / among religions themselves.
- In some faith schools, there is a lack of good materials for the teaching of the school's own religion that present learning from a religious perspective yet in a way that is engaging and appealing for the pupils or that is structured and supports progression.

Use of Materials

- The survey indicates that all six principal religions are well established at KS3, though coverage of different religions is more restricted in other Key Stages.
- Much material used in RE is generated by the teachers and tailored to the learning styles, interest or assessment requirements of their pupils.
- The survey and cases studies showed that teachers draw heavily on web resources, and on DVDs. They make creative use of ICT in their lessons using much material not specifically produced for RE purposes.
- Lack of subject expertise among many teachers of RE means that they depended on the reliability of the materials they use as sources of information about world religions.
- The case studies indicated that a variety of RE approaches and pedagogies are being used (often in combination) including world religions approaches, scriptural approaches, experiential approaches, philosophical and ethical approaches and (in some faith schools) nurture within a religious tradition. Teachers and schools mix different approaches, within lessons or across the school.
- The selection of materials is influenced by the RE pedagogies being used e.g. world

religions approaches require more information-based material, scriptural approaches require a choice of key texts and stories, while philosophical and ethical approaches often draw on current materials from the media (television and newspapers).

- Teacher selection and use of materials for RE is influenced by other pedagogical considerations and trends e.g. learning styles and literacy needs, thinking skills and creativity and technological innovation.
- The faith of pupils in classes is often an influence on the selection of themes and content for RE. However, there is some evidence in the case study schools of minority religious positions in the school being overlooked.
- The survey showed that learning *about* other religions is seen as a lower priority in primary RE than the development of personal values, social values and moral living. In secondary RE, learning about religions again has lower priority and the priorities are more about ultimate questions, the development of critical thinking and positive attitudes towards religions.
- Where pupils had a religious background, their existing interest and experience of religion was seen as a firm foundation for learning about other faiths. In these cases teachers often adopted comparative approaches.
- The case studies revealed that, where the pupils had very little experience of religion, teaching strategies included the careful selection and use of material (familiar and faith specific) to bridge the gap in pupils' understanding between a religious and a non-religious worldview, or a greater focus on life issues relevant to the pupils and the development of dialogical skills.
- Pupils and teachers interviewed in primary and secondary schools linked the practice of discussion and dialogue to the growth of empathy and respect for those of different faith positions.

- Case studies showed that some 'faith schools' are attempting to incorporate both confessional teaching of their own faith *and* multi-faith religious education into their school curriculum (sometimes taught by different teachers in different timetable slots), and identified religious reasons for learning about other faiths.
- Case studies showed that at some 'faith schools' pupils are encouraged to engage at a higher level with the interpretation of religious texts, including being introduced to traditions of commentary in the Jewish and Islamic primary schools.
- Case studies illustrated that some faith schools differentiate between materials produced by the faith community for religious nurture and unaffiliated information books on world religions and make use of both in the different learning contexts.

Pupil perspectives on RE materials

- Books were given a higher value as learning tools by pupils at primary schools, where there was a preference for story books over information books. At secondary level books were less appreciated by the pupils and often viewed as too challenging or too boring.
- Among secondary pupils there was general appreciation of more interactive, person-to-person approaches to teaching and learning whereby teachers, fellow pupils and visitors were valued as resources.
- Pupils generally appreciated electronic resources for learning and many found them more real, more interesting and more memorable than books.
- Pupils welcomed materials where their learning had been pre-packaged by the teacher and ready-made for examination revision purposes.
- Pupils' own faith identity and commitment affected how they viewed RE materials, especially those representing their own religion.
- Primary school children were excited to see their faith or that of their family and friends represented in the resources and were keen to identify with it.

- Secondary school pupils had mixed responses to the portrayal of their religions. Some Muslim pupils found that RE materials helped to break down negative stereotypes of Islam. Some Christian pupils found negative stereotypes of Christianity were reinforced.

Other sources of learning

- Religious artefacts are used in primary schools in particular, as tools for concrete learning, to encourage empathy with the people for whom these artefacts hold religious significance, and even to generate responses of awe and wonder. In use, the boundaries are sometimes blurred between 'hands-on' learning, respect for other people's sacred objects and religious devotion.
- The contribution to learning made by visitors from faith communities is valued highly by teachers and pupils. The survey showed a considerable involvement of visitors from across the faith traditions. For example, of the 273 primary schools that responded 77% reported that the Christian faith community had contributed to RE and 23% reported that the Muslim faith community had contributed to RE. Of the 261 secondary schools that responded, 70% reported that the Christian faith community had contributed to RE and 30% reported that the Muslim faith community had contributed to RE.
- In the case study schools many pupils gained experiential understanding of religion through discussions with classmates of different religious backgrounds, active relationships between the school and local churches, 'faith schools' or other faith communities and collective worship. These experiences were evident not only in 'faith schools' and were most prominent at primary level.

Community cohesion and religion

- Although community cohesion principles were often not explicitly stated in materials, policies and RE lessons at the case study schools, and the teachers and school leaders recognised social and citizenship imperatives for learning about different faiths. At some of the 'faith schools' the argument for doing so was strengthened by religious imperatives.
- Responses to the community cohesion agenda in case study schools (including their RE) are varied, including learning about differences, developing the idea of a

democratic community within the school, engaging in partnerships and social action in the community.

Factors for Schools to Consider when Selecting Materials

- Reviewers suggested criteria for teachers to assess the representation of religions in materials, the key features included: accuracy; presenting authentic voices from the religions; coherence in their portrayal; recognition of each religion's complexity and internal diversity; acknowledgement of the religions' spiritual / theological depth; conveying a sense of religions as living and contemporary.
- With regard to electronic materials, the ready availability of so many resources means that teachers and students need to become critical evaluators of materials and assess them for authenticity, content, ease of navigation and provenance.

General Conclusions

The research project was predicated on the understanding that community cohesion objectives are served by increase in knowledge of the beliefs, practices, motivations and values of the six principal religious traditions represented in British society.

The fact that schools of all types were found to include a variety of religions in their curriculum is very positive, as is the wide range of materials available to support them.

However, the findings from the project suggest a need for active measures to ensure that 'learning about' religion(s) retains its prominence in the school curriculum and that the information pupils receive about religions is accurate, balanced and comprehensive.

At the same time the findings show a number of different approaches to community cohesion taken by schools and means by which they too can support greater understanding of the way religion influences people's lives and society. Opportunities for partnership and shared social action with faith communities were found to be valuable examples of engaging school pupils in positive community relationships.

Recommendations

Schools should recognise in their policy, practice and self assessment that an increase in knowledge about different religions is an important part of education for community cohesion.

RE policy makers need to investigate the move away from studying religions to issues-based approaches and explore ways in which learning about religions might be renewed in upper secondary education.

Given the current emphasis on practice, histories and moral teachings, RE teachers and producers of RE resources should ensure that pupils also learn about the spirituality and/or theology of religions.

RE teachers should be aware of the presence of minority religious positions within their classes.

Meetings between teachers, RE advisers, university academics and scholars from the religious traditions should be facilitated to identify ways of working together to support the development of teacher subject knowledge.

Initial teacher education and continuing professional development opportunities should be provided to enhance subject knowledge of specialist and non-specialist teachers.

Training opportunities should be extended for faith community members who visit schools or host visits from pupils.

Advisers of community and faith sectors should consult together at a local level with teachers of both sectors so they can support each other in developing RE.

Publishers, authors and designers of websites should work with academics and faith consultants to ensure the accuracy, balance and appropriateness of the representation of religious traditions in their materials.

Publishers, authors and designers of websites should promote community cohesion by supplying examples from religions of communal living, positive social involvement and collaborative action between different faith communities.

School leaders and RE teachers should develop community partnerships between the school and local faith communities, so that pupils can learn about the role of religions in society. SACREs and RE advisers should offer guidance on this.

References

Hayward, M. & Hopkins, P. (2010) *Resources for teaching about world religions in schools in England: an audit*, London: DCSF.

QCA (2004) *Religious Education: The non-statutory national framework*, London: QCA.

Additional Information

The full report (DCSF-RR197) can be accessed at www.dcsf.gov.uk/research/

Further information about this research can be obtained from Rosalyn Xavier, Schools Analysis and Research Division, 3 FL, DCSF, Sanctuary Buildings, Great Smith Street, London SW1P 3BT

Email: rosalyn.xavier@dcsf.gsi.gov.uk

The views expressed in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department for Children, Schools and Families.