

INNOVATIVE RELIGION AND WORLDVIEWS IN SCHOOLS

Encountering religion and worldviews as lived and fluid

Set in a largely monocultural context, the school is concerned to ensure that pupils are well-prepared for encounter with religion and worldviews diversity. Knowledge and understanding of the diversity of religious and non-religious worldviews is seen as important for their transition to workplaces and in their wider relationships and communities. As year 10 pupils begin to think about their career choices, the school is aware that many pupils have a fairly limited experience of religious and cultural diversity and that this will change as they go out into the world of work or further education.

The school's innovation stems from a collaboration between teachers responsible for RE, SMSC & careers education, with the shared understanding that learning about religion and worldviews should not be simply about learning 'facts' about different traditions, nor should it be confined to the RE space. Rather, religion and worldviews are seen as lived phenomena that have relevance and importance to everybody in their engagement with society.

The innovation consists of a half-day 'life and careers fair' in which speakers from a range of backgrounds are brought into the Year 10 classroom to talk about what their worldview means to them and how it plays out in daily life, including in relation to work. The activity was offered to all Year 10 pupils, including those not studying RE at GCSE. Everybody seemed keen to learn about religion and worldviews in this way, recognising that they are important parts of many people's lives, both at work and in wider life.

First the speakers took turns to talk to the whole class about what their worldview means to them. Each participant described their worldview, using the label they felt most appropriate to them. They each pointed out that they did not 'represent' their particular worldview but were just one example of it. After this initial panel, the speakers moved round in a 'carousel' of small group discussions with pupils, spending around fifteen minutes in each group. The discussions were aimed at exploring how different worldviews play out in the lives of their adherents and to this end, pupils were encouraged to prepare

questions beforehand on any aspect of the speaker's experience. The groups were student-led and pupils were given clear permission to ask any questions they wanted. This was put forward as a 'safe space' in which it was ok to take risks.

Some speakers combined pupils' questions with stimuli of their own, including sacred objects, provocative questions or thoughts and images designed to generate conversation. These stimuli were useful in getting discussion going, in supporting pupils to consider real-life situations and to explore deeper meanings associated with ritual, but actually on this particular day the pupils were very active in bringing forward their own questions.

One of the guests, a Jewish lady provided 'scenarios' based on the interaction between religion and the workplace. These provoked discussion around issues such as discrimination based on religious clothing and symbols and reasonable adjustments for religious festivals. The pupils were encouraged to think about the role of worldviews in their possible future workplaces and how this relates to them and each other as people.

Whilst some conversations focused on religion and worldviews in the workplace, others were more broad in scope exploring ideas such as the concept of modesty in Islam. Pupils were thoroughly engaged in the conversations and were keen to 'get around' to all the guests and explore their perspectives. A final session brought everyone back together so that pupils could ask any questions they had not yet had the chance to, or to probe further into particular themes.

Pupils found that the carousel offered them space to explore differences and variations between worldviews, and within them. The process enabled an understanding that religion and worldviews are not monolithic blocks of unchanging fact but living, breathing experiences. On reflection afterwards, many pupils commented on how meeting 'real people' and led them to challenge their own assumptions and revisit stereotypes propagated in the media.

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What makes innovation possible?

The head of RE was motivated by an ambition to extend learning about religion and worldviews to all pupils and to promote an understanding of religion and worldviews as relevant and important to all aspects of life in a diverse society. This teacher's own drive and vision were a key driving force but it is an example of collaboration both within the school and with the local community. The head of RE and the school's SMSC & Careers Co-ordinator shared the vision of preparing pupils for encounter with the lived diversity of worldviews and they worked together to make the day happen.

Engagement with local networks was also key. The head of RE started by making contact with the local interfaith forum and SACRE, who were able to co-ordinate speakers from the range of worldviews to participate in the activity, which was planned as part of inter-faith week. The local interfaith forum is growing in capacity and is keen to expand its educational activities. All the speakers were very enthusiastic and welcomed the opportunity to work with a local school.

The activity was also underpinned by a supportive head teacher who is an RE specialist. Whilst not directly engaged in the day, the head teacher's support gave a sense of importance to the day, which was felt by pupils and teachers. This support is seen in the degree of trust given to the teachers and the pupils - a willingness to take risks by taking year 10 pupils off timetable to meet with members of the community and trust in giving pupils the freedom to explore a range of issues.

Key Messages

- The importance of encounter to understanding
- Understanding worldviews as lived, day-to-day realities
- Challenging one's own misconceptions and assumptions
- Teachers' drive, shared vision and cross-curricular collaboration.
- Engagement with the local community.
- Supportive leadership.