

The new Staffordshire Agreed Syllabus in RE

“Necessity is the mother of invention”, it is said. This was precisely the situation in which we found ourselves in Staffordshire, a year or two ago. The existing Agreed Syllabus had had its five-yearly review. This review concluded that the AS needed significant revision, preferably a re-write of the whole syllabus. The problem was, the Local Authority could not find any extra funding in order to buy in a specialist consultant/agency or to buy in an up-to-date syllabus from elsewhere. What to do?

With some trepidation, we were forced to look into the possibility of doing the re-write ourselves. The only alternative would have been a fourth-rate minor tinkering with the out-of-date syllabus. We were able ultimately to negotiate some days of consultancy time from within the School Improvement budget and other sources, but could draw only on people contracted to Entrust, the education agency for Staffordshire schools.

Fortunately, these included Emma Jardine-Phillips, RE Adviser to SACRE and an Advanced Skills Teacher in RE, and Mary Gale, an experienced former head teacher, long-term member of SACRE, SIAMS Inspector, and senior consultant with Entrust. The three of us made a good writing team – I had the wild ideas, Mary earthed them and fleshed them out in teacher-speak, and Emma edited, sharpened and enriched them with her practical RE expertise. We were supported by a small group of SACRE/Agreed Syllabus Conference members.

We began by asking ourselves some fundamental questions about the role and aims of RE. In my own mind, I wanted to emphasise the validity and relevance of gaining insight into religions (and non-religion) as an educational end in itself, and to reduce the prevailing emphasis on RE as an individual “personal quest” furnishing pupils with analytical and rationalistic skills. I was also keen, from my own inter-faith experiences, to seek to draw pupils out from their own comfort zones into the realities of living in a religiously diverse and open society, with all the opportunities and challenges this brings.

The concept of “religious literacy” had just gained impetus in the UK as a fresh way of thinking about how to live constructively with – and within – religious diversity, and we seized on this as providing a powerful rationale to undergird the whole of the new Agreed Syllabus. So the Syllabus begins with this statement: *the role of Religious Education in schools is to help prepare and equip all pupils for life and citizenship in today’s diverse and plural Britain, through fostering in each pupil an increasing level of religious literacy.*

This rationale is spelled out in three inter-related aims, namely that pupils should acquire:

- (1) *An increasing core of insightful knowledge concerning religions and beliefs;*
- (2) *A developing capacity to engage with ultimate questions and to formulate their own sense of identity and values;*
- (3) *A growing range of the social, spiritual and emotional skills and dispositions appropriate to living well in a religiously plural and open society.*

These three aims can be encapsulated in a number of ways. The Syllabus itself sums them up respectively as Exploring, Engaging and Reflecting. They might also be summarised as being about Them, Me, and Us: getting to know more about all the different “Thems” I am living alongside; understanding and articulating where the “Me” belongs within this picture; and reflecting on how we need to shape our lives and our society if the “Thems” and the “Me” are to become US.

We were able to retain the previous syllabus’s six key dimensions for studying religions and beliefs, and to adapt its programmes of study to harmonise with the three new aims. This

meant that there were elements of continuity between the old and the new, which would assist the transition to the new Syllabus. We had to replace the obsolete framework for assessment in RE, based on the old eight level scale, so we devised from scratch a new framework setting out a sequence of age-related expectations corresponding to each of the three aims.

We retained the previous syllabus's basic guidance for choosing which religions to study in greater depth: one religion alongside Christianity in Key Stage 1, and two religions alongside Christianity in later Key Stages. However, we added a "steer" to this guidance by stating that Islam should feature throughout the RE curriculum, stopping just short of explicitly requiring Islam always to be one of the religions selected for fuller study.

The resulting new Agreed Syllabus is therefore innovative, coherent, incisive and dynamic. In many ways it is at the leading edge of developments in Agreed Syllabus RE. It is also hugely relevant to today's world and to the broader duties laid on schools in relation to promoting community cohesion, citizenship, and the prevention of extremism. Nevertheless, it retains the distinctive character of what is the unique English (and Welsh) tradition of Agreed Syllabus Religious Education.

Unlike the hefty hard-copy Agreed Syllabuses familiar to us from former times, the new Staffordshire Agreed Syllabus exists and has been circulated only in electronic form. It is, however, available for anyone see at <http://www.entrust.education/Page/331>. Since there is almost nothing in it which is narrowly specific to Staffordshire, it could readily be adopted by other local authorities, or by academies and educational trusts. We commend it to the wider public, and would simply request that if use is made of it, then this is clearly acknowledged, including reference to Staffordshire County Council.

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