

Youth SACRE:
Promoting children and young peoples' voices on the Standing
Advisory Council for Religious Education (SACRE)



School delegates to Youth SACRE at our December session

On Tuesday 4th December, 20 delegates from Years 5-9 in seven Islington schools met at Laycock Centre to talk about issues important to relations between people of different faiths and beliefs. In February they will report on their activities to Islington's faith leaders who sit on the Standing Advisory Council for Religious Education. They will also prepare for an Islington schools' RE conference at the Emirates in April.

Before lunch, the delegates showed how much they knew and how good they were at listening. They wrote 'welcome' on a poster in 18 different languages and they all memorised everyone's names! To work up an appetite the young people presented some drama 'freeze-frames' showing different feelings they had about the day and about different situations. If you think that sounds easy you need to know that they had to plan these *on the move*, whilst walking round the room and avoiding bumping into each other! They then played a game that got them into the groups they would work in after lunch (not with a friend from their own school!).



Looking 'wary' or 'nervous'



And lunch was.....sandwiches with vegetarian and Halal fillers, crisps, juices and cakes.....

Getting to know about each other

Each delegate sat in their group and was given a coat of arms card to draw or write something in each of the three sections that shared something about their identity.



They explained to each other what they had done and what it represented. Together the young people then looked at each other's work, thought about things they had in common, things that were very different and anything that took them by surprise.



What groups reported about their discussions:

Things we share:

- Some of us were from the same area
- Things we like doing, especially music and sports, were often shared
- Having the same faith

How we are different:

- Places we are from
- What we do in our spare time
- The words we sometimes use
- Different backgrounds and faiths

Things people in our group wrote/drew that surprised us:

- The importance of freedom to do what we want to do
- Obligations we have
- How similar we were
- How far apart are the places we are from
- Hobbies we didn't know about

Watching a film about identity and belonging.

It was time for some higher-order thinking!

First we watched two brief extracts from a Teachers' TV film about a group of young people from diverse cultural and religious backgrounds who spent a residential weekend together to grapple with issues of identity and belonging (Brit Camp: see <http://www.teachersmedia.co.uk/videos/the-whole-story-1>).



Delegates discussed whether they agreed with any of the young people on the film, and whether they themselves mixed socially with people from different religions and backgrounds outside school. Looking at the children on the film doing the coat-of-arms activity, what was different about it? What issues came up?

The young people thought critically about some of the issues that came up:

- *'You don't need to be born in Britain or be white to be British!'* (on film one boy thought this was a condition for being British)
- *'There was stereotyping, for example what they thought about the food each of them ate'.*
- *'The issue of peer pressure is important'* (in the film a boy was honest about the negative peer pressure that existed that prevented him from befriending people from different cultural backgrounds to him).
- All delegates were struck by the segregation and prejudice that some of the children on the film experienced in their home lives.

When delegates considered how they themselves experienced cultural diversity, discussion groups fed-back the following:

- *We mix with other cultures outside school*
- *We may relate to one culture more than another*
- *We draw on different cultures that are represented in our families when making decisions*
- *We have pride in our cultural origin, and different cultures are part of that (eg. some of us have parents from different cultures and with different faiths)*
- *Seeing ourselves as British is not straightforward. You only become British if you feel it inside...if you are ready.*
- *What is it to be British anyway?*

Thinking about this Christmas, about all our religious festivals and about each other's background, faiths and beliefs



The discussion about the film led us to consider what we knew about other faiths and beliefs. As Christmas was approaching we looked at some questions in groups, linked to festivals. Here's some of the questions and some of the answers that groups fed-back:

1. Do you think you have to be a Christian to celebrate Christmas in today's modern world? What do people of other religions living in Christian countries do at Christmas time?
 - *Anyone can celebrate Christmas, and everyone can celebrate what Christmas is about too...that is 'peace'*
 - *Some Christians don't believe in Christmas (eg. Jehovah's Witnesses)*
 - *Other faiths can enjoy the trappings of Christmas, especially the lights and what is on TV.*

2. Christmas is the biggest festival in the Christian calendar; what are the biggest festivals in the calendar of other religions? What are these festivals celebrating and how do people celebrate them? Examples given included:
 - *Diwali for Hindus*
 - *Eid-ul-Adha for Muslims*
 - *St Patrick's Day for Irish Catholics*

3. In your experience are other religions' festivals as commercialised at Christmas? When deciding if they are or aren't, consider why you think this is?
 - *Other religions' festivals can be equally commercialised*
 - *If your faith is strong you will want to remind others of the importance of your festivals. Otherwise you may just enjoy the commercial aspects.*

4. Do you think people around the world think of their festivals as mainly a time to celebrate their faith, a time for families to get together, a holiday or just a good excuse to go shopping? Give reasons for your answer.
 - *Some of us follow a strict observance of religious and family rituals at Christmas and keep the commercial and social aspects separate*

5. Do you think that our main religious festivals can help bring people together around the world to promote important values, or do celebrations like these just emphasise our differences? Explain your answer.
 - *They can bring people together, especially if the religions share similar stories or values.*
 - *Non-religious celebrations can also bring people together*
 - *If we are aware of our different festivals and their observance, that understanding can bring people of different faiths and beliefs closer together.*

Taking action

We listed the main issues/themes that came up during the day's session:

- *How we have many different religions and beliefs represented in our schools and in Islington*
- *Do we mix with others from different backgrounds/religions/cultures outside school?*
- *What do we consider our common identity to be? Do we consider ourselves and each other British?*
- *What myths/stereotypes (about people from different religions and backgrounds to ourselves) influence us or others we know?*
- *What are the experiences of children in faith schools who do not share the school's faith (if a voluntary-aided faith school)? What are the experiences of children of minority faiths in non-faith schools? Are they very different?*

Delegates thought about what activities they could do to follow up these issues (either in their schools before we next meet, or at the next Youth SACRE session).

They suggested one or more of the following activities:

- *Research/surveys of their peers, parents and teachers about one of the issues above (eg. whether pupils feel their religions or beliefs are acknowledged and valued in school), and then reporting back to the next session of Youth SACRE*
- *Preparing presentations to take to Youth SACRE/SACRE and/or back to their classes (if prepared by themselves and other pupils at Youth SACRE)*
- *Preparing displays and information about our different faiths, but also commonalities and connections between them*
- *Preparing a presentation for teachers to show how we can further support different faiths in school*
- *Compiling a list of 'difficult issues and questions' to take to faith leaders at SACRE and also to teachers back at school. Eg. How to respond to beliefs held by some that it is against their religion to go swimming in a public place where boys and girls may be present.*

The pupils have now returned to their classes to ask them if any of the issues that came up are interesting or important to them and which most interest them. Some may try and involve their peers in an activity to follow up on some of these issues... one group have already suggested doing a follow-up activity (a survey) that they want to do in school. Everyone will give the opportunity to share what they have done at the next Youth SACRE session on 11th February.

Participation: the roles we took

Because we are keen to further develop delegates' participation skills, at the beginning we asked delegates to think about what kind of roles they played during each activity. At the end some of them identified these on a chart. The following roles were identified:

- *I think I was a listener because I didn't talk a lot and I thought about what other people were saying*
- *I was a thinker and a speaker*
- *I was a planner*
- *I managed to express my views many times*
- *My role was a listener and a thinker*
- *I was a listener*
- *The role I played in this experience was a speaker. I answered lots of questions and contributed honestly*
- *I think I was a dreamer*
- *I was a questioner*
- *My role was an answerer*

And finally.....

On a flipchart delegates evaluated the session by stating one thing they liked and one thing they disliked. We already know from verbal feedback that most delegates thoroughly enjoyed the session. This activity confirmed it. Lots was liked and just four statements identified that something was disliked...and we have found at from those statements that we need to do something about everyone having enough food – there was lots left over so maybe one or two participants felt too rushed.

One thing I liked:

- *Getting to express my views and being heard*
- *Meeting an old friend*
- *That everyone took part*
- *The part when we made the shield*
- *The discussions were very interesting. Everyone's points were supported by a good argument and there was no discrimination. People respected one another.*
- *Everything, especially when we did the coat of arms*
- *I really enjoyed the discussion. It really showed people from different backgrounds and religions sharing their ideas. The ideas were great and I learned and understood new things*
- *How we did a bit of drama*
- *I honestly enjoyed the whole experience. I thought it was very thought-provoking and inspiring*
- *How we talked about many varieties of religions and cultures and backgrounds*
- *The way we talked about many religions and how we can get together*
- *How we discussed our ideas.*
- *How my old school came.*
- *The discussion and how open people were*
- *Learning about other peoples' cultures, communities and religion*
- *Meeting with different schools and discussing religion*
- *How we took the conversation seriously*
- *Talking about different beliefs*
- *Sharing ideas*
- *Drawing our coats of arms and sharing things about myself*
- *Making a coat of arms about myself*

One thing I did NOT like:

- *Lunch didn't fill me up (X2)*
- *Not enough choices of food*
- *I didn't like the question bit*

We were keen that the children and young people found the session engaging and fun, that they experienced real benefits from their participation as well as achieving good outcomes for their peers back at their schools. Well, we had a lot of fun and the children and young people made really considered, insightful and thought-provoking suggestions. They made the day successful and their contributions will now take the work forward to our next session.

SO A BIG THANK YOU TO ALL WHO CAME, including the adults who accompanied all the young people; and a special thank you to Andrea and Ashleigh who are helping plan and facilitate the sessions.

The next Youth SACRE session is from 12-3pm on Monday February 11th. We are looking forward to seeing you!

Tim Spafford

Other facilitators were **Andrea Smith** (Hungerford Primary school) and **Ashleigh Mugridge** (Pooles Park Primary).

Participating schools were:

Grafton Primary, Elizabeth Garrett Anderson School, Hungerford Primary, Mount Carmel Secondary School for Girls, Pooles Park Primary, St Andrews Barnsbury C of E Primary, St John the Evangelist RC Primary.