

Every One Matters in the Classroom

A Practice Code for Teachers of RE

This document was drawn up by an RE Council working group with representation from NATRE, AREIAC, NASACRE and several religious/non-religious belief traditions. The code is based on the outcome of consultation responses from these organisations and their members. It was produced in 2009 to complement the GTCE's general code for teachers (the GTCE has now been superseded by the Teaching Agency). When that code was being drawn up, there was some concern about the implications of 'demonstrating respect for diversity and promoting equality' and whether that principle might ever come into conflict with a teacher's sense of integrity in relation to his or her own beliefs. This proposed code for teachers of RE is designed to help reassure teachers of RE themselves as well as pupils, parents and colleagues that a professional approach to such issues can and will be observed.

Unlike the GTCE code, this one is voluntary but it is hoped that the principles and examples it sets out will be of sufficient worth for them to gain widespread acceptance amongst teachers of RE. The ideal would be for them to be used by teachers of any subject who address issues of religion and belief in their own area.

Demonstrating respect for diversity and promoting equality: religious and non-religious belief in schools

Introduction

Teachers are influential people and it is important that this influence is exercised in a professional and responsible manner, particularly in relation to religious and non-religious beliefs.

All teachers operate within the framework of human rights legislation. The following principles are offered for teachers to support them particularly when working with religious and non-religious beliefs. Professional judgements will need to be made concerning the interpretation of these principles with pupils at different ages and stages.

Principles

Exemplifications

1. Respect persons

One hallmark of a professional teacher is sensitivity to pupils. Irrespective of their religious or non-religious beliefs, every pupil should be treated equally out of respect for their dignity as a human being.

Learning is planned in a way that allows pupils to express and evaluate opinions and feelings in confidence e.g. collecting anonymous comments on post it notes which are then shared and discussed by the class.

Before involving any pupil from a particular religious or non-religious background as a 'living resource', teachers consult with them, and ideally their family, to make sure they are comfortable to take on this role, to agree how their contribution will help learning and to check that they are knowledgeable enough to do this successfully. It is important that they are not presented as authoritatively representative of their tradition or community.

Teachers always allow pupils to withdraw from answering a question and/or participating in an activity if they feel compromised, being careful also not thereby to draw attention to such pupils.

2. Value reason-giving

Schools are places of critical engagement and respectful, vigorous debate where deep thinking is valued. Pupils should be encouraged to think skilfully about, reflect on and take responsibility for the beliefs that shape their behaviour and attitudes so that they continue in or develop their beliefs through lifelong critical reflection.

The teacher's careful use of a variety of appropriate assessment methods in planning lessons allows pupils to employ skills of evaluation and encourages them to be reflective learners. Teachers' planning creates opportunities which allow pupils to challenge and reflect through the use of thinking skills activities such as 'Mysteries' and 'Community of enquiry' and through debate.

3. Practise reciprocity.

The Golden Rule, "treat others as you would like to be treated", is a principle which is widely shared across human communities. When handling beliefs in school, teachers should treat religious and non-religious beliefs as they would like their own beliefs to be treated in the same circumstances.

Teachers include the Golden Rule as one of the ground rules for RE lessons negotiated at the start of each year with every class.

Teachers recognise that it is not their role to pass judgement on whether pupils' beliefs are valid or not but to help them explore those beliefs and their impact on individuals and groups who hold them.

4. Accept contestability and value self-awareness.

Beliefs are always contestable; the teacher should recognise that they may be controversial and should frame their language accordingly. This entails a willingness to be self-aware, particularly in relation to the way in which the teacher's own beliefs impact on his or her approach to teaching and learning.

The word 'we' is used with caution by teachers e.g. 'Because we believe in God...' is never appropriate as teachers cannot assume belief, even in a faith school context. Teachers acknowledge the variability of beliefs in response to moral issues even within a single tradition.

Principles

Exemplifications

5. Be open.

Appropriate openness about what a teacher believes can be a professional asset. This means being prepared to answer questions about and talk about his or her own beliefs when that is appropriate (an important professional judgment) in a way that enables pupils to develop in their own learning. The older the pupils, the more likely it is that a teacher could be open in an appropriate way. Teachers will make their own professional judgment on the extent to which to be open about their own beliefs.

Before sharing their response or belief with students teachers routinely ask themselves, 'Will this help the learning?' They also consider prefacing their thoughts with 'My comments/beliefs are no more important than those of anyone else in this room/group', and are receptive to pupils' critical evaluations of their responses.

6. Promote fair and accurate representation.

Where people of diverse beliefs meet, there is opportunity for both conflict and co-operation. Teachers should strive for fair and accurate representation of religious and non-religious beliefs by drawing on sound scholarship and a range of voices. To promote cooperation, teachers should treat diversity as an opportunity to work with others in the shared task of achieving excellence in teaching and learning.

Teachers' planning allows their students to work with members of different groups within the same religion or non-religious belief, e.g. ask the same questions to Sunni and Shi'a Muslims. Teachers consider how they present religious or non-religious beliefs, ensuring they avoid the phrase 'Hindus believe...' or 'Jewish people worship by...' preferring 'Some ...' or 'Many ...' Teachers also include examples which help pupils to understand that in some cases religious and non-religious identification is expressed in terms of belonging not believing.

7. Model life-long learning.

In a culture where open debate and hard questions are encouraged, teachers will often find there is much that they do not know. Professionalism in these circumstances means being open to the discussion moving into challenging territory and being willing to learn.

It may be appropriate for teachers to adopt the role of 'learner' alongside pupils thus modelling that to be adult means to accept that you don't always have all the answers. The words 'I don't know' can be powerful in the RE classroom especially if they are followed by the questions 'Is there an answer?' and if so, 'How could we find out?' In many cases teachers should be, in the words of Philosophy for Children, 'the guide on the side' rather than 'the sage on the stage'.

8. Promote balance.

The search for meaning and truth is central to education. When dealing with a controversial issue, teachers should encourage consideration of a balanced range of views, even if they find this uncomfortable on occasion.

Teachers provide pupils with cards with a wide range of comments and views and ask them to rank order them, justifying their own ideas to others in the group. The point is not comprehensiveness of coverage but is about helping pupils to understand that there is difference of opinion, which often rests on a key issue. So on abortion they need to understand the key difference on the status of a foetus if they are to get a balanced understanding of that debate.

The Religious Education Council of England and Wales

The Religious Education Council of England and Wales was established in 1973 to represent the collective interests of a wide variety of professional associations and faith communities in deepening and strengthening provision for religious education.

It provides a multi-faith forum where national organisations with an interest in supporting and promoting religious education in schools and colleges can share matters of common concern.

Accord Coalition	Institute of Jainology
Al-Khoei Foundation	Inter Faith Network for the United Kingdom
All Faiths and None	ISKCON Educational Services
Association of Christian Teachers - ACT	Islamic Academy
Association of RE Inspectors, Advisers and Consultants (AREIAC)	Jewish Teachers' Association
Association of University Lecturers in Religion and Education (UK)	Keswick Hall Trust
Barnabas in Schools (BRF)	The Methodist Church
Bloxham Project	Muslim Council of Britain
Board of Deputies of British Jews	National Association of Standing Advisory Councils on RE
British Association for the Study of Religions (BASR)	National Association of Teachers of RE
British Humanist Association	National Council of Hindu Temples (UK)
The Buddhist Society	National Society (Church of England) for Promoting Religious Education
Cambridge Muslim College	National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of the United Kingdom
Catholic Association of Teachers, Schools and Colleges	Network of Buddhist Organisations (UK)
Catholic Education Service	Network of Sikh Organisations
Christian Education / RE Today	The Oxford Foundation
Church of England Board of Education	Pagan Federation
Church in Wales Division for Education	REEP: The Religious Education and Environment Programme
Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints	Religious Education Movement, Wales (formerly the Christian Education Movement (Wales))
Churches Together in England	Roman Catholic National Board of RE Inspectors and Advisers
Clear Vision Trust	St Luke's College Foundation
Council of African and Afro-Caribbean Churches	Shap Working Party
Culham St Gabriel's	Stapleford Centre
Deanery of Great Britain and Ireland	Theology and Religious Studies UK (TRS UK)
The Farmington Institute	3FF, Three Faiths Forum
FBFE: The National Council of Faiths and Beliefs in Further Education	Tony Blair Faith Foundation
Federation of RE Centres	United Sikhs
Free Church Education Committee	Wales Association of SACREs - WASACRE
Hindu Council (UK)	World Congress of Faiths
Hindu Forum of Britain	Zoroastrian Trust Funds of Europe
Hockerill Educational Foundation	
Independent Schools Religious Studies Association	

Working together to strengthen the provision of religious education in schools, colleges and universities.