

Religious Education, Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

Advice for teachers using the RE syllabuses in Calderdale, Kirklees and Leeds

Why is RE relevant to equality, sexual orientation and gender identity?

Religion has helped to shape the culture, values and experience of humanity. Today the majority of people in the world, and in the UK, express at least some connection to faith and belief. Here in West Yorkshire, we are enriched by a wide diversity of people, cultures and beliefs and we can be strengthened and empowered by learning from each other.

In school, the study of RE (Beliefs, Philosophy and Ethics) enables students to:

- find out more about the beliefs and cultures that shape West Yorkshire and the world beyond;
- develop religious literacy through understanding concepts, beliefs and practices;
- explore informed and resilient responses to misunderstanding, stereotyping and division;
- discover their own journey of meaning, purpose and value;
- investigate challenging or controversial questions in a safe context;

Religion is about how people live their lives and faith communities embrace a range of different views and perspectives. Questions around sexual orientation and gender identity can be sensitive and controversial, partly because of their perceived relationship to faith and beliefs. All religions present a range of perspectives in their teachings and in the individual experiences and convictions of believers. In this context study of RE encourages and enables reasoned discussion about many ethical issues, among them: human rights; gender equality; gender identity; the nature of family; marriage and relationships; sexual orientation and same sex relationships.

The RE syllabuses in Calderdale, Kirklees and Leeds encourage and require open study of ethical issues. The non-statutory units of work on the West Yorkshire RE Hub provide opportunities for learning in these areas. To enquire about subscribing to the West Yorkshire RE Hub contact enquiries.learningservices@kirklees.gov.uk or ian.ross@kirklees.gov.uk.

Why is this a challenge?

One of the most important duties in a school is to provide a safe, inclusive and tolerant learning environment for all pupils. However, perhaps because of uncertainty and anxiety, many schools find it particularly challenging to engage with sexual orientation and gender identity. This matters in all phases of education.

At primary school this is about nurturing tolerance and understanding of difference and diversity. There are different families in every school. A significant proportion of children will grow up, in due course, to realise they themselves are gay or lesbian. All pupils will work as adults with people who

are different from themselves. The atmosphere and ethos of their primary school can support or handicap them on that journey.

At secondary level, students' own sexual orientation and identity will be emerging more clearly. It is vital that all young people feel included, affirmed and supported. Policies, staff awareness, pastoral care and curriculum provision are all key elements in ensuring school is a place of acceptance and nurture, not of secrecy and fear.

Of course, this is equally true for all learning communities, including those with a faith foundation. The Church of England underlined the duty on church schools to challenge homophobia in a report from the Archbishops' Council, 'Valuing All God's Children'. All faiths condemn discrimination and abuse of fellow human beings, even if there are differences around the acceptability of relationships or identity.

What are schools' legal duties?

As well as the moral imperatives, schools have a range of legal and professional duties.

The **Equality Act 2010** unified all equality laws into one code. It extends protection against discrimination to *age, disability, ethnicity, gender, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, religion and belief, sexual orientation*. The Public Sector Equality Duty requires schools to do all they can to eliminate discrimination, promote equality of opportunity and foster good relationships. This means they have a duty of care to all students and staff, including an obligation to challenge HBT (homophobic, biphobic, transphobic) attitudes or bullying at every level.

Schools must nurture the **SMSC** (spiritual, moral, social, and cultural) development of all pupils. Since 2014 this has been augmented by the promotion of **fundamental 'British' values**, including tolerance of diversity, mutual respect and individual liberty. This work is right in line with these obligations and is a key aspect of safeguarding pupils.

As part of its inspection process, **Ofsted** reports on SMSC and fundamental values. It focuses this through the notions of equality and safeguarding and often makes specific mention of schools' work on HBT bullying.

Advice on handling sensitive issues and questions

In summary, there are some key objectives which all schools need to implement. The practical application of these will vary according to the context and phase of education.

Staff confidence

- Ensure that all staff are aware of the priority of this work in school. Help them to feel empowered to discuss diversity with pupils in an age appropriate way and to respond to

issues that arise in the classroom. Information and discussion is the first and crucial step in gaining momentum.

The classroom environment

- Establish a classroom environment that is enquiring, open and respectful. This will include the agreement of ground rules for discussion.
- Ensure that the classroom is used as a safe place for open and respectful discussion on these and other controversial issues. Sometimes these may be built into the curriculum. On other occasions, a teacher may need to respond flexibly to topical questions or issues raised in class. It is crucial that this is supported and encouraged by senior leadership.

Clarity on the law

- Ensure pupils know that UK law is clear that it is wrong to discriminate against people because of their gender identity or sexual orientation. Everyone in the country is protected by this law.

Sensitivity to diversity

- Remember that in all schools, and most classes, there are pupils who are, or have family or friends who are, lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender. This includes pupils from faith backgrounds. Pupils may have questions about their gender identity at an early stage in their school career, or even pre-school.
- Be aware that much, if not most, HBT bullying is directed at pupils who are not gay, but who are perceived as different. They do not conform to narrow gender expectations, for example around sport or attitudes to work.
- Help pupils to understand about the diversity of faiths and beliefs, even within specific faiths and denominations.

Support and help

A **toolkit and audit** is available and regularly updated. It includes all recent guidance, sources of information and some key questions and ideas. It can be downloaded free from the Equalities page on Pennine Learning website <http://www.penninelearning.com/page.php?pageid=12>

An **Equality network** is open to all schools in Calderdale and Kirklees. This meets twice a year and includes support, training and resources to promote inclusion and diversity. Kirklees schools can access this through the Network Package. Tailored **staff training** is also available as a twilight or as

part of a training day. A specific transgender training session is also available. Contact enquiries@penninelearning.com

Barnardos Positive Identities Service run training and support project in Calderdale. They also organise a support group for LGBT young people aged 13-21 in Calderdale. For more information please contact Yasmeen Sharif at yasmeen.sharif@barnardos.org.uk

Calderdale schools can also access **Stonewall's national training programme** through the Train the Trainer day course. Details are on the national website www.stonewall.org.uk and courses are held in Calderdale and Kirklees. You can also email ian@penninelearning.com for details.

West Yorkshire RE Resources hub has many detailed units of work tailored to the local RE syllabuses and also including many other resources. Schools pay a one-off subscription of £200 lasting until 2019. For details please contact ian.ross@kirklees.gov.uk or enquiries.learningservices@kirklees.gov.uk

Websites

Stonewall	www.stonewall.org.uk	Wide range of education resources
Mermaids	www.mermaidsuk.org.uk	Support for Transgender
Gendered Intelligence	www.genderedintelligence.co.uk	Work and training with transgender
Barnardos	www.barnardos.org.uk	

Guidance prepared by Alastair Ross, December 2016.

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