

Discovery RE and Radicalisation

Can Discovery RE contribute to schools' work to prevent radicalisation and extremism?

The religious radicalisation of young people in Britain today is constantly in the news, with teenagers as young as 15 and 16 being made wards of court and being banned from travelling by a high court judge (20th March 2015) because of fears that they may go to join the Islamic State. Whilst these cases are highly publicised in the UK, England is not alone in this issue.

Can schools help prevent this and, more to the point, can high quality RE teaching play a role?

Ed Pawson, the Chair of NATRE (National Association of Teachers of Religious Education), stated at the inaugural national conference at the beginning of 2015, that the development of 'religious literacy' in young people in the UK could help. In addressing the conference, he said, "good religious education has never been more needed to help combat radicalisation". This shows the importance of the role RE can play, especially important when reports from the Department for Education have shown that the threat of radicalisation in UK schools is very real (Keeping children safe: updated statutory guidance for schools, Department for Education, May 2014 –accessed at <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/keeping-children-safe-updated-statutory-guidance-for-schools>).



Britain is now a multi-cultural and multi-faith society. Understanding this and the similarities and differences between faiths and belief-systems is vital if extreme views are not to be accepted by our children and young people without critical thought.

Effective religious education is vital, and particularly one employing an enquiry approach as recommended by OFSTED, as this will equip children to gain both knowledge and the skills of evaluative thinking. The critical thinking intrinsically necessary throughout the Discovery RE scheme of work, for example, encourages children to take nothing at face value and to delve deeper into the beliefs of the religion or belief system being studied. This should help them start to identify when a religious view or interpretation of one, seems extreme. Children are taught to question, to apply knowledge, to consider consequences of beliefs as they are put into practice, and to reflect on their own beliefs.

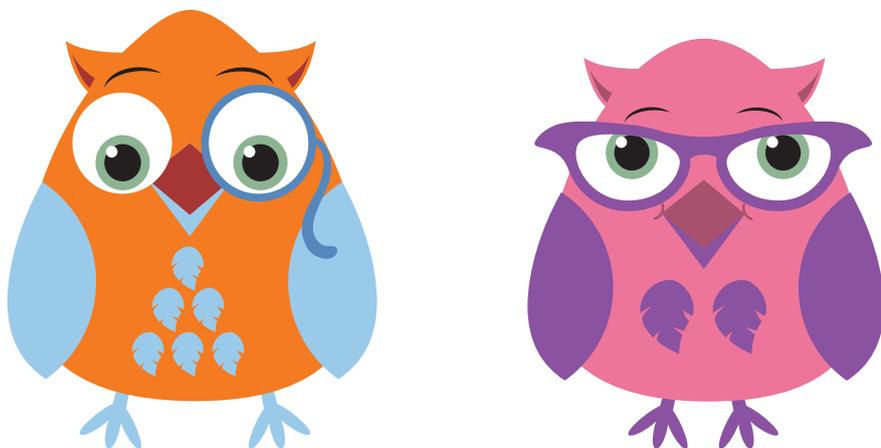
Discovery RE enquiries are designed to enable children to do this by starting in their own experience, travelling into the world of religion and belief, critically applying the knowledge gained to the key enquiry question, and then returning to their own world to consider the impact of the study for them.

This process aims to provide a firm basis on which to secure their own emerging beliefs and views as they grow older, independent of the influences which may come at them through the internet or media, as well as to build respect and empathy for others.

The reasons behind a young person's submission to radicalisation are complex. Preventing this takes much more intervention than RE alone can offer; but it would not be unreasonable to suggest that excellent teaching using an impartial and unbiased RE scheme of work, would help build knowledge and understanding, the ability to consider and discern, think evaluatively and approach others with empathy and at least tolerance. This is what we hope Discovery RE can help teachers to do.

In October 2013, Ofsted published a report entitled 'Religious education: realising the potential'.

The report stated that religious education lessons make 'an important contribution to pupils' development, both personal and academic...by promoting respect and empathy, which are increasingly important in an ever more globalised and multicultural 21st century'. In addition, the "Prevent for Schools" document (www.preventforschools.org) recommends several steps on learning, teaching and the curriculum:



“Teaching and the curriculum therefore requires some thought to be given to teacher style. A curriculum and pedagogy for learners to support them ... could include:

- promoting knowledge, skills and understanding to build the resilience of learners;
- exploring controversial issues;
- recognising local needs;
- challenging extremist narratives;
- promoting universal rights;
- promoting critical analysis; and
- promoting pro-social values.

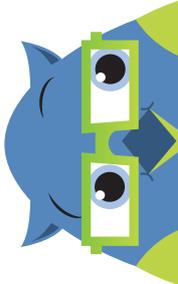
Schools can also help learners develop the skills to critically evaluate controversial issues. They provide safe places for learners and they provide opportunities for learners to meet people from backgrounds other than their own.”

Discovery RE promotes both knowledge and skills through the investigative approach integral to the enquiries. Controversial/sensitive issues (such as jihad, life after death, levels of commitment, ‘truth’) are investigated and stereotypes and media-influence are challenged. Opportunities are given to maximise learning through local community resources such as speakers from different faiths and visits to places of worship.

Throughout Discovery RE, critical analysis is embedded and utilised by the children, and respect for those of different faiths and beliefs is expected and nurtured.

A second area that the “Prevent” document tackles is “Teaching Controversial Issues”. It states: “Effectively tackling controversial issues can help learners challenge the perceptions and misconceptions of their own and others’. To do this classroom practices can include:

- developing questioning techniques to open up safe debate;
- building confidence to promote honesty about a plurality of views;
- ensuring freedom of expression and freedom from threat;
- debating fundamental moral and human rights principles;
- promoting open respectful dialogue; and
- affirming multiple identities.”



Discovery RE tackles many controversial issues including the possibility and status of miracles, reincarnation, the existence of god, the feasibility of eternity etc. Questioning is used throughout. It first appears in the key question which begins each enquiry, and is answered by the learners in their assessment tasks, and then continues throughout the planning itself as at every stage, examples of questions are given to scaffold the learning and move the children forward through the enquiry.

Freedom of expression is encouraged at every step and especially in the sixth lesson of each enquiry where children are specifically asked to express how the learning has affected them personally.

Scenarios are considered to debate moral and human rights such as reconciling the belief in the sanctity of life with e.g. a role in the armed forces. The investigations encourage children to pose their own ideas and questions. They are encouraged to listen carefully to their peers and believers through the use of speakers and film clips. This allows them to consider a multitude of views and beliefs, whilst receiving respect for their own.

It's evident that high quality religious education is becoming increasingly important in schools to equip our children as global citizens.

At a time when the world's beauty and mystery is often overshadowed by the ugliness and cruelty of human power-struggles, we hope Discovery RE will support the sort of RE that will empower children to look at the world through discerning eyes with compassion and empathy.

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