

Dealing with diversity: practical tips for primary and secondary RE

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In 2018, the Commission on RE (CoRE) released its final report after a year-long investigation into the teaching of RE. The report made many recommendations, one of which was approaching the teaching of RE through the religion and worldviews approach. Many schools have been grappling with what this approach might look like. One of the key features of this approach is the teaching of diversity within religious and non-religious worldviews.

As part of NATRE's curriculum symposium, we talked about our curriculum design within our primary and secondary schools. It was interesting to see how we both approached the teaching of diversity within religious and non-religious worldviews in similar ways. One of the key similarities within our curriculum design was the use of stem sentences to support children in using the language of diversity within the topics that they are studying. Within this article, we will discuss our approaches and the differences that they have made to the knowledge that our children acquire within the study of RE.

Katie's approach

I am lucky enough to teach RE across my primary school from Early Years Foundation Stage to Year 6. When the CoRE's final report was published, I was drawn to the information that talked about the teaching of diversity within the worldviews that the children study. I have to admit that I felt this was something that I already did, but in hindsight I have realised that I was not doing this in enough depth.

In my previous school, I taught a Year 1 class and we had been introduced to White Rose maths and were using this alongside some of the features of Shanghai maths. This structure encourages teachers to use stem sentences so that children can share their knowledge within the classroom.

After using these stem sentences within my maths lessons, I realised that they were having a significant impact upon the knowledge that the children were able to share. This inspired me to think carefully about how we could use stem sentences to share knowledge in RE when I moved to my current school.

Within the Early Years Foundation Stage and Key Stage 1 classes that I taught RE to, I noticed that many of the children were sharing their knowledge in RE by starting their sentences in the following way: 'Christians believe that ...', 'Muslims believe that ...' or 'Jewish people think that ...' I realised that through the language the children were using, they were leading themselves into thinking that all people from the same worldview believed the same thing.

As a Key Stage 1 specialist, I am a big believer that young children can do big things and can understand big concepts. I felt that if we could change the vocabulary that was used in the younger year groups, we could ensure that the language of diversity would move with the children throughout the school. For this reason, I decided to start with our very youngest children, teaching them stem sentences that they could use to answer questions and share their knowledge.

We started with the following:

- ▶ Some Muslims ...
- ▶ Most Christians try to ...
- ▶ Some believers think that ...
- ▶ Many Jewish people try to ...

As a school, we soon noticed that these stem sentences were having a huge impact on the knowledge and language that our children were sharing. It also enabled the children to ask questions about the diversity within places of worship and practices linked to key religious festivals.

We are now in the fourth year of implementing our curriculum, since adding these stem sentences when the children were further down the school, and we have noticed that they naturally use 'Some', 'Many' and 'Most' as sentence starters when they are sharing their knowledge within the classroom. This language is also evident within the children's writing and has supported them in their understanding of the diversity that they encounter when they speak to real 'livers' of religious and non-religious worldviews.

In Key Stage 2, pupils have taken this further by using the stem sentences to form questions to ask to visitors to the school. This has supported them in learning more about the diversity of views that the people from these worldviews have, and ensures that they are not surprised by this. I cannot believe what a huge impact adding a few simple stem sentences has had on children's understanding of diversity and the vocabulary that they use within the RE classroom.

Dawn's approach

During a session at the Edge Hill University Religious Education Summer School in 2022 I was inspired to make an activity to make explicit to students the possible diversity within religions. I wanted to give them the language that they can use to simply show that there is variation in beliefs and practices. For example, 'Many Christians celebrate Christmas on 25 December, some celebrate it on 7 January.' Among students coming to us in Year 7, I have found this to

be a concept that they have not explored very much, and it is something that can be used across religions and beliefs.

How can we talk about diversity within religions?

- ▶ All ...
- ▶ Many ...
- ▶ Some ...
- ▶ A few ...
- ▶ One ...



I decided to start with their own context, their year group in their school, to help them understand the language.

I presented them with the task below, starting with asking them to complete the 'All Year 7s ...' sentence. This is a tricky task as I wanted them to come up with something that applied to Year 7, but *only* to Year 7s.

Year 7 students at school

- ▶ All Year 7s ...
- ▶ Many Year 7s ...
- ▶ Some Year 7s ...
- ▶ A few Year 7s ...
- ▶ One Year 7 ...

They then completed the other sentences. We found that the most difficult ones to complete were the 'All ...' and the 'One ...' I discussed this with them, and said that when we use these when talking about religion there are actually very few things that we can say that are correct using 'All ...' This is an important conceptual development in their study of religions, where they may have previously spoken in generalisations. The more the students develop a sense of diversity, the deeper their understanding of the reality of a religion.

- ▶ All Year Hindus ...
- ▶ Many Hindus ...
- ▶ Some Hindus ...
- ▶ A few Hindus ...
- ▶ One Hindu ...



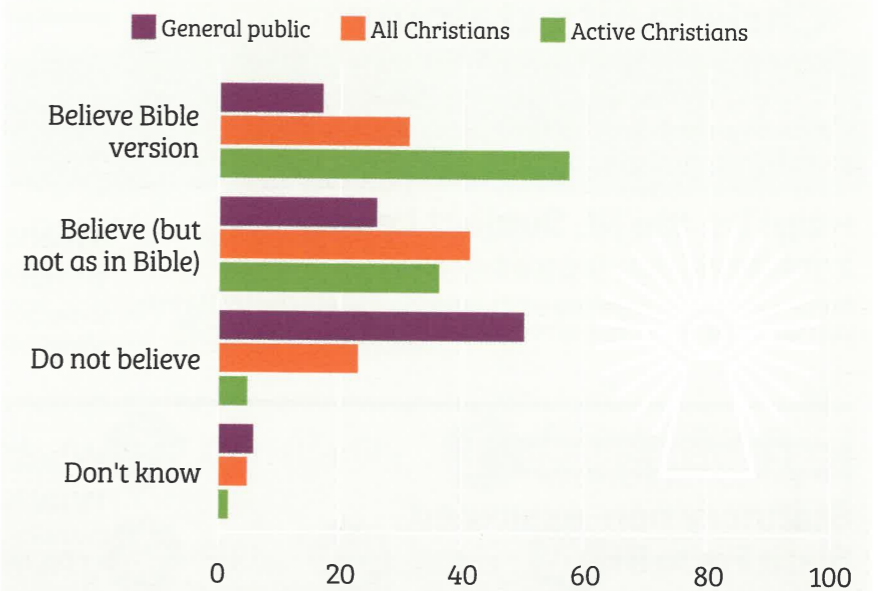
We then discussed how we know which of the sentence stems we should use. I admitted that in much of my teaching I use 'Some ...' because we do not have data on the exact proportions. This was a challenge to my own practice. How does the language we use with students matter in terms of their understanding of internal diversity? It is easy to say 'Christians believe ...' but is this really correct? It has made me think about the difference between doctrine and the reality of beliefs. At GCSE level, students are mainly expected to write about doctrine and only talk about denominational doctrinal differences. While we plan and teach them to understand this diversity, we only teach them to focus on these and not the reality, except for counter-arguments in evaluation questions. I plan to introduce students to this so they can see how doctrine is part of but can also conflict with real-life beliefs and practices.

Having an understanding of this also helps to address controversy within religions. Students can get perspective on minority views, and it can also lead to the important discussion in RE about what makes you a X (insert religion/worldview). Can you be religious and not do anything that the religion teaches? Are extremists members of their religion? Who gets to say?

I have found that using these sentence stems has enabled me to reflect on my own teaching and enabled students to have structured language, but most importantly highlighted the diversity of lived religion around the world.

Belief in the resurrection of Jesus Christ

% of people asked about the Bible story of Christ rising from the dead



Source: Savanta ComRes survey of 2,010 British adults for BBC local radio

From BBC News at www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-39153121 ('Resurrection did not happen, say quarter of Christians', BBC News, 9 April 2017)

This structure works well when we look at survey data such as that shown here, as part of using the discipline of social sciences in our lessons. When interpreting data, I want to give students the language to be able to explain what they see. This foundation activity allows them to express the findings clearly so we can then go on to consider why this may be the case.

We also introduced this to Year 8 at the start of their first unit on Hinduism (Hindu dharma), which helped structure their language.

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