

Visit to Bullers Wood School on 17th October 2014

This visit was undertaken by Mrs Penny Smith-Orr, the RE consultant, The Rev Roger Bristow, Chair of SACRE and Mrs Samantha Barnett, the Jewish representative. We were given a very comprehensive document which is the latest policy from the RE department and were greeted by the head teacher at the entrance. Rev Bristow was taken to observe a Year 10 collective worship (CW) led by Mrs Van Teutem his report is as follows: "She introduced the worship by referring to different traditions of meditation, mentioning specifically Buddhist and Christian practices of meditation. She then distributed to everyone present a piece of chocolate or a grape with the instruction to hold onto it until told to do otherwise. Once everyone had received their piece we were instructed to place it in our mouths and to focus on the sensations we experienced whilst sitting silently and breathing slowly. She went on to talk about being aware of ourselves and of the world around us and of the need to take time to focus our thinking and truly appreciate our place within creation. I was impressed with the respect of the students and with the very obvious impact this experience had on them.

I personally found it very enlightening (and actually took some of the idea in a pre-school service the following Tuesday morning!). As collective worship I felt that it took seriously the fact that everyone present was coming to this from different backgrounds and perspectives. It didn't require any kind of religious commitment but did engender a sense of the numinous. It was very effective."

The other visitors were taken to a CW for Years 8 and 9. This was on the theme of Life is a Challenge and was led by Mrs Lorraine Sansom the Science teacher who showed a series of pictures of a walk in the Lake District which involved hill walking and described how she had felt. She also talked about others for whom life is a challenge that had not deterred them from making great achievements and inspired the pupils to try their hardest to overcome difficulties and make the best of themselves. Each week the pupils encounter a variety of collective worship methods including in Tutor groups, with material for thinking themes worked out by Mrs Helen van Teutem, and every pupil would have experienced the CW that we saw during the week.

We were then taken on a tour of several RE lessons covering Year groups 9,8,12 and 11. This was a fascinating insight into the progression of RE through the school and we were warmly welcomed into each class and between each one we were collected and delivered by a series of teachers who we were able to chat with about the place that RE has in the school. Mr Stone was involved as a member of SACRE in the discussions regarding the new syllabus for Bromley and has updated their curriculum as necessary.

The first group that we saw was using the philosophy for children method and discussing the pros and cons of abortion, next we saw a creative lesson based on the story of Moses where the pupils were weaving paper baskets as their activity. The next class had just finished a guided meditation as part of a unit on Buddhism and were able to discuss with us what they had felt and what they had gained from the activity. We then got involved in a high level discussion of the philosophical arguments for belief with Year 12. In Year 11 they were discussing the similarities and differences and reasons for the celebration of different faith festivals.

After this thought provoking tour of the classes we went to the library for some refreshment and to view a display of work including some entries for the True Meaning of Islam competition, work on the Holocaust and other RE work. Pupils, the head boy and girl and teachers came to talk to us about the activities of the RE department. Among other things I had an interesting discussion with a pupil who had taken part in the government scheme to take pupils to Auschwitz.

We then had a series of talks from pupils in each year group who had prepared power point presentations on what they were doing in RE and what the impact of this was on their life. Some of the pupils had taken their RE GCSE in year 9 and were able to speak about how this helped them in other areas of school work. All the pupils expressed tolerance and respect for others and talked about how they had formulated their own philosophies of life which they had discussed with their families and others. This was extremely impressive and the presentations will be shown as part of the training at the next SACRE meeting.

This visit was very interesting and showed how important RE is and what an impact it can have on the pupils and the ethos of the school. Mrs Barnett commented that she felt she could not visit another secondary school as this had been so impressive.

As we left we had a quick discussion about a possible 6th Form RE conference to be held at the school. It was a very uplifting morning and we thank Mr Stone and Bullers Wood staff for the kind invitation and their warm welcome.