

Effective religious education and interfaith dialogue: Redbridge Ambassadors of Faith and Belief (AFaB)

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Brief description

The case study offers an insight into an outstanding and innovative scheme led by Newbury Park Primary School whereby sixth-form students from schools in the borough have been trained to support religious education and promote social cohesion by sharing their faith experience with children in local primary schools.

Overview – the steering group’s message

‘Primary teachers are continually seeking to enrich religious education (RE). They know the value of experiential learning and giving pupils the opportunity to encounter an authentic voice of faith and belief. Secondary schools seek to support their sixth-form students by providing good quality volunteering opportunities as well as enhancing their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. The “Ambassadors of Faith and Belief Scheme” meets both sets of needs by training sixth-form students to talk with primary pupils about their faith background. The ambassadors represent a diverse range of faith perspectives, traditions and beliefs.

Primary RE sessions are enriched through the inter-generational encounter and dialogue between the students and pupils. Direct access to teenage “experts” provides a unique and personal experience, promoting a sense of awe and wonder in the primary classroom. Crucially, teachers report that these sessions promote progress and enhance the quality of learning in RE. The impact on this scheme for the ambassadors has proved significant in a wide range of ways, not only in terms of consolidation of key skills necessary for university and work, but also in increasing confidence and providing valuable opportunities for personal and spiritual exploration.’

The good practice in detail

The Ambassadors of Faith and Belief (AFaB) pilot was conceived in 2011 by the London Borough of Redbridge's Standing Advisory Council for Religious Education (SACRE) in response to needs identified by primary and secondary colleagues.



The concept was developed by a steering group at Newbury Park Primary School in collaboration with Beal Secondary School and Ilford County High School, as well as primary schools across the borough. The ambassadors are a group of sixth-form students from a range of religious and non-religious backgrounds who have been trained to deliver sessions about their faith in local primary schools.

AFaB was designed to address three local needs:

- **To support good quality RE** by providing authentic representatives of local faith communities who could work with children in bringing the subject to life. At the heart of the AFaB scheme is the recognition that primary subject leaders were looking to provide their children with hands-on authentic experience of the diversity of religion and belief within their community. Redbridge benefits from a very diverse faith community but it was not always easy to find representatives who could communicate effectively with children. It was recognised that sixth-form students, trained and well prepared, could provide that authentic experience in ways that would capture the interest and imagination of children.
- **To provide sixth-form students with opportunities to extend their personal and social skills** by undertaking volunteering activities as they prepared for the next stage in their education. A goal of the scheme is to provide sixth-form students with an opportunity to extend their own skills and develop their confidence and aspirations. Building confidence is a key part of the scheme. It has helped the students to articulate their own beliefs in dialogue with others as part of the process of helping them build their own sense of identity.
- **To help promote social cohesion** and sustain and extend the RE subject community within Redbridge. The scheme is also concerned to help young people develop the understanding, skills and attitudes that will enable them to counter prejudice and extremism, and live constructively within a diverse community. The promotion of social harmony was close to heart of the scheme. It has also come to be recognised that the capacity of the local authority to support RE is being stretched and the local schools community needs to develop its own resources and networks. The development of the AFaB scheme is proving invaluable as a way of developing subject support across the borough.

One of the ambassadors, Anusha from the Muslim tradition, explained that she volunteered because she wanted to provide a positive role model of her faith in primary schools and

tackle stereotypes about her religion with children. She wanted to help children understand the diversity within her faith. In the process she found that the scheme extended her own understanding of her faith as well as developing her confidence and skills.

The AFaB scheme outlines its aims, how it was developed, the pattern of recruitment and training and its impact in a [report produced in June 2013](#).

The Impact of the Scheme



The pilot scheme has been an outstanding success and will be extended in 2013/14. Those involved have recognised the huge impact on primary pupils and teachers, the AFaB ambassadors themselves, and on the wider RE community in Redbridge.

As Julia, a leading practitioner and member of the AFaB steering group, explained: 'The ambassadors have given primary children the opportunity of a powerful and authentic personal encounter and dialogue with very positive role models of faith from a diversity of backgrounds.' Talking to the children themselves, they said that before the way RE was taught was very traditional. Meeting the ambassadors means they now recognise that religion is modern and that different people have different ways of living their faith. The ambassadors can relate to the children's own culture; they are open to questions and talk very directly about their faith in ways the children can understand.

Some of the primary teachers involved commented that, very importantly, the ambassadors give the children who share their religion a more positive image of their faith, helping to raise their self-esteem. One of the ambassadors, Melda, had noticed that the children will often ask important questions about their faith which they might find hard to discuss with parents and carers or other adults.

‘They are really enthusiastic and great role models for their religion.’

— Primary school teacher

From talking with some of the primary RE subject leaders it is clear that already the AFaB scheme has proved a great resource for supporting colleagues. The teachers themselves have learnt a lot and developed their confidence in teaching RE. One teacher said: 'We have gained a much more meaningful sense of the importance which faith plays in the lives of people in our community'.

One of the most successful elements has been the rich and diverse impact that the AFaB scheme has had on the students involved. Appendix 3 of the [AfaB report](#) shows a very powerful statement of this impact. The impact has been at a number of different levels:

- Many of the ambassadors spoke about the effect being involved in the AFaB scheme has on their own faith and on their relationship with their parents and carers. Researching for their presentations and preparing to talk to younger children has helped them reflect on the significance and meaning of their religion. Many have developed a deeper understanding of the diversity within their faith. For example, two of the Sikh students, Prabhvir and Kabir, who have quite contrasting approaches

to their faith, worked together to develop a joint presentation offering different perspectives on Sikh identity. For some, the scheme offered the opportunity to discuss openly issues about their faith and identity with their parents and carers in ways they had not done before. As one ambassador explained, 'it has taken our family discussions about our faith to a whole new level.'

- From the challenging interview and selection process through to the expectation that the ambassadors organised their own programme of visits, a key success has been the way the AFaB scheme has developed a wide range of the students' personal, social and communication skills. A major challenge for the students was to learn how to communicate to a younger audience. As Shaheda and Abdul explained: 'We had to be trained how to deliver our presentations in a child-friendly way. We watched children's television and worked on our hand gestures, eye contact, pace and use of voice'. Crucially, the whole AFaB process developed the students' self-confidence and sense of esteem.
- For many, the involvement in the scheme has had a more direct impact of their plans for the future. Hina spoke about the way it has helped her re-think her university choices and focus on a career where mentoring or teaching plays a part. Being an ambassador has made her feel much more comfortable about her sense of identity and she is now keen to become involved in outreach work into less culturally diverse areas. Janushan has been inspired to start an ICT club in some primary schools and, as a result, now has the opportunity to take part in a summer school at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.
- The opportunity to take part in a high-quality volunteering exercise has strengthened the students' CVs and preparation for higher education. As Aditi said, 'It has helped me prepare for university interviews. You never know what question the children will ask and you need to become confident in thinking on your feet'. Christman added that the scheme was a good way to prepare for going into medicine – understanding that you are going to have to communicate with a wide range of different people.

The London Borough of Redbridge and its SACRE have a long tradition of strong support for RE. As with many other local authorities at the present time, this level of support is now under threat.



Local SACRE members are clear that the AFaB programme is a springboard for securing the high profile of RE in the borough. The ambassadors are part of a network of new ways of working, alongside events like the Youth SACRE Conference, to sustain RE into the future.

Redbridge SACRE has been fully behind the scheme which will be rooted in their locally agreed syllabus. The plans to

extend the scheme in 2013/14 are part of the wider strategy for supporting the teaching of RE within the local authority and building relationships with local academies.

The Keys to Success

Frankie Chissim and Julia Diamond-Conway from Newbury Park Primary – the two main organisers of the scheme – have undertaken a thorough review of the pilot to identify its impact but also analyse the keys to its success. These keys included the following:

- **Effective leadership and coordination** – from the outset, the scheme identified a very clear set of aims and established very careful structures to enable the plans to succeed. Securing the support of SACRE and the headteachers of the two secondary schools involved as well as the primary subject leaders was crucial and very forthcoming. The head of Newbury Park Primary developed the [AFaB website](#) to promote and manage the programme. A pilot was established to trial the idea and, following an assessment of the impact of the scheme, this is now being rolled out more widely across the borough. This pilot has been carefully evaluated and many of the plans for the future recognise areas that could be developed further. The two main organisers have dedicated considerable time to leading and managing the scheme to secure its effectiveness.
- **A strong recruitment and training programme** – at the heart of the success of the scheme was the very rigorous and extensive recruitment and training programme. Potential ambassadors were given a [detailed job description and person specification](#). Successful applicants took part in a three day training programme to help them understand how to work with children and develop their own subject expertise and presentation skills. The training also included opportunities for personal reflection and exploration of the students' own beliefs as well as practical sessions with pupils.
- **A culture of high expectations** – alongside the rigorous selection and training programme, a decision was taken to place a high level of responsibility on the ambassadors to manage their own involvement in the scheme. A personal profile of each ambassador was placed on the scheme website and primary schools contacted the ambassadors directly to request a visit. It was up to the students themselves to manage their time and organise their transport and resources. Giving students this level of personal responsibility secured the high expectations the students had about their role.
- **A programme of ongoing support for the ambassadors** – as Julia explained: 'As coordinators, Frankie and I are in contact with our ambassadors a lot! We are there to help with any queries linked to the scheme no matter how large or small. We will take action throughout by ensuring that particular ambassadors meet with us for rehearsals or discussions and to go through presentations. Just as importantly, if we get any feedback from subject leaders about ways the ambassadors could improve their presentation, we will always pass this on. This bespoke, continuous support has been essential to make the scheme runs responsibly. I don't think we knew how much of our time we would need to give to this support before this academic year, but it's important to let anyone thinking of starting a similar scheme know that you can't just train up ambassadors and let them go; you've got to be fully on the ball with them throughout.'

The way forward

Having evaluated the pilot, the steering group has identified a range of ways in which they want to take the AFaB scheme forward into the future, including:



- involving more secondary schools within the scheme and increasing the number of ambassadors – they intend to increase the number to 45 in 2013/14
- recruiting and training a more diverse range of ambassadors so that the scheme can have maximum impact and be truly inclusive – for example, extending the range of representatives from different Christian traditions as well as ambassadors from humanist and non-religious backgrounds
- providing outreach so that other local authorities can benefit from the scheme
- providing a greater variety of presentations that are linked to specific aspects of faith and belief that may be studied in primary classrooms
- working more closely with primary teachers to help them build the resource of the ambassadors more strongly into their planning and classroom practice
- making the ambassadors available to visit Key Stage 3 classes
- utilising video and Skype to ensure that the impact of this scheme is as far-reaching as possible.

The school's background

The Redbridge Ambassadors of Faith and Belief scheme (AFaB) is led by Newbury Park Primary school in association with the [London Borough of Redbridge SACRE](#). [Newbury Park Primary School](#) is a much larger than average primary school. A very large majority of the pupils on the school roll are from minority ethnic backgrounds. The largest groups are of Tamil and Indian heritage. During the pilot phase, the scheme benefited from the strong support of a number of local primary schools as well as [Beal Secondary School](#) and [Ilford County High School](#). These schools continue to provide excellent support while the scheme is being rolled out more widely.

Are you thinking of putting these ideas into practice; or already doing something similar that could help other providers; or just interested? We'd welcome your views and ideas. Get in touch [here](#).

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