

A distinctive angle on community cohesion

In a recent report (Good Professional Development in Schools, March 2010) Ofsted noted that 'school-based professional development, with judicious use of external support, proved to be the most effective means of improving staff skills'. This observation underscores the approach adopted by *REsilience/AtGyfnrthu*.

Every school is unique – in its location, its social circumstances, its student and staff bodies. Every school has its own distinctive priorities. *REsilience/AtGyfnrthu* is a process, not a curriculum or a method: still less a dogma. It aims to offer something stimulating, individualised and helpful to every school that participates through allocating each one its own trained mentor. In this way we believe we can make a positive contribution to the way a school addresses some of the issues surrounding community cohesion through its provision for religious education.

The core offer is:

- a tool that enables a school to evaluate the existing levels of confidence in addressing contentious issues that arise in RE lessons;
- a range of easily accessible materials for teachers covering areas where their confidence may be low;
- help to identify the first priority areas where a school can assist teachers of RE to build up their confidence as necessary;
- support for the development of a practical action plan to address the identified priorities.

Geoffrey Penzer

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Project manager for the *REsilience/AtGyfnrthu* programme

Outlook for May



- Shortlisting, interviewing and recruitment of mentors will be completed
- Active promotion of the programme to schools and the opportunity to register to take part will start
- Quality review and then finalisation of the materials will continue: so will piloting the programme in Wales

Achievements during April



- Mentor recruitment is on track. There was a good response to the national advertising for applicants
- The suite of materials developed by the project is being quality checked by a range of experts for accuracy and balance
- Piloting the programme in Wales has started

Be part of the action



- Schools wishing to be kept abreast of the programme as it develops should register their interest through the sign-up page of the *REsilience/AtGyfnrthu* website. In addition to general updates, this will ensure that they receive full details about how to enrol on the programme.

Flexible friendship

REsilience/AtGyfnnerthu has already been piloted in a group of English schools and is currently being piloted in Wales. The first, unsurprising, conclusion from the experience in England is that the interests and priorities of the schools involved were all different.

When asked to rate their confidence in a range of about 35 aspects of Religious Education, only one question* received the perfect score ('very confident') from every respondent. At the other end of the scale, two issues where several schools expressed a lack of confidence were finding good external speakers on a range of relevant issues and establishing effective collaboration with parents when dealing with contentious topics that can arise in RE.

We do not, of course, claim that this is a statistically significant result from which to draw general conclusions – the sample size is far too small for such confidence. But what is certainly encouraging is that the self evaluation questionnaire we have developed was generally found to be quick and simple to complete and illuminating too. Schools have found that it throws up questions and ideas that are well worth considering. Completing it with colleagues – whether trained RE teachers or others who are involved in RE provision – has provided a pretext for reflection about important issues that had previously tended to be overlooked.

The project has generated a set of materials linked to each of the self evaluation questions. We have called them Gateways. They are not the last or definitive word on anything. Rather they are quickly assimilated pieces aimed at teachers who lack full confidence in a particular area. They must provide a secure starting point and so are being submitted to checking by experts – members of the *REsilience/AtGyfnnerthu* Advisory Group and others. This process is under way.

* *How confident are you that you demonstrate respect for different cultures, religions and beliefs in your teaching?*

For someone who wants to go further, each Gateway contains a range of Signposts to additional resources. Some enable a teacher to go deeper into the topic. Others suggest where materials directly relevant to teaching can be found, or ways to expand understanding and make links to different areas of the curriculum. The pilot schools have given us positive feedback on the draft Gateways, and a wide range of staff say that they have found them really useful.

As part of the *REsilience/AtGyfnnerthu* programme, all participating schools are offered a visit from their mentor. The timing of this visit is arranged as far as possible to be the most convenient for the school (usually in the person of the RE subject leader). Its purposes are to discuss the completed self evaluation questionnaire and to help the school decide its two or three top priorities for action. There can then be a preliminary discussion about action planning, with the mentor providing advice on the mechanics of the process, if this is helpful.

Subsequently, mentors keep in touch with their schools in order to answer queries and suggest ways that draft action plans might be strengthened. The plan belongs, naturally, to the school not *REsilience/AtGyfnnerthu* or the mentor, and so it is the school that makes final decisions about what it contains. In order to ensure that it is consistent with and supportive of the school's wider development plans, and is not seen simply as something for the RE teachers in isolation, we ask for it to be 'signed off' by the headteacher or some other member of the leadership team. In some of the pilot schools this involvement has been particularly fruitful, as headteachers have recognised the possible application of our approach in other parts of their schools.

So, overall the basic process seems to work. Now we must make it even better.

Our mentor ... 'was excellent at helping us to highlight the needs we knew we had as a department but had not voiced'

'The action plan needs to be very closely linked to the teaching and learning in the department – it was easy to get excited and plan something that wasn't directly linked to the curriculum'

'Such issues as are dealt with by REsilience are all too easily pushed aside ... involvement in the project heightens awareness for all involved and gives us 'permission' to spend time on it'