

CHALLENGING *our* UNCONSCIOUS BIAS

For use by teachers preparing to teach RSE at primary or secondary level

"They should know our communities and culture better. Invest more in knowing and educating our communities by taking into consideration our own values and ways too." We could begin with "A meeting where we could teach teachers about our culture ... and where teachers could teach us more about your system" – Parent of Faith, Sheffield

"RSE should "be inclusive reflect the community we serve" and should "allow pupils of different faiths to have a voice that is empowering and affirming their faith" while also providing for "pupils who don't belong to any particular faith" – Sheffield Teacher

"It really feels like home and school are at odds in this area [sex education] and that even initiatives to involve faith communities and the new RSE curriculum delivery are from a position of schools feeling their position is ideologically stronger and that faith communities should just change with the times. I am guilty of this myself!" – Sheffield teacher

"We do not have diverse staff, we have no Muslim staff." – Sheffield Teacher

In order to teach RSE inclusively, we need to overcome barriers. These include bias. We are all biased. This bias is often unconscious and unintentional.

We all have the capacity to hold prejudice and unintentionally cause harm by perpetuating stereotypes, stigmas and misconceptions. This is true of teachers too. Most teachers acknowledge that they have existing assumptions about faith communities. Teachers told us they want to address these perceptions and become more confident in broaching religious questions, and understanding how children with faith backgrounds may experience their lessons.

This resource will help you prepare to teach by reducing your unconscious bias. It will help you become more aware of voices and perspectives that you might not have heard before. It will help you avoid some wrong assumptions about how children and families from diverse backgrounds might approach sex and relationships.

By addressing our biases, we can ensure we are teaching RSE in a culturally and religiously sensitive, trauma-informed way.

In this way, we can try to ensure that all students will feel included, supported and understood as they navigate their bodies, their relationships, and the world around them.

This resource is designed to aid your learning, and contains a practical guide to approaching the RSE activities in a constructively critical and unbiased way.

Underpinning Research

This resource is informed by research with teachers, parents and communities, and young people with religious backgrounds. We found that many parents of faith felt their children's teachers did not understand their faith and/or culture, and wanted this to change. Many teachers also shared this concern, acknowledging that their insight into the faith of the students they are teaching is lacking:

- Some parents want to be better understood, with some parents feeling misunderstood, misrepresented, misjudged or ignored.
- Some teachers lack confidence in their cultural sensitivity and knowledge and would like to be better equipped and more confident in diverse classrooms.

Additional Resources

Women Making Choices: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vO8dF3_upr8

This short film:

- Challenges one of the most persistent myths about faith communities and sex relationships, specifically in relation to Muslim women in Britain. It features young Muslim women who are making choices about who, when and whether to marry.
- This film also explores ways of broaching potentially awkward topics of sex and relationships, in this case through storytelling and creative writing exercises. Some of these ideas can be translated to RSE teaching, as we show in the Resources on this website on Healthy Relationships, which includes an exercise on Fairy Tales.

What is unconscious bias?

Definition: Unconscious bias refers the ways that our societal upbringing influences discrimination and prejudice against individuals or groups based on their (for example) race, ethnicity gender, sexuality, ability, faith and age.

The term 'unconscious bias' recognises that our belief systems, the way we view others and ourselves is largely influenced by our life experiences, our relationship with power and privilege, and our compassionate access to information that questions our worldview.

Unconscious bias can lead us to treat other people unfairly, without meaning to. It can translate to things such as; stereotyping, harassment, hostility and aggression.

Examples of unconscious bias can include:

- Making immediate judgments about a person based on physical appearance
- Assuming someone has or doesn't have certain characteristics due to their identity,
- Feeling superior to someone because of your identity or background,
- Expecting all people from a group or demographic to be, feel or act the same

Reducing unconscious bias is linked to wider efforts to decolonise education. This might make you feel uncomfortable at times. This is a normal part of the process of challenging unconscious bias.

PRACTICAL TIPS FOR THE CLASSROOM

DO SAY

'Does anyone in this room want to talk about how their faith matters to this topic?' Or, 'Could I get you to think about how your own religious beliefs guide you in this area?' Or, 'Could I get you to think about how religious family members or religious leaders guide you in this area?'

These questions, which you may invite individuals to speak or think more privately about, allow you to broach the very real relevance of religion to sexual relationships, while recognising that people have choices and that their views and experiences vary.

'This issue might affect any of us.' Or, 'You might meet someone who believes this: you'll need to know what to say.'

Broaching subjects in this way, you will be able to help children to appreciate and respect the diversity of people that exist in the classroom, and ultimately in the world. Understanding other people's beliefs, values, lifestyles and experiences can foster tolerance and integration.

'If anything comes up that you feel uncomfortable about, you should feel free to say.' You may also find more specific ways of putting this and inviting feedback, such as 'If I've said anyone's name wrong, please let me know.'

Be open to feedback from people of faith and people of colour, and others too. Make it possible for them to give feedback. Be a role model by inviting feedback and taking it well.

Faith, religion, Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Mormon, Hindu and other religions and denominations, in no particular order.

Diverse classrooms include many different faiths, and many different approaches to faith.

'I'm aware that the colour of peoples' skin will affect their life experience.'

People with different skin colours may need specific support. Since many people of faith are also members of racial minorities, some children with faith backgrounds may need specific support.

'Most, many, or some,' when referring to the ways in which people of faith approach sexual relationships.

Being specific, you can avoid generalisations, and also recognise the ways in which individuals are able to find and make choices of their own. For example, you might say that 'different Christians have different views on sex outside marriage' and that 'many Christians have sex before marriage'.

DON'T SAY

'You're Jewish, what do Jews think about this?'

Singling out a student in a class due to an aspect of their identity can cause them to feel exposed and alienated. The question also makes the assumption that one individual can speak on behalf of an entire religious group, which, as we have uncovered, is impossible due to the varying interpretations of Judaism and the effect of differing cultures on lifestyle and beliefs.

This won't be relevant to _____ in the class.'

Just because a student themselves may not experience a scenario being explored in the classroom, it doesn't mean they won't encounter others throughout their life who will.

Don't treat people differently. Using different tones of voice, different words and different body language – however well intentioned – can leave individuals feeling singled out. This behaviour is a form of 'microaggression'

Microaggressions are commonplace verbal or behavioural acts, which can communicate hostile, discriminative, or negative towards marginalised groups. Because some people – such as religious minorities, people with different skin colour, and people with visible disabilities – are repeatedly treated differently, these seemingly small acts add up. For example, a person whose name is repeatedly mispronounced can be left feeling like an outsider.

Dont say... 'Muslim' too often.

Muslims are one of many faith communities and should not be used too frequently as the example for religious diversity

I don't see colour / I treat all students the same.'

Within our efforts to ensure all people are treated equally, we must ensure that we do not ignore the racism and societal inequalities that influence the lives of non-white people.

All [members of a given faith community] think/do [sexual relationships in particular way].' For example, **'All Roma marry within their community.'**

Generalising is a form of discrimination which reinforce stereotypes that are often untrue, manipulated or exaggerated. When we do so, we assume that an entire group or demographic of people think, feel or act the same way and have real, material consequences for those impacted. An example of this could be "All Muslim communities practice arranged marriage" or "all LGBT+ people have casual sex".