

SIFRE and EEFA – Support for RE

SIFRE began our formal service to schools slowly and steadily in the mid-1990's in response to requests from teachers for speakers from the faiths. In Autumn 1997 there was a national RE festival and this provided a platform from which to advertise and expand the work. Contacts were made with every school in Suffolk through the County mailing system, special events were arranged, including faith training workshops, a multi-faith fair and guided tours for children of places of worship.

SIFRE also contributed formally for many years to initial teacher-training and to in-service training for RE teachers. SIFRE also arranged many public lectures, seminars, study tours and visits in which have teachers have participated.

SIFRE's work over the years with the faith communities has helped to foster good relations while building up a strong team of tutors from the faiths. The County Advisory RE staff and SACRE have been involved in the development of the service from the outset and there has been mutual benefit. The schools are charged and the tutors paid for their work. In fact the arrangement has raised the status of RE in some schools and increased the budget allocated to that subject!

After the formation of EEFA we were able to offer a similar service in neighbouring counties and it is EEFA which now handles all the paperwork and financial aspects of the service in Suffolk as well as in neighbouring counties. We are in contact with over 50 tutors in Essex, Cambridgeshire, Norfolk and Suffolk. Some of them already have teaching experience; others are ordinary members of different faiths who thus gain the confidence to speak to groups of children or to teachers and who sometimes then go on to become more closely involved in the education process in various ways.

The arranging of visits is quite onerous but very rewarding. We have produced a leaflet which explains how the schools can contact us and the costs involved. To keep costs as low as possible to schools we only charge a small administrative fee (on top of the payment to tutors and contributions to places of worship), which generally does not reflect the time and effort involved as the actual setting up requires several phone calls/ emails before forms confirming bookings can be sent out. In addition we try to respond imaginatively to each request as well as persevering when finding a suitable date proves difficult..

Here are some examples of our work with schools:

- A primary school in Norfolk, embarking on a study of India requests a Hindu speaker, preferably with the ability to demonstrate Indian dancing.
- A primary school from Norfolk who cannot afford to pay for a visit send an email with a set of questions on Islam from the children and we ask a Muslim family to reply.
- A primary school in Ipswich wishes to use a Baker Day to take all its staff, teaching and non-teaching, to visit a Mosque, a Synagogue and a Cathedral.

This can only be achieved in Norwich. On this occasion we do not charge, but arrange that they paid the faith organisations involved in Norwich.

- A middle school in Sudbury asks for help addressing issues of Islamophobia and the media. We contract 3 of our tutors - a Sunni Muslim man from Bangladesh, a Shia Muslim woman from Iran and a Kurdish Refugee from Iraq. They work with a whole year group throughout the day.
- A middle school in Leicester tests out our game *Diversity* and devises challenges to be included in the pack. The game is now sold nationally.
- Upper Schools around Suffolk request speakers from different faiths for conferences on various topics, including Marriage, Sexual Orientation, Breaking Boundaries, Rites of Passage, People of Faith, Attitudes to Work, Money and the Environment. Sometimes we provide up to 8 speakers on different faiths and sometimes up to 5 speakers on different aspects of the same faith.
- An Essex School takes its 6th form on retreat to All Hallows Ditchingham.. We provide a Humanist speaker to join them and arrange a session playing *Diversity*.
- In fact we have even been booked to play *Diversity* with a school from Lincoln at its Field Centre in a disused pub on the edge of the Yorkshire moors!

In rural East Anglia there is little contact with people of different faiths and cultures, and our tutors are able to build bridges and bring their faith alive. Sometimes this happens just through their personal presence in a school talking about their faith; sometimes they use various styles of presentations for example enacting a Sikh wedding as part of a whole day on Sikhism for a school which also included a culturally appropriate lunch! One school spent a week on Islam and every class was involved in one way or another, including visits to the Mosque, assemblies and an exhibition for parents at the end of the week.

It is important to stress that our religious education work has involved us with children through from nursery classes to 6th form and beyond; with special needs children, excluded children, children on general RE, and children on examination courses; with college students on Early Years courses, and with FE and HE teaching staff.

ALL CHANGE

Academies and Free Schools

Changes in the way our schools are managed and financed have had a considerable effect on our work. Initially schools which had gained financial independence or had been taken over as Academies cut back on their use of our services because they were exploring their budgetary controls. Now that they are more secure and are possibly being driven by OFSTED criteria, they are returning to ask for help in delivering multi-faith knowledge within their institutions. Likewise faith schools are beginning

to look outside their core faith and to ask for a series of speakers from different faiths to participate in their school assemblies and to speak to particular year groups.

SACREs

Local Authorities have long since had a statutory responsibility to facilitate a 'Standing Advisory Council for Religious Education' which is responsible for producing the core RE curriculum for schools in their control. The new structure has removed many schools from the direct control of the LEA but some are nevertheless opting to work with their local SACREs. Funding cuts have meant that the allocated hours of SACRE coordinators and RE Advisers have been reduced and SACREs may need to explore how best they can continue in future to support RE in their counties. We are sensing that EEFA will need even closer co-operation with them to continue our services to schools.

THE FUTURE

When EEFA took on the work of working with schools, it was and still is run by volunteer staff and only its tutors are paid. I (David) envisaged that as the service grew, it would reach a point at which the overhead income from arranging visits would be sufficient to employ staff to run the service. The financial restraints imposed on schools has meant that the service did not mushroom as we hoped and the fees that could be charged were capped so that at this time whereas the service meets all its running costs, it is still dependent on voluntary management. David and Cynthia Capey, the present management team, are ageing and looking to ease off / retire. At the present time they are looking around for ways in which this very vital and valuable service can be continued into the future, without their involvement.