

**Using the Interpretive
approach for teaching RE to
gifted and talented pupils at
Key Stage 3**

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Synopsis

This study considers the question of how teachers of religious education may best approach teaching pupils at key stage three who are gifted and talented in this subject. Consideration is given to the most appropriate pedagogical approach for religious education in its entirety and the ways in which this can be developed to suit gifted and talented pupils. The study moves on to suggest a generic pedagogical principle and subject specific pedagogical strategies which can be employed in the classroom with the most able pupils, utilising the Interpretive Approach to Religious education. These principles and strategies were researched within a selective boys' grammar school in the West Midlands and then reflections were made concerning their success. Research was conducted over a three term cycle, using an Action Research methodology.

I will argue within this study that the Interpretive Approach is the most appropriate pedagogical foundation for teaching *all* pupils religious education and that from this foundation we can develop pedagogical strategies which allow our most able pupils in religious education to be challenged to engage with dynamic religious traditions whilst placing themselves firmly onto the circle of hermeneutical learning.

Introduction

Religious education constantly faces challenges from inside and outside of the discipline; from those who question its role within education to those who see religious education as unchallenging and undemanding (Wintersgill 2000, 15; White 2004, 151ff). Within this context, there is also the current drive to ensure that learning meets the personal needs of all those pupils we encounter within our classrooms. Clearly, as part of this process we have a role to nurture and stimulate pupils who are talented in our subject and ensure that religious education is a challenging, academic discipline which engages and enthuses our most able pupils. Challenge is vital within religious education to engage and captivate all our pupils, and this is especially relevant for pupils who are gifted and talented in our subject. Much work has been completed on pedagogies for teaching religious education generally and specifically to those pupils with special educational needs but there is less written on pedagogical approaches to teaching religious education to gifted and talented pupils.

In this work, I have surveyed the literature on pedagogies for teaching religious education, specifically those for gifted and talented pupils. I have then drawn together these ideas and principles to suggest an appropriate pedagogy for gifted and talented pupils within Religious education, based upon the Interpretive Approach. The study was researched in a school context using an Action Research Methodology. Following an initial study as part of my MA dissertation, I have conducted two cycles of research with two year 8 classes; one cycle focused on the study of Rites of Passage and the other on the study of Islam. The school I work in is a selective boys' grammar school in the West Midlands. The school has a very diverse ethnic population with boys representing the Christian, Muslim, Sikh and Hindu traditions. Pupils are taught in form groups which are mixed ability though due to the intake include all academically able boys. Boys have religious education once per week, with each lesson lasting for fifty minutes. The two groups in this study are representative of all classes at the school; both have 26 pupils in

total, with a total of 10 Muslim pupils and 11 gifted and talented pupils between the two classes.

Gifted and talented – what does it mean?

The question of identification of gifted and talented pupils is fundamentally important. Before any teaching pedagogies can be developed, it is crucial that teachers have a reliable method by which to recognise the pupils within the classroom who are gifted in their subject. It is not sufficient to simply base this judgement on academic ability. If we are considering the most suitable pedagogies for teaching religious education to gifted and talented pupils, it is of crucial concern that we are able to identify successfully and accurately these individuals (Blaylock 2001, Freeman 1998, Kaniel 2002, Montgomery 2001; 1996, Maitra 2000).

The work of Maitra in the identification of gifted and talented pupils

Traditionally, teachers have used IQ tests or other such theoretical methods as the criterion for judging giftedness (Maitra 2000, 296). However, this methodology fails to consider other identifying traits. In what way would a theoretical intelligence test draw to our attention those pupils who possess sporting, musical or artistic gifts? Maitra also highlights the tendency amongst teachers to connect the concept of giftedness with our own need or purpose of identification (Maitra 2000, 296). He also reflects on the variations of this identification within different cultures resulting in artistic giftedness only being recognised in some cultures depending on the value given to art within that society (Maitra 2000, 297). Having analysed the difficulties in identification, Maitra suggests seven key areas which should be considered when identifying gifted pupils (Maitra 2000, 301). He recognises that giftedness must be seen as part of a cluster of many aspects of behaviour which develop through stimulation and enriching teaching experiences and that a pupil's learning style is a clue to the potential they hold. Importantly,

he also argues that giftedness cannot be something which is simply equated with a score in a test but must be seen holistically and within different settings. I would argue that this is fundamental within the identification of gifted pupils within religious education. It is not enough to simply identify pupils based on a whole school test and resulting list. Teachers must look at pupils within the whole context of religious education and consider ways in which they are gifted in this specific area of the curriculum.

Identification of gifted and talented pupils with reference to RE

National Curriculum guidance

Within the field of religious education, there is limited subject specific work on the identification of gifted pupils. The National Curriculum website is one source which has published details to suggest strategies to identify gifted and talented pupils in religious education. They make the distinction that being gifted and talented in religious education are not the same as being religiously gifted and they draw on six notions to identify individual pupils. Firstly, they suggest that pupils will show high levels of insight into the obvious and ordinary. Secondly, they are able to comprehend and infer meaning from symbols, texts, metaphors and practices. Thirdly, they are sensitive to the numinous and are aware of how this can be explored and expressed. Fourthly, they are able to transfer ideas and concepts from one unit of work to another. They then add two further and more general factors which are having highly developed skills of comprehension, analysis and research and the ability to think quickly and deeply about a given topic. (www.nc.uk.net/gt/re/index.htm, 2004) They define these pupils as “those who can easily, quickly and at an expert level apply the specific skills and processes of RE, and who demonstrate high levels of understanding, insight, maturity and achievement” (www.nc.uk.net/gt/re/monitoring.htm, 2004, 2).

Blaylock's contribution to the debate on the identification of gifted and talented pupils

In Blaylock's work on teaching religious education to gifted and talented pupils he draws on important issues when identifying specific individuals. He notes that whilst gifted and talented pupils can be identified generally by their ability to think quickly, ask provocative questions, being sceptical of assumptions and making original responses, it is also important that in religious education we identify gifted and talented pupils through their distinct RE ability, skills and insight (Blaylock 2001, 14-5). They can, he suggests:

“quickly, at an expert level, develop and apply knowledge, understanding, skills, and processes of RE (for example critical thinking, interpretation, insight, reflection and synthesis). Talented and most able pupils have the potential to demonstrate high levels of understanding, insight, discernment, achievement and maturity”

(Blaylock 2001, 15).

Blaylock discusses that the higher order language skills and critical thinking skills all have an important role in developing religious education for gifted and talented pupils. He connects this to work from Professor John Hull who writing about primary school pupils noted that the giftedness of these pupils will be specific to religious education and may also involve the possession of religious or spiritual gifts, combined with an original vision. Blaylock builds on this to note that the gifted and talented pupils in religious education may also “demonstrate skills of insight, application and discernment, making sense and drawing meaning from religious symbols, metaphors and sacred writing at a high level” (Blaylock 2001, 15). He does note that much relies on the teacher's professional judgment to identify the gifted and talented pupils within the classroom.

Cope's contribution to the debate about the identification of gifted and talented pupils

Dr Mark Cope interviewed a number of the staff within the Theology department of the University of Birmingham. He questioned them about their methods for recognising gifted and talented students. From these interviews he constructed a list of thirteen identifying characteristics. They were:

- The ability to raise questions
- The ability to construct and sustain an argument
- Being critical at the right point
- The ability to sustain a counter argument
- The ability to plan and sustain a project
- The ability to start with and move between the whole and the parts.
- Holding an in depth dialogue
- Utilising different methodologies in producing work
- Weaving personal experience into their work
- Being adventurous in their thinking and writing
- The ability to place knowledge into new and different contexts
- The ability for self reflection

(Cope, 1997, 44-5)

Whilst these were mainly reflections on undergraduate students, there is some application to the gifted and talented pupils in the classroom and the observations highlight the importance of seeing giftedness in religious education as a separate skill to any other subject and therefore requiring individualised methods of identification. This study builds upon the notion of the special requirements of gifted pupils within religious education and considers pedagogical approaches to teaching these individuals.

Identification of Gifted and Talented pupils within this research.

A core element of this research was the identification of pupils in the group who were gifted and talented in religious education. As I discussed earlier, this is a controversial topic due to the underlying issues concerning the categorisation and labelling of pupils. In many disciplines the term adopts differing meanings and nuances but for this research I had taken the term to mean, as defined by Blaylock, pupils who can

“quickly, at an expert level, develop and apply knowledge, understanding, skills, and processes of RE (for example critical thinking, interpretation, insight, reflection and synthesis). Talented and most able pupils have the potential to demonstrate high levels of understanding, insight, discernment, achievement and maturity”

(Blaylock 2001, 15).

In order to be able to identify the gifted and talented pupils within the group based on the above definition, two strategies were used. Firstly, I consulted the schools gifted and talented register identified the top ten percentage of the cohort according to the CAT score, which also predicted a subject specific target level for each curriculum discipline. This information was combined with subject specific data which I held on each pupil. All pupils are assessed termly against both assessment strands (learning about and learning from religion). As the levels develop in the QCA model, they begin to utilise more of the skills and techniques which Blaylock links to the identification of gifted and talented pupils in religious education such as interpretation, understanding and reflection (Blaylock 2001, 15, QCA 2000, 10-17). These assessment results allowed me to see which pupils were working at the highest levels within the group in terms of RE ability as well as providing an overall picture into the ability of the entire group. The majority of pupils were achieving

consistently at levels 5 and 6, with a selected band of pupils achieving consistently at level 7.

In summary, we can see from this literature that the identification of gifted and talented pupils is a complex process, one not simply confined to test results. The generic skills which the writers above have identified illustrate that gifted and talented pupils in Religious education require a holistic, pedagogical approach which stimulates their particular learning styles. As I shall demonstrate below, these skills synthesise with the Interpretive Approach.

Gifted and talented Pedagogy

Religious education has the capacity to open new realms of thought and experiences for pupils within the classroom. For all pupils in their encounter with religious education, it is vital that they receive quality and appropriate provision. The provision must be appropriate in terms of the legal requirements, the drive to raise standards and the needs of the individual pupils. In classrooms today it is sometimes claimed that mixed ability groups and 'teaching to the middle' does not ensure a quality provision for the majority of pupils in the classroom. Those with special educational needs can find the lesson inaccessible and the most able may find no intellectual stimulation within the lesson. In both of these cases, the subject being taught is failing to engage on the appropriate level with the individual pupils in the classroom and therefore failing in its fundamental requirement.

Montgomery's approach to teaching gifted and talented pupils

The question of teaching the gifted pupil is not one solely confined to religious education. The Government initiated the area by convening the Gifted and Talented Advisory Group in 1998 to develop a national policy to advise teachers on teaching the most able within the classroom. This has been

followed by the Gifted and Talented strand within the Excellence in Cities initiative (Department for Education and Employment DfEE: 1999, 4/99). However, as Montgomery highlights, these recommendations focus on master classes, summer schools and additional provision and she comments on the difficulty in transferring the skills learnt in these settings back into the general classroom environment (Montgomery 2001, 263). She also reflects on differing approaches to teaching gifted pupils such as that suggested by Butler whereby pupils are engaged in advanced thinking courses. (Montgomery 2001, 264). However she notes that it is the question of transferring these skills to everyday learning in the curriculum which is problematic. In contrast to this, Montgomery argues that the key to teaching gifted pupils is developmental differentiation within the mixed ability classroom setting and this is placed within the Cognitive Curriculum (2001) (Montgomery 2001, 270). This approach utilises certain underlying principles which can be translated into classroom activities. The Curriculum should involve:

- Development of Positive Cognitive Intervention
- Cognitively challenging questioning
- Deliberate teaching of thinking skills and protocols
- Creativity training
- Reflective learning and teaching
- Cognitive Process Teaching methods e.g. Problem solving, investigative learning, experiential learning, games and simulations, language experience methods, cognitive study skills and collaborative learning and team building.

(Montgomery 2001, 270-1)

Whilst Montgomery does not relate this to religious education directly much of her work resonates with that of Blaylock (2001), O'Grady (2003), Ipgrave (2001) and the interpretive approach which is shown in the work of Jackson (2000, 110-28) all of which I shall consider below. Montgomery shows us

that teaching the gifted pupil in any area cannot simply be through extension or additional booster classes but should be through an underlying pedagogical principle which informs the teaching activities within the classroom. It must also be a pedagogical approach which allows gifted and talented pupils opportunities for developing transferable skills in a reflective learning environment.

Kaniel and the use of High Thinking Processes to teach gifted and talented pupils

Kaniel writes about the gifted as the future leaders of their country and as such they are individuals who need stimulation and preparation within the classroom (Kaniel 2002, 225). He argues that able pupils should be taught High Thinking Processes (HTP) to fulfil these goals of stimulation and preparation. Within his goals of HTP, he considers the following to be vital to the education of gifted pupils. Firstly, pupils should become flexible learners whereby they can move between the component parts thus encouraging multidimensional and multidirectional thinking. Secondly, pupils must be open to information, drawing on clues and relevant information which can be utilised to consider the task in hand. Thirdly, pupils should develop strategies for listening, speaking, reading and writing which focus on the use of cognitive processes such as empathy, message reflection, non verbal communication, rhetoric and strategies for effective reading and writing. Fourthly, pupils should develop the ability to infer and reason through comparing, conceptualising, induction and deduction, classification, organisation, analogy, proposal and investigation of hypotheses and the detection of reasoning errors. Fifthly, Kaniel talks of decision making using metacognition whereby pupils are aware of what is happening before, during and after the decision making processes in which they are engaged. This ability allows them to transfer data from one setting to another and also devising strategies about how to act in settings and the reasoning for these actions (Kaniel 2002, 226-8). As Kaniel describes, within these goals for the

able learner there is a resonance with the best of religious education whereby pupils can engage, investigate, transfer, empathise and reason with religious traditions.

It is clear that once more the work of Kaniel is pointing teachers to the need to develop a clear pedagogical approach for teaching gifted and talented pupils which utilises the skills of comparison, conceptualisation, investigation, empathy and assessment of the component parts of their knowledge. I shall show below how this links to the pedagogical approach of the Interpretive Approach.

The question of religious education and teaching gifted and talented pupils

There has been considerable literature and resources produced to support teachers in delivering religious education to pupils with special educational needs. On the other hand, though this is changing, there has been less support for teaching gifted and talented pupils. Often the most able have had to push through the ‘extension’ activity in which work is revisited or a slightly different angle is found on the same or similar topic. Many pupils can see these tasks as a simple increase in the quantity of tasks and work they are expected to produce.

Religious education, through all of its diversity and difference, can offer a huge amount to the gifted and talented pupils in the classroom. Here they can engage with some of the most difficult and complex areas of human existence. Religious education needs an appropriate pedagogy to allow this intellectual stimulation of the most able to take place. The classroom can nurture these pupils to explore existential questions, to evaluate their own and others’ responses and as a result reassess their initial position. It is no longer sufficient to provide these pupils with a simple extension – a longer piece of writing or a reworking of a previous task. This study is intended to address

this question – how should religious education engage, encourage and precipitate the highest achievement of the most able pupils?

To allow appropriate strategies and teaching activities to develop, it is fundamentally important that they are based upon a concrete foundation. Without this basis, it is all too easy, under the pressure of time and a drive to raise standards, to slip back into the time honoured extension task and therefore failing in our role of teaching all individual pupils in an appropriate and engaging way.

Principles of Pedagogy in Religious Education

Contributions from the work of Michael Grimmitt

A seminal work in the area of pedagogies for religious education is that of Michael Grimmitt (Grimmitt 2000). Grimmitt's work seeks to bring together some of the most influential writers in the field of pedagogical approaches to religious education during the last twenty five years and then asks the authors to summarise their research in this area. He notes that by placing contributions together the work can be seen within the context of the wider debate (Grimmitt 2000, 5).

Grimmitt contributes work concerned with the meaning and significance of pedagogy. He surveys the political pressures and developments which have led to the capture of religious education and the pressure for the subject to conform to standards and intended outcomes (Grimmitt 2000, 10). He notes that whilst religious education was captured politically there was also a move from the faith communities to capture and shape religious education. The move by the Government to control the backlash from faith communities led to, he argues, a more damaging development in terms of the model syllabuses which imposed onto LEA's a prescribed content and reinforced the drive to standards and conformity (Grimmitt 2000, 14). As the model syllabuses were

introduced into PGCE training, they led to a descriptive approach to religious education which began to dominate in the classroom (Grimmitt 2000, 15).

Grimmitt argues for the liberation of religious education whereby pedagogical principles can draw upon psychological theories bringing a significant meaning to the role of pedagogy. Grimmitt defines pedagogies as “a theory of teaching and learning encompassing aims, curriculum content and methodology” (Grimmitt 2000, 16). The views held of education and religion can interact and pedagogical strategies can determine how and why this interaction takes place. This leads to the interaction between the pupils and the religious tradition (Grimmitt 2000, 17). As a consequence, the principles held can inform the strategies used “which determines how pupils will experience, engage with and respond to the content” (Grimmitt 2000, 18). This engagement between the pupils and the religious tradition results from a generic pedagogical principle applied to subject specific content.

Grimmitt summarises his work from 1973 and assesses the distinction between pedagogical principles and pedagogical strategies. Generic pedagogical principles involve those mental activities which through assimilation and accommodation allow children to build up new schemas and it is through these that new experiences can be analysed. Reconstruction of the schemes takes place when new learning is mastered. Grimmitt applies this to religious education through the example of two pedagogical principles applied to a strategy. Firstly, there must be a principle of building conceptual bridges between pupils’ own experiences and the central concepts of faith which they explore. Secondly, the learning is enhanced when the lesson takes account of and is related to the pupils’ individual feelings and experiences. The pedagogical strategy develops these principles to facilitate their use in presenting religious concepts within a dimensional approach (Grimmitt 2000, 19). Religious educators therefore should consider the importance of the pedagogical principles as these will allow the invention and development of their own pedagogical strategies.

Grimmitt has compiled a comprehensive survey of pedagogical projects with the contributors assessing their work in terms of his notion of pedagogical principles and strategies. It is clear that in relation to teaching gifted and talented pupils, a clear pedagogical approach needs to be developed which then allows strategies to be applied to the teaching. Grimmitt's work is important here as it firmly establishes the need for religious education, as an academic activity, to be grounded in firm foundations. One of the approaches which Grimmitt includes is the Interpretive Approach and it is to this which I shall now move.

The Interpretive Approach – Professor Robert Jackson and the Warwick Religious Education Research Unit (WRERU)

The Interpretive Approach strives to address within religious education the questions of how we represent religious traditions to our pupils, how we engage the pupils in a process of interpretation and the possibility for pupils to interact at a personal level with the traditions. The approach has as its foundation therefore three key concepts: representation, interpretation and reflexivity which emerged from ethnographic studies at WRERU of Hindu children in Coventry (Jackson 2002, 96). As I shall demonstrate below, it forms the most appropriate pedagogical structure for teaching RE to gifted and talented pupils.

Utilising the work of Cantwell Smith on the emergent concept of a religion as an intellectual system into a clearly named system by the nineteenth century it became clear that religions could not be represented as simple, fixed systems of belief (Jackson 2002, 50-3). This was connected by Jackson to ideas from Said on the term Orientalism. Said assessed the way in which the term Oriental was used by the West in a fashion which caused a polarisation between 'us' and 'them'. Knowledge became intrinsically linked to power and the institution and was transmitted intertextually as part of a culture's

history (Jackson, 2002 55-7). It was argued therefore that cultures could not be seen as continuous, unchanging entities but dynamic processes involving negotiation between individuals and groups which meant that the individual moved between a personal experience of faith and the cumulative tradition. This led to the first of the three key concepts for the Interpretive Approach; representation. This entailed religious education presenting a tradition as a process containing contributions from individuals, groups and the wider tradition (Jackson 2002, 66, 108).

The second concept within the Interpretive Approach was that of Interpretation. It became clear from the work of the anthropologist Clifford Geertz that when studying other cultures it was important to be reflective and critical and importantly to see the three following relationships; firstly, that of the relationship between concepts, symbols and institutions, secondly, the relationship between the particular and the general and finally the relationship between the parts and the whole (Jackson 2002, 33). Geertz encouraged the building of a bridge between the ethnographer and the subject using the ideas of experience near and experience distant concepts. Jackson gives the example of the concept of caste. It is an 'experience near' concept to a Hindu meaning that it is an idea which is familiar to them and has meaning even if the term isn't immediately recognisable. The term is also one which has a role as an experience distant concept when used by outsiders to the tradition imposing their understanding of the meaning onto the term (Jackson 2002, 34). This dual understanding of the concept of interpretation highlights the need when studying a religious tradition to create parallels between the tradition and the life of the pupil, allowing them hermeneutically to move between the parts and the whole, thereby understanding each in relation to the other. The Interpretive Approach therefore suggests the concept of interpretation whereby pupils must move continually between the parts and the whole. Religious education must involve insiders in any study as this supports the aim of trying to represent and in turn interpret someone else's life as part of a religious tradition (Jackson 2002, 46)

The third essential concept within the Interpretive Approach is that of reflexivity (Jackson 2002, 46-7, 112). The concept has some connections with the concept of 'learning from' religion (Grimmitt 1987) though utilises the concept of edification. Based on the terminology of Rorty, the interpretive approach suggests that one aim of religious education should be opportunities for pupils to re-assess their own ways of life using a method of constructive criticism, creating a relational process between the experience of the insiders to the tradition and the experience of the outsiders (Jackson 2002, 46).

It is clear to draw comparisons between Grimmitt's expectations of a pedagogical principle and the reality of the Interpretive Approach. Grimmitt suggests that pedagogical principles need aims, content and methodology represented in the Interpretive Approach through the concept of representation of religious traditions as living, dynamic faiths. Grimmitt also suggests that pedagogical principles require a generic basis which can be made subject specific and allowing for an opportunity for conceptual bridges to be built between a faith and the pupils' own experiences, a notion represented in the Interpretive Approach's concepts of interpretation and reflexivity.

Why is the interpretive approach best suited to the needs of the gifted and talented?

I have chosen the pedagogical principle of the Interpretive Approach to underlie the strategy I developed for teaching gifted and talented pupils for a number of reasons. Having considered previously the characteristics of those pupils who are gifted and talented, a pedagogical principle for teaching this group needs to allow an engagement with living, dynamic faiths; the notion of representation in the Interpretive Approach. Through the deconstruction of the systems of religious belief and the accurate representation of these traditions, the most able pupils will gain access to the symbols, texts,

metaphors and practices as they appear in an individual's faith and as a consequence the classroom activities can allow for pupils to consider comprehension and interpretation of these dimensions and component elements of faith (www.nc.uk.net/gt/re/index.htm, 2004; Blaylock 2001, 15; Maitra 2000, 301; Cope, 1997, 44-5;). Guidance on gifted and talented pupils also notes that they are sensitive to the numinous and the ways in which this can be explored and expressed (www.nc.uk.net/gt/re/index.htm, 2004). The Interpretive Approach allows pupils to engage with the individual's experience of the numinous as related to the individual, the group and the tradition.

The notion of representation, whilst targeting the skills of the gifted and talented pupils, also promotes opportunities for pupils to ask questions about the tradition and to see the different ways in which beliefs can be translated into daily life and practice. This in turn encourages in depth dialogue between the tradition and the pupil.

Through Jackson's principle of interpretation, pupils can engage with the religious traditions and move from the whole to the parts in a hermeneutical activity as well as moving between 'experience near' and 'experience distant' concepts. This links to their ability to move concepts and ideas from one unit of work to another, a skill vital in hermeneutical learning. Cope, Kaniel and Maitra note the importance for gifted and talented pupils in transferring knowledge from one area to a second, placing knowledge in new contexts, analysing component parts and being involved in a dialogue with the material they are studying, in this case a religious tradition (Maitra 2000, 301; Cope, 1997, 44-5; Montgomery 2001, 270-1).

The third principle underlying Jackson's work is that of reflexivity and this too is suited to the learning and abilities of the most able. Both Cope and Blaylock note that the most able pupils display the ability for self reflection, weaving personal experience into their work resulting in insight, discernment

and maturity (Cope, 1997, 44-5, Blaylock 2001, 15). We also see from the work of Montgomery and Kaniel that reflective, personal learning combined with a degree of empathy is important for challenging our most able pupils (Montgomery 2001, 270-1; Kaniel 2002, 226-8). Clearly this resonates with the concept of reflexivity.

In presenting religious traditions through the interpretive approach, we are allowing challenge to become an integral part of religious education. It no longer becomes an activity of studying a static phenomenon but allows real engagement and discernment by our pupils. It is only when this takes place that pupils can really engage in challenging religious education and therefore the gifted and talented pupils can be stretched to attain their ultimate levels of achievement.

If we wish the most able pupils to gain the maximum learning outcomes from religious education, it is vital that a pedagogical principle is used which connects with their abilities and learning characteristics and styles. I would argue that through representation, interpretation and reflexivity, the key elements of the Interpretive Approach, the most able pupils are provided with the opportunity to engage with religious traditions and their own ideas and experiences at the highest possible levels and move hermeneutically to a representative insight and the resulting process of edification. It is these skills which are vital to engaging and challenging the most gifted of pupils in religious education.

Action Research

Within this study, I have used the methodology of Action Research. This has often been defined as follows:

“as the model for teacher-researchers to adopt, might be described as inquiry conducted on a particular issues of current concern...with the

aim of implementing a change in a specific situation” (Hitchcock and Hughes 1995, 6).

The principles of action research stem from a movement connected to Lawrence Stenhouse (1983) and John Elliott (1991). The focus, particularly within the work of Elliott, is to utilise the experience of pupils and teachers through their direct connection to school life and educational pedagogy and in my case, the desire to create the most successful classroom environment for teaching and learning. There are two central types of action research; technical action research where the intention is to make a situation function more effectively and practical action research where teachers draw on their own judgement. Within this area is action research as reflection on action, which is the central focus of this research, whereby teachers can understand the relationship between professional knowledge and action and apply to this understanding critical reflection and thought (Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2000, 226-31). This reflection allows the researcher to consider the answers to the questions they have raised concerning classroom practice.

I have utilised the specific action research methodology of O’Grady. He took the notion of action research in the direction of iterative cycles whereby pupils were given the opportunity to reflect on their learning in previous work to help him plan for future learning opportunities. O’Grady combined this action research perspective with an ethnographic stance combining participant observation and interviews with groups of pupils (O Grady 2005, 26). I also involved pupils in questionnaires which encouraged pupils to reflect on each individual learning task. We can see the direct correlation with the ideology of the Interpretive Approach which seeks for pupils to engage with the religious traditions whilst simultaneously moving between the tradition and their own experiences and perspectives.

Action research provided a number of benefits as a research methodology within this study. Firstly, it allowed me in my role as teacher to observe

directly the impact of the materials, activities and structures which were employed in the classroom. This enabled the review of these factors to be completed more effectively. Secondly, pupils were given a direct role in the teaching and learning in the classroom. The Interpretive approach has as a key foundation the idea that pupils engage with a living tradition, through dialogue and use this experience to interpret the tradition they are studying. Through action research, the pupils whose tradition was being represented were able to present the living tradition in a way which resonated with their own experiences. In turn the remaining pupils were constantly in a process of interpretation between the tradition and their own experiences. Directing the learning allowed them to take the lessons in the direction which best resonated with their engagement of the tradition. Thirdly, the gifted and talented pupils were able to provide an insight into their own challenges and questions which enabled me as teacher-researcher to analyse the success of the pedagogical principles and strategies being employed.

The role of the teacher as research in an action research context

In this study the action research was undertaken through classroom teaching and learning where I took the role of teacher and researcher and aimed to utilise my experiences and those of my pupils. The teacher as researcher can ask practical but evaluative questions of their classroom practice and seek to address these through the research. The goal of action research is often the transformation of current practice and therefore was an ideal method for this research. Action research allows the researcher to identify a problem or issue within the classroom, devise a method of intervention and through a cyclical process monitor and reflect on the results of any strategies employed. This allows the researcher not only to disseminate the results of the research but also to continue in the cycle of identification and intervention. This intervention is fundamental in allowing a continual development of ideas. This cyclical approach can be utilised as the research is internal and grows from the dual role of teacher and researcher and therefore links together the

conscious and unconscious actions within the classroom. Action research allows a continual process of reflection where questions are asked and answers are sought. As teacher and researcher you are able to read the classroom situation knowing the individual characteristics and idiosyncrasies of the pupils and draw upon these throughout the research process.

Classroom Activity

Methodological principles and strategies

I have designed a generic pedagogical principle, two religious education related pedagogical principles and a religious education related pedagogical strategy. These follow the format suggested by Grimmitt for the development of pedagogical strategies (Grimmitt 2000, 19-20).

Generic Pedagogical Principle:

- For the most able pupils to be challenged within religious education, challenge must be an integral part of all lessons and needs should not be catered for in segregated sessions (Montgomery 2001, 270).
- In order to challenge the gifted and talented pupil, lessons should utilise cognitive thinking skills such as problem solving and investigation combined with higher order learning strategies (Montgomery 2001, 271).
- The goal of learning for the most able will involve flexibility, openness to information, active listening skills of empathy and analysis of language. This should be combined with inference and reasoning processes, decision making using metacognition and the ability to transfer knowledge from and between areas within the discipline (Kaniel 2002, 226-7).

Religious education Pedagogical Principle 1:

For pupils to gain representative knowledge and understanding of any religious tradition and to be able to build bridges between their own lives and the lives of members of the tradition, religious education should wherever possible encompass Jackson's principles of Representation, Interpretation and Reflexivity (Jackson 2002, 108-112)

Religious education Pedagogical Principle 2:

Gifted and talented pupils should be challenged in their work in order that they can aim to achieve at the highest levels in terms of religious education knowledge, understanding and reflection. QCA has defined 'Exceptional Performance' in religious education at key stage 3 as displaying the following skills:

- Analysis of different influences and views.
- Ability to see the relationship between beliefs and their historical and cultural setting.
- Being able to give an informed and well argued account of their own and others views and ideas in relation to questions of meaning, purpose, values and commitments.
- Distinguishing between and investigating into the religious and philosophical contexts of belief.
- Being able to make well informed and reasoned judgements.

(Qualification and Curriculum Authority 2000)

I shall now consider the pedagogical strategies employed in this research. It is these strategies which form the core of my research into teaching gifted and talented pupils and each strategy links closely to activities within the classroom.

Religious education related pedagogical strategy to allow the application of principles 1 and 2.

Religious education for gifted and talented pupils should employ wherever possible the following strategies as related to the principles above:

- 1 Selecting areas within schemes of work and individual lesson plans which allow pupils to move hermeneutically between the whole and the parts; comparing and contrasting between ‘experience near’ and ‘experience distant’ concepts (Cope 1997, 44-50, Jackson 2002, 129-34).
- 2 Allowing pupils to raise and address individual questions and areas of interest (Cope 1997, 44-50, O’Grady 2003, 223).
- 3 Pupils should be provided with opportunities to pose a question and develop a hypothesis about the answer using previous knowledge and understanding (Cope 1997, 44-50).
- 4 Pupils should also be allowed to decide upon the methods to be used to investigate their hypotheses (Cope 1997, 44-50).
- 5 Opportunities should be given for pupils to develop a dialogue between themselves, their peers and members of the tradition in order to investigate their hypothesis (Cope 1997, 44-50, Ipgrave 2001, 20).
- 6 Pupils should be given the opportunity to reflect upon their discoveries both in terms of their knowledge of the tradition and their own ideas and values (Jackson 2002, 130-1, Cope 1997, 44-50)

Accounts of teaching and learning

Cycle One – One term study as part of my MA Dissertation

The pedagogical principles and strategies detailed above were first trialled in a one term action research cycle of research. All activities within the scheme of

work involved interpretation, representation or reflexivity. The group I choose were a year 7 class studying Buddhism. None of the group had vast prior knowledge or experience of Buddhism and so was encouraged to raise questions about Buddhism which interested them. They focused on two questions to investigate in groups and formulated provisional hypotheses for each of the questions. Over a number of lessons, pupils decided upon their own process of investigation, including the methods, homework, areas for research, resources required and possibilities for achieving a representative answer. They were continually encouraged to move between the parts of the tradition they were studying and the whole picture of the tradition. In doing so, they were involved in the concept of interpretation, working through a hermeneutical process to achieve 'answers' to their initial questions. This process was supported by a dialogue between local Buddhist communities and Buddhist pupils within school. Some groups chose to write to Buddhist communities and then compare the answers they received with the research they had compiled, therefore engaging in representation and interpretation.

One pupil commented that

“We sent a letter to a Buddhist place because we wanted to have a first hand knowledge of what a Buddhist answer was from an actual Buddhist person.” (JS)

This notion was clarified in an interview by a second pupil:

“We wrote to them as we wanted a hands on answer, a book might only give the facts and we wanted to know how a real Buddhist felt about it.” (TP)

The final element of the Interpretive Approach, reflexivity, was targeted in the final exercise in which pupils prepared a written report detailing their findings. In addition to providing their 'final' answer to the question, pupils

were also encouraged to reflect on the accuracy of their initial, tentative answers. What processes had they used to formulate the answer and how accurate had these been? Pupils made observations about their use of other religious traditions in developing an answer to their questions about Buddhism. Two pupils commented;

JS “I thought that Buddhism was split into two religions as Buddhism is probably like Sikhism as there are branches. The fact that I knew that there were branches in Sikhism helped me to compare.”

UP “I thought about my religion and thought ‘what do Buddhists think about something similar?’”

They were also encouraged to consider whether they had learnt anything about their own idea from their studies and whether they were able to make any connections between the ideas of Buddhism and their own concepts and answers. One pupil, for example, made connections between the concept of nirvana and that of paradise in Islam.

UP “Miss, Is nirvana a bit like heaven?”

AW “Why do you think that?”

UP “Well, I suppose it is the ultimate goal of life for Buddhists like heaven is for Christians. It might be similar to Paradise in Islam too.”

It became clear from this short study that the pedagogical principle of the Interpretive Approach combined with the pedagogical strategies I suggested above did stimulate and engage the gifted and talented pupils within the group.

I had been able to ascertain from this short study that gifted and talented pupils through these pedagogical principles and strategies did engage with a representative picture of Buddhism both within and outside of the tradition.

They were able to use their growing understanding of Buddhism to place knowledge 'in parts' into the whole tradition. They were also able to make conceptual links between the Buddhist tradition and other traditions with which they were more familiar. It was clear that there was a continual hermeneutical process of knowledge discovery, refinement and reassessment through developing knowledge and changing contexts. All pupils commented that they enjoyed the freedom of raising their own questions and the challenges which this brought in relation to gathering, analysing and contextualising knowledge. It was also clear that pupils responded well to the implicit and explicit dialogue of engaging in a representative way with a religious tradition.

Whilst there were clearly strengths of this methodology, it also became clear that pupils had not really engaged fully in the process of reflexivity. Seven out of the eight pupils questioned did not feel that they had been able to learn anything from their study of Buddhism about their own ideas, values and beliefs. It was therefore important in further research that different ways to stimulate this process needed to be developed. The other clear development which was needed was variety. Whilst this short exercise had provoked positive enthusiasm and engagement from pupils, it would quickly become tiresome if an identical format was consistently used. The challenge for cycles two and three therefore became discovering varied opportunities for reflexivity and to create new activities which utilised the pedagogical principles and strategies I had developed.

Extended Research – Two cycles of research with Year 8 pupils.

The initial research on Buddhism highlighted the need for sustained research of the application of the Interpretive Approach in the teaching of gifted and talented pupils and therefore I undertook two further cycles of action research (cycles two and three). The research focused on two year 8 classes, each containing 26 pupils, working at levels 5, 6 and 7. The second cycle focused

on the teaching of the topic of Rites of Passage and the third cycle concentrated on a unit about Islam.

From the outset of the two terms, I made it clear to the classes that I was conducting a piece of research into teaching methods for religious education but did not stress that the focus was on gifted and talented pupils. My reason for this was as Rosenthal and Jacobson highlighted, pupils' performance can easily be influenced by the expectations of the teacher (Hitchcock and Hughes 1995, 252). In their study, this was shown in a negative capacity, whereby pupils who were labelled as 'D stream' pupils showed a poorer performance than pupils who were not labelled. They had therefore adopted the characteristics of a 'D stream' pupil, completing the self fulfilling prophecy. Whilst I was concerned about the reverse situation, the study raises the ethical and moral issues about the extent to which the process of research can influence participants in it, in this case, the pupils involved. Labels can often stigmatize or isolate pupils as well as having a direct influence on their self perception and subsequent attainment. Through not revealing to the boys concerned that they had been identified as gifted and talented in religious education, I hoped to avoid a reaction to any labelling process.

My second ethical consideration was the issue of confidentiality. Before any of the taped interviews and questionnaires were completed, I discussed with the pupils the importance of confidentiality and that nothing they discussed with me would be used in such a way as to allow them to be identified.

Methodology

As discussed above, I had decided to use an action research methodology in both of these cycles. In the cycle on Rites of Passage, I concentrated my interviews on the 11 gifted and talented pupils identified within the two groups. For this cycle, I conducted group interviews after lessons 7/8, 10/11 and at the end of the topic to question pupils about their responses to the end

of unit questionnaire. For both cycles, I kept a diary of my observations as a participant in the lessons. In the final cycle on Islam, I broadened the interviews to two groups; the gifted and talented group from the second cycle and in addition, a group of Muslim pupils from both classes (10 pupils in total). These interviews were conducted fortnightly to allow both groups of pupils opportunities to contribute to the planning and structure of the lessons, as well as discussing their own learning and responses.

Cycle Two – Rites of Passage

The first two lessons in this cycle focused on the journey of life. Pupils were asked to produce a visual guide to their lives, including the past, present and future. The pupils were asked to select both religious and secular events which had been/would be significant for them. They were also asked to highlight any which they felt had religious significance in terms of the impact on their own spirituality. This lesson allowed them to engage in the early processes of interpretation and reflexivity, being on the hermeneutical circle of meaning with their own lives and experiences. The completed work led to a discussion of the concept of a Rite of Passage, and whether this concept was significant only to those who were part of a religious tradition.

Pupils were then asked to choose one religious tradition which they were interested in but which was not one they felt they had a sense of belonging with. The task, which took place over a period of three lessons, involved pupils choosing one Rite of Passage from that tradition and then preparing a diary account for a member of the tradition before, during and after the experience. This task involved pupils researching the tradition, posing questions and suggesting possible answers. Their diaries became their hypothesis for this unit. Pupils needed to utilise their analysis of their own lives to try and relate their experiences and feelings with those of a member of a religious tradition. They were also asked to include in the section after the rite of passage reflections on how the experience may have impacted on the

person's spirituality. We can see here the combined use of the strategies for teaching gifted and talented pupils with the interpretive approach specifically the skills of interpretation and reflexivity.

The third task in this unit was intended to create opportunities of dialogue and representation of the religious traditions. I contacted members of religious traditions and asked them to complete similar diaries for the experiences they had had connected to Rites of Passage. In this setting, this was the most feasible way of ensuring dialogue and representation. Pupils were then asked to compare and contrast their own accounts with the accounts from the religious communities. This allowed them to engage in dialogue, interpretation and representation through an analysis of their hypothesis.

The final individual task in this unit was to write an account of their own Rite of Passage from personal experience and to compare this with the accounts from religious traditions. Could they see connections between the feelings, experiences and impact of the two accounts? We can see here the use of the principle of reflexivity in the encouraging of pupils to critically move between their own experiences and those of others in combination with the assessment of experience near and experience distant concepts.

In the interviews preceding the drama task, it became clear that pupils had made use of their own experiences in understanding the religious rites of passage and that this hermeneutical process was something they were clearly engaged in. When asked how they had hypothesised over the impact on spirituality of rites of passage, one pupil commented:

“I did Bar Mitzvah and I think it is similar to confirmation. I could imagine some of my feelings being similar. I think that it comes naturally. It is easier if you have a religion. I could imagine that you feel would closer to God after Bar Mitzvah just like at confirmation. You can take control of your spiritual welfare.” (DG, gifted and talented pupil)

It was noted that this was a challenging task and that the process of reflexivity is a difficult one to achieve. As AZ commented,

“It is hard to take on the role of someone of a different religion. I don’t know many Sikhs. I prefer to study my own religion as it is easier to think about the feelings.”

It also became clear through the interviews that pupils had engaged in the process of interpretation of concepts within religious traditions, as well as experience near and distant concepts. When questioned about their own rites of passage which they had chosen to describe, this process became evident.

DG “Mine wasn’t a religious event but I went on holiday to Wales and when I was there I felt closer to God. It was similar feelings to the diary but I didn’t have to work for the feeling like at Bar Mitzvah.”

OB “Yeah, I related it to the entrance exam -I did Bar Mitzvah too – and in both, we felt anxious before and did training, and then during and after, it was about being relieved it was done.”

JA “Yeah, not wanting to let parents down, I did Hindu marriage.”

Pupils were then grouped together and asked to produce a piece of drama which expressed the story of a religious and non religious rite of passage as well as demonstrating the connections between the impact and the experiences gained from both encounters. The presentations could take any format chosen by the pupils. The task encouraged the skills of interpretation and reflexivity.

Pupils chose many and varied methods of presenting their drama. Groups chose dramatic, comic and thoughtful ways of sharing their ideas about the impact of rites of passage and the connections between religious and non religious rites of passage. Many groups suggested that the impact of significant events was similar whether they were religious or secular in origin and looked thoughtfully at the ways in which such an experience could

change a person or influence the future direction of their life. It was interesting to note that the groups which contained pupils who were identified as gifted and talented found the process of comparison and analysis much easier than the other groups. Groups which did not contain gifted and talented pupils mainly focused their presentations on a re-enactment of two rites of passage and did not present the impact of or comparison between the events.

Key Findings

There were a number of important observations and conclusions which were drawn from this cycle of research. Firstly, the concept of spirituality proved much easier for the gifted and talented pupils to grasp. It was a much quicker process for them to make the connections between a concept and their own experiences and this was achieved in a hermeneutical fashion whereby they moved between the experience near and experience distant concept with ease and gradually built a more comprehensive appreciation of the idea of spirituality.

“I wrote about Jews. I think that with the spirituality it was easier and the feelings are more obvious. I think the spirituality was more important than the actions” (GW, gifted and talented pupil)

This was also mirrored in the discussions about the concept of a rite of passage. Whilst the gifted and talented pupils quickly saw the way in which this concept had moved from a religious setting to a common secular one, the remainder of the group were often reluctant to progress past a view of rites of passage as a ritual solely engaged in by religious traditions. It was interesting to observe the different levels of hermeneutical engagement and reflexivity.

This observation was reinforced when pupils prepared their written diaries of a religious rite of passage. All diaries from the gifted and talented cohort included analysis of the impact of rite, the emotions and the spirituality.

“It came naturally. I picked someone the same age and so I think the feelings are similar. I thought about how I would feel in a similar Rite of Passage” (GW, gifted and talented pupil)

It was interesting to compare this with the remainder of the group who produced mainly phenomenological descriptions of a rite and were unable to empathise sufficiently to produce the dimension of interpretation. It was very interesting when the group analysed the accounts from members of the tradition. Many of the gifted and talented pupils had questions prompted by this initial dialogue which could only have been answered by a cycle of dialogue and interaction. It became clear that for the gifted and talented pupils, an element of the dialogue required personal interaction to allow the continual interpretative process and the resulting questions to be addressed.

Similar observations could be made both in the drama task and the pupils’ accounts of their own rites of passage. The gifted and talented pupils achieved consistently high levels as they were able to engage much more fully with the concepts being raised, the impact of the rites, the changes these prompted and the emotions which were felt. They were also able to compare and contrast their own experiences and those of the members of the religious traditions.

“It was hard to express my feelings but I pushed myself more to do this” (DG, gifted and talented pupil)

Pupils who had not been identified as gifted and talented in religious education found it much more challenging to identify an event to write about and then, in the main part, gave descriptions of the events but did not move to the process of analysis and comparison.

The comments which the gifted and talented pupils made at the end of this cycle reflected these observations. They had found the unit challenging,

engaging and had been able to take part in the representation and interpretation of the traditions as well as their own reflexive responses. They had also, once again, been enthused by the autonomy of choice which the unit provided.

The observations made in cycle two allowed me to reinforce the premise that the interpretive approach through the pedagogical principles and strategies I had designed suited the characteristics of gifted and talented pupils, engaged and enthused them whilst providing ample levels of challenge implicit in the activities. It was still difficult however to assess the impact for the remainder of the group. It was important to consider whether the interpretive approach was most suitable for solely gifted and talented pupils or whether the approach helped all pupils to achieve their potential and engage with living, dynamic traditions. The choice of Islam as the primary topic for the third unit would allow me to have two focus groups. As a result within cycle three, I had two groups as the focus for the study; the same group of gifted and talented pupils from cycle two as well as a group of Muslim pupils who were actively involved in the planning process for the work.

It was also important that the final cycle would be a further opportunity to develop and trial varied activities utilising the pedagogical principles and strategies for gifted and talented students and ascertain their feedback on these tasks.

Cycle Three – Islam

The first lesson focused on pupils being able to ask and form questions about Islam, whilst expressing views and ideas they currently held. Before any discussion began, both groups established a set of rules for discussion. They focused primarily on respect and consideration of the opinions of others but had the added dimension that the Muslim pupils in the room should have the opportunity at any time to give their opinion about matters being discussed.

This task allowed pupils to engage in the process of representation as well as the pedagogical strategies of asking and forming questions, being open to information and developing active listening skills. Pupils were then asked to answer the following four questions in groups:

1. What do you think are the key beliefs in Islam?
2. Write down five things you know about Islam
3. What is your understanding of Muslims in the UK?
4. What has helped you to gain this understanding?

The answers to these questions varied greatly but the common focus areas were:

- Belief in Allah and the Prophet, the Five Pillars,
- Hajj
- The strictness of the Islamic tradition combined with a strong faith
- Links with Christianity and Judaism

This is not to suggest that the group did not hold any misconceptions about Islam though these were often combined with representative knowledge. As one pupil wrote;

“Most males wear turbans and believe hair is sacred. Islam is a fast growing religion and they fast during Ramadan. I think that Muslims are strong believes and they are usually a quiet and peaceful community.” (GW, gifted and talented pupil)

I also asked pupils to note down any specific questions which they had about Islam they would like to answer or topics they would like to cover. At the request of the Muslims pupils prior to the lesson, they worked as a separate group. As one pupil expressed,

“I think we should have a discussion with us in the middle and the class outside. Let them ask us questions or give us topics. We can correct them.”
(MC, Muslim pupil)

It was their task to focus on which areas of Islam they felt we should study in class, a topic which was pursued in the group interviews. I also questioned the Muslim pupils concerning their initial reaction to studying Islam. They were wholly positive responses which articulated their desire for their faith to be accurately understood and represented and that they were pleased to have a role to play in this process.

“It is good when people get to know about Islam and then the religion becomes clear. People do ask me lots of questions like things about haram food.” (MC, Muslim pupil)

“I am pleased. We can challenge things they think they know and what they don’t know about Muslim life.” (SR, Muslim pupil)

One pupil did recognise the need for other pupils to gain a true picture of Islam.

“I am worried about the rituals. Some people might think that we are strange, like what we do at prayer but at least people would think that we wanted to do it.” (AS, Muslim pupil)

They were also aware of the need to dispel stereotypical presentations of Islam or images which they felt to be inaccurate.

“We need to explain what we do in depth. There are places in Palestine which have views and they might be different views to ours. Jews might have hatred and other people might get the wrong idea or messages.” (AS, Muslim pupil)

“I think they will relate it to their religion and to the media and to the TV. They might link it to Christianity and make comparisons. Henry did that today” (UJ, Muslim pupil)

It was clear that both the Muslim and non Muslim pupils were interested in a dialogue forming between them to allow a greater understanding to be achieved.

“I think that people are scared and prejudiced – it is all what they see on the news. They need to know that not every Muslim wants to bomb the whole earth” AS, Muslim pupil.

At the end of the lesson, I analysed the written responses from the group. The Muslim pupils focused on a need for the group to understand the Qur’an and their belief in Allah and the Prophet as an example for daily living. The non Muslim pupils in the group focused their questions about five common topics; rituals and ceremonies, the differences between Sunni and Shia groups, the history of Islam, food and extremists combined with the concept of jihad.

The second and third lessons of the cycle were both discussion based and allowed a chance for a prolonged dialogue between the Muslims and non Muslim pupils. As a group they raised questions which were then discussed with the Muslim pupils contributing their knowledge and perspectives. This task was designed clearly to enable dialogue but also to allow pupils a chance to engage in representation and reflexivity, utilising the pedagogical strategies of giving accounts of their own and others’ views as well as demonstrating the ability to transfer knowledge from and between areas within the discipline. It was clear from the discussion that pupils had generally a good basic knowledge and understanding of the Islamic tradition which was accurate in the main. Misconceptions often came over the nuances of practice such as dietary regulations. The discussion quickly moved to the image of Muslims which was portrayed in the media and as a group a very quick rejection of

these images was made. Pupils expressed their understanding of the root of these images as lying in a blame culture portrayed through a media concerned with security. Pupils expressed the idea that much media coverage contained elements of racism and that the link between Islam and terrorism had been forged by the media presentation of the Islamic community.

I asked pupils to formalise their responses to the discussions in three written homework questions:

1. What image did I hold about Islam after our discussion?
2. Did I have any misconceptions about Islam?
3. What do I now understand about what it means to be a Muslim?

One of the pupils in the gifted and talented group wrote as follows:

“My knowledge of Islam was based on what I had seen in the media and films, things observed in daily life. I did have misconceptions – it seemed a very strict religion to me with lots of rules; having to fast for a month, rules about what Muslims were allowed to eat, not drinking alcohol, even what women were allowed to wear. This apparent strictness of the Islamic religion made it seem to me very contained as if it does not wish to mix with the other religions and cultures, almost intolerant of others. This view was brought about by media coverage of some countries where Muslims are trying to adopt a way of life which follows more extremely the laws of Islam, such as groups called fundamentalists. Sometimes these groups have resorted to violence to put their message across. In the wake of 9/11 and the recent tube bombings in London, it would be easy to mistakenly believe that all the Muslim faith approved of violence, extremism and terrorism as a way of following their faith...I now realise that to be a Muslim is not just to be a member of that religion but to live life following the guidelines for living set down in the Qur’an...For Muslims living today in Britain, Islam is trying to be moderate and tolerant uniting with other religions and cultures against violence and

terrorism without hostility to western values, whilst upholding the Muslim faith and values. To be a Muslim is not just a religious commitment but a commitment to culture, to a way of life.” (JF, gifted and talented pupil)

The next two lessons within the cycle focused on the topic of Hajj. This topic was chosen after consultation with the Muslim pupils. Many of them expressed the opinion that the rituals were understood but the spiritual significance of the pilgrimage was often missed. Pupils were given an account of Hajj written by a young Muslim of a similar age to them. In pairs, pupils analysed the different emotions expressed by the writer as the Hajj progressed; pupils identified emotions such as amazement, enchantment, appreciation, guilt, awe, love, sense of destiny, reconciliation and wholeness. In whole class discussion, we then analysed the spiritual significance of the Hajj for the writer. As one pupil expressed:

“Hajj contributes largely to a Muslim’s life. It is one fifth of a Muslim’s life as it is one of the five pillars but many Muslims see it as more. Once the Hajj is complete, they feel more confident and wholesome, as though their eyes have been opened to Allah. They feel enlightened and content with their life, as though they have just taken a huge step in life. It is rather like confirmation; you have reached your spiritual destiny. To summarise, Hajj is about spiritual enchantment. The hole in life is filled.” (DG, gifted and talented pupil)

This activity allowed pupils to engage in representation and interpretation of the tradition whilst targeting some of the key skills for gifted and talented pupils such as being able to see the relationship between beliefs and their historical and cultural setting and then transferring knowledge from and between areas within the discipline.

To complete the work on Hajj, pupils then chose one of the emotions they had identified within the Hajj diary as expressed by the Muslim writer which they

felt they had also experienced during their life. Pupils were then asked to write their own diary account based around this event, expressing their emotions before, during and after the event. This task was designed to target the skill of reflexivity allowing pupils to move between their own experience and that of the religious tradition they had studied. Pupils were also asked to consider the similarities and differences between their own experiences and the experience of Hajj. The responses were greatly varied, though the extract below highlights the level achieved by one of the gifted and talented pupils. He is writing about a trip to Wales.

“This thing was hundreds of thousands of millions of years old. It made me think, look how old this thing is, look how old I am. Look how old my nan is! Humans compared to this thing are insignificant, they are puny but look at this column it has been around for millennia and has achieved eternal beauty. Eternal power. Then another thought crossed my mind; if there is an Almighty Being up there that created the earth, created us and created this column then he has the power, he is one Almighty Being. This experience was similar to Muslims on Hajj in the way that they feel the power of the Kabah. I felt the power of the column and they can feel the sense of being closer to God whereas I felt closer to God in a more inquisitive way. Mine was not a spiritual journey but it brought me closer to God in an abstract way. But the Hajjis’ journey is a journey of spirituality to feel closer to God.” (SQ, gifted and talented pupil)

The final element of the scheme allowed pupils to focus more clearly on some of the initial questions which they had raised about Islam. In groups, pupils were asked to choose three questions about Islam which they wanted to investigate. Two questions had to focus on the beliefs and practices of Islam and one had to focus on a moral issue or question which interested them. Many of the pupils chose questions which focused on the recent publication of pictures of the Prophet Muhammed in Denmark, as well as the conflict between Sunni and Shia Muslims. Pupils then decided how they would

investigate and organise their research which had to culminate in a presentation to the rest of the group. In reference to the gifted and talented strategy, this allowed pupils to be involved in problem solving, investigation, inference and reasoning processes as well as the ability to transfer knowledge from and between areas. It also targeted representation, interpretation and reflexivity. In all of the preparation lessons, the year 8 classes were joined by Muslim students from years 12 and 13. Their role was to answer questions from the pupils, allowing a process of dialogue from inside and outside of the tradition. Three of the pupils expressed their views on this process as follows:

“It is much more personal and more informal and more interesting. It is really nice to have a chance to talk. Books don’t deal with the modern issues like the recent pictures of Muhammed”

“It is easier to understand as he put it in simple terms. He gave personal examples and evidence. He had some ideas mixed with his opinions”

“It is so much better than a book. It is an actual Muslim. It was fantastic. It gave us the why rather than the how”

Once the investigation was completed, pupils chose a method through which to present their findings and conclusions to the rest of the group. This allowed the entire class to continue in a process of interpretation and representation whereby they could place their own knowledge (‘the parts’) into the larger context of the tradition (‘the whole’).

Presentations were again greatly varied in style and approach, utilising excellent multi media skills as well as the specific strengths of the groups involved. I have chosen to focus on three groups specifically as they highlight key observations from this exercise. Group one contained two of the gifted and talented pupils, as well as one Muslim pupil. Their questions focused on the role of women in Islam, the teachings about Allah and the rituals for

prayer. The presentation was given through a medium of drama, with three separate scenes focused around a family and their discussions. It was important to note with this group that they had engaged in detailed processes of interpretation and representation. Throughout the three questions, they were careful to show variations in behaviour and beliefs due to culture as well as carefully explaining the reasons behind phenomenological behaviour. They gave views from the Qur'an on women as well as considering views from inside and outside of the Islamic tradition. They showed the ways in which they had critically analysed the evidence to reach a conclusion about Islamic ideas as well as their own perspectives on the three questions.

Group two had chosen to focus on the miracles of the Prophets, the rules governing haram and halal and the moral questions of suicide bombing. The section on suicide bombing highlighted a further area of representation which pupils had engaged in. The presentation began with a discussion of the concept of jihad, set in the context of an insider and outsider to the tradition.

JD "I thought that jihad was holy war, where you take revenge on someone. That was what it said on the TV!"

YM "Well, that's the media for you".

The group then proceeded to give a variety of interpretations of the concept of jihad, having surveyed a number of people at the local mosque, as well as the year 12 and 13 students in school. They provided the group with the rules about jihad and then related this to the way in which the term had been used in discussions about 9/11. By comparing the rules of jihad, they commented that the events of 9/11 were against key Muslim teachings and compared this to Islamic teachings on murder. They concluded by arguing that from their study of Islam, they felt that suicide bombing and Islamic teachings were incompatible but that this was not the common perception as the tradition had been misrepresented through the media, resulting in a misjudgement of Muslims and the Islamic tradition.

A third group had focused on similar questions but had chosen to write to local mosques to gain their views. They shared the different views with the class, including the reasons why some might support the actions of 9/11. This group ended their presentation with a process of reflexivity by showing the way in which their group had concluded that the Qur'an and the Muslim tradition could not support suicide bombing.

It was interesting that in most cases groups had chosen to focus on the question of suicide bombing, the recent picture of the Prophet Muhammad or the disputes between key groups of Muslims. They were clearly events prominent in the media at the time and ones which pupils were interested in gaining a representative answer to.

The presentation proved to be an interesting medium for pupils sharing the results of their studies as well as being a springboard for further whole class dialogue. It is interesting to note again that groups which did not specifically contain gifted and talented pupils found the incorporation of interpretation and representation much more challenging and often limited their presentations to linear descriptions of knowledge they had discovered. It is also important to note that pupils were constantly involved in a process of dialogue between individuals presenting and the whole class but the dialogue was constantly widened to the parts and whole of tradition. After each presentation the class were able to discuss the ideas and many related them to material discovered as part of their own work and research.

In interviews held after the presentation lessons, it was clear that these were a popular activity with all pupils who were interviewed identifying this task as their top rated activity.

KS "I enjoyed the presentations because I learnt the most. I liked the research and talking to the students." (Gifted and talented pupil)

NK “I liked the presentations because I liked the work on Muslims and non Muslims – looking at the similarities and differences.” (Muslim pupil)

The final task as part of this unit was a levelled assessment in which pupils were asked to produce an article for a school magazine. The article had to address the following four questions:

1. What does it mean today to be a Muslim?
2. Is the reality of Islam different to images of Islam as presented by the media?
3. Can you see any similarities between the Islamic tradition and your own approach to life?
4. What have you learnt about yourself through your study of the Islamic tradition?

One of the gifted and talented pupils wrote as follows:

“During the course of this focus, I have learnt how similar Islam is to Christianity. They have different practices and cultures but their god is the same as Christianity. The most important thing in Christianity is love, which inflicts peace. The very word Islam means peace. They believe in the same God, they just call him Allah and they believe he is the one and only God, the mightiest and most merciful. Needless to say that this is what Christians believe about their God too.

I believe that to be a Muslim would be a great honour. A Muslim must be proud despite the accusations from the media...Over the course of this study I have started to think about what it would be like if I was brought up as a Muslim instead of a Christian, how I would feel and how I would react. What life might be like and the hardship of living under these accusations. It really saddens me to think of this and makes me wish I could do more. Muslims don't deserve this treatment and I think they are unbelievably powerful people

to live so (seemingly) calmly in this kind of environment.” (DG, gifted and talented pupil)

Key Findings

Cycle three allowed further insights to be made into the areas of dialogue, representation and reflexivity. Firstly, in this cycle dialogue played a key role and involved dialogue within classes and with older students in the school. The initial discussion lessons were very open and honest. All pupils were careful to be respectful and thoughtful in their questions and comments and as a class, the notion that Islam had been misrepresented emerged and was grasped quickly. The Muslim pupils who had chosen to represent themselves in the discussion as a separate group were very confident in dealing with the questions and this mode of dialogue worked well.

As I discussed after cycle two, personal dialogue was much more successful for the gifted and talented pupils. Spending time with older Muslim students allowed them to engage in dialogue which became far more than simply questions being asked in order to gain answers. I observed that the discussions, whilst beginning with the questions from the presentations, quickly widened and allowed pupils to move between concepts and continually reassess and re-evaluate their ideas based on the dialogue taking place. As gifted and talented pupils think quickly and process concepts with ease, the personal nature of the dialogue supported these skills.

Within the task on Hajj similar observations could be made to those from cycle two. The gifted and talented pupils were much more able to grasp the concept of spirituality and therefore engage with the emotions which were being felt during Hajj. They were also much more adept at building bridges between their own experiences and that of Hajj; the remaining pupils in the class found the choice of event more difficult and the connections made were often superficial and forced in the links being made. One pupil chose to

describe at length a Liverpool football match as his emotional experience and concluded as follows:

“This is similar to Hajj because it makes you feel so many emotions and makes you want for it to last longer than it should. The experiences are magical and inspiring.” (CM, year 8 pupil)

Some pupils did grasp the emotions in a more definite way but were still unable to fully make the reflexive connection to their own lives. It is interesting to compare the following account from a pupil not within the gifted and talented group to the account above of the trip to Wales from the gifted and talented pupil:

“On the last few days we stayed outside of Mumbai to mainly look at all of the temples and all the things that India had to offer. All the temples that we went to had images of the gods and goddesses carved in the rock. This was an amazing sight. The architecture was mind blowing. This could be different to the Muslim account because she was amazed by the size of the kabah but I was amazed by the architecture of the gods carved in the stone. However, this could be similar because they are both religious and architecture and size are quite similar towards amazement. This had slightly changed my view of life because it now makes me think that nothing is impossible.” (AP, year 8 pupil)

It was also interesting to note that the pupils who were not specifically gifted and talented also found it difficult to make connections between the tradition of Islam and their own lives.

“There are not many similarities between the Muslim faith and my approach to life but there are a few. I also believe that you should not harm yourself or others because there is no point in you doing it as you will live with it on your conscience for the rest of your life. Also I believe that you should always try

hard to do the best you can do in life. What I have learnt is that I can become an overall better person in life by working hard and always trying my hardest to be the best person that I can be.” (MS, year 8 pupil)

It was still evident that the gifted and talented pupils were much more able to engage in the three key skills of the interpretive approach and that the lessons became much more of a continual hermeneutical process. Links were made, re-evaluated and reassessed with bridges being built between the tradition and their own experiences. Their growing knowledge of Islam was constantly assessed against other traditions and their own approaches to life to gain deeper understanding and perception.

“I liked the wholeness of the unit. There was nothing I didn’t like. The whole unit made me think and I have really thought about myself, especially in the assessment.” (DG, gifted and talented pupil)

Critical Discussion

I shall now consider from these three cycles of action research what has emerged in the following four areas; the impact on the gifted and talented students, the pedagogy of the Interpretive Approach, the methodology of Action Research and the recommendations for further research.

The impact for the gifted and talented pupils of this pedagogical approach has three key elements and the first are the skills which have been developed. All the identified pupils made gains in developing the skill of conceptual understanding. As the units progressed, their ability to analyse unfamiliar concepts improved through a distinctive hermeneutical process. They utilised their existing knowledge to place new knowledge into a context of the ‘whole’. Through this process, they were able to engage in interpretation of the traditions they studied with a continual reassessment and re-evaluation of their existing knowledge and understanding. This skill led them to the ability

to see the need for a representative picture of religious traditions. I would also argue that the gifted and talented pupils excelled at the skill of reflexivity. As the work above highlights, pupils were able to make the connections with their own lives but importantly to place those connections into a context whereby they could draw conclusions from their own experiences.

The complimentary skill which was developed was that of self direction of learning. Pupils were able to plan, research, analyse and critique their own work providing a sense of ownership to their learning. This allowed learning to become personalised without losing a common, whole class focus. It could also be argued that these skills themselves are transferable in a hermeneutical sense to other subject disciplines within school life.

The second key observation of the gifted and talented pupils is that they were able to articulate and understand the process of the interpretive approach. I consciously chose to use the terms of interpretation and representation with the pupils to give coherence to the work we were undertaking. It was interesting to note pupils' own understanding of these concepts at the end of the unit.

AW What do you think we have achieved in RE this term?

“I think we have changed our views about Islam from the media. It worked.”
(KS, gifted and talented pupil)

“I think that the moral question forced us to look at modern Islam and that is better than just general knowledge” (DR, gifted and talented pupil)

AW What do you think representation is and why is it important?

“It is the way you present things and it is looking at different views within a religion and working it out from that” (KS, gifted and talented pupil)

“It is using real opinions not just textbooks” (DG, gifted and talented pupil)

“It is taking your first image but then it changes. It is representing Muslim and non Muslim views and being able to compare” (UH, Muslim pupil)

AW Why do we need representation in RE?

“If we just concentrate on beliefs, well, we understand more if we compare it to your own religion” (UH, Muslim pupil)

“You don’t just get one thing or view, like one from image from the media” (KS, gifted and talented pupil)

“In a textbook, you only get one opinion and we had a range of opinions” (DR, gifted and talented pupil)

AW Why do we need to build bridges between religions?

“We can understand everyone better. It is a bit like Eid and some Christian festivals” (UH, Muslim pupil)

David “If it happened to you, you understand so you understand someone else better” (DR, gifted and talented pupil)

Thirdly, it is important to consider the impact of this pedagogical principle and strategies on the pupils in the group who were not identified as gifted and talented. The principle of representation did not provide a problem for the remainder of the group. They were able to understand the idea of seeing a living, dynamic tradition and were also able to gain from the dialogue in

which they were engaged. As I discussed above, the difficulty emerged with the notions of interpretation and reflexivity. I do not think that this is because only gifted and talented pupils can access these concepts and skills but the less structured approach of the pedagogical strategies I used may have made this more difficult. I would argue that interpretation and reflexivity can be achieved with all pupils but that different pedagogical strategies may need to be employed.

Secondly, I shall now consider the pedagogical principle of the Interpretive Approach. I would argue that the gifted and talented pupils were able to access with ease the concept of representation. They grasped quickly the notion of living, dynamic traditions and were quick to reject stereotypical, one dimensional presentations of religious traditions. It is important to note that in the main this was achieved through dialogue and highlights the need for dialogue to be an integral part of religious education. Pupils need to have contact with religious communities and the individual members of these traditions. Once contact has been made, pupils need time and space to engage in meaningful dialogue which allows them to enter a process of engagement and reassessment of their current knowledge and understanding.

Worthwhile dialogue is difficult to achieve and takes time for links to be made and communication to take place. I would argue that within religious education we are in need of some form of formal arrangements for dialogue. Local communities are invaluable sources of dialogue but pupils can be restricted by the geographical and ethnographic setting of their school. There is no doubt that a formal system of dialogue is a challenging aim but it is clear that the benefits for the pupils in the classroom are without question.

The gifted and talented pupils were also able to access the skills of interpretation and reflexivity with relative ease. This is not to say that the activities lacked challenge but the pupils reported their enjoyment of the challenge. Having the goals of interpretation and reflexivity at the heart of the

pedagogy for gifted and talented pupils meant that challenge was an integral part of the teaching and learning process. Pupils constantly challenged themselves at higher and higher levels due to their place on the hermeneutical circle.

I shall now consider what has emerged concerning the methodology of Action research. There are three key observations which must be made about this methodology. Firstly, the pupils involved in this research claimed a sense of ownership to their work and to the lessons they attended. This created a positive feeling about religious education and an integral motivation to their studies. Pupils thrived on the individual direction they were able to give to the work, ensuring that the lessons were always relevant and appropriate to the pupils in the classroom. It is important to consider the potential tension between pupil directed learning and the requirement to meet the demands of the local agreed syllabus. Teacher must carefully consider ways in which these two factors can be built into their lessons which are planned and executed.

Secondly, there is a benefit for teachers in this methodology as it gives us direct access to the voice of students. We are able to create a direct, frequent process with integrity which allows us to hear the views of our pupils and to act upon these. It allows us to analyse as teacher researcher the best methodology and strategies for the pupils we teach not those who have been part of a national survey possibly in an educational setting very different to our own. Action research has the potential to become a vital tool for teachers in the continual bid to ensure that our pupils receive a quality and relevant experience of religious education.

Thirdly, the use of an action research methodology raises the question of time and practicality. Whilst the three cycles within this study have provided invaluable insights in pedagogy within religious education from the voice and direction of pupils, there is no question that this methodology requires a time

commitment from both teacher and pupils. The inherent benefit of this methodology is clear but I would argue that for this to be of continual use we need to develop a refined system which allows it to become a standard part of educational practice as opposed to an additional task, which could become increasingly demanding on time and therefore robbing the methodology of its integrity and value.

Finally, it is clear that this study is set in specific educational context which is not replicated in many educational establishments. Whilst conclusions can be drawn from this study, it is fundamental that the pedagogical principles and strategies suggested here are researched and analysed in other settings. It would be important to look at their use within classrooms which have a wider range of ability from special needs to gifted and talented. It is also important to consider whether the strategies suggested here are most successful with boys or whether the benefits can be seen with female students of all ranges of ability. Lastly, it would be important to assess the impact of these strategies for key stages 2 and 4. Can similar principles and strategies be utilised with similar success teaching pupils of differing age ranges? Perhaps this study addresses the peak of the iceberg with a great deal of research required still in related areas.

Conclusion

I would argue that as a result of these three cycles of research it can be seen that the pedagogical principle of the Interpretive Approach is successful in engaging and challenging the most able pupils within religious education. It allows them to encounter living, dynamic traditions, interpret the overriding concepts found in religious belief and practice whilst firming placing them inside the circle of learning. It engages with the specific learning styles and talents of gifted pupils and removes any ceiling from their learning. They can be challenged to achieve at a level individual to them and be able to

constantly reassess their progress and therefore the challenge within their learning.

However, I would also argue that the Interpretive Approach is not restricted to the teaching of gifted and talented pupils but serves to place challenge within religious education for all pupils, allowing them to achieve at a level appropriate to their own gift and talent. What is clear is that the pedagogical strategies employed in these three cycles of research are more suitable to gifted and talented pupils, as the less structured and more independent nature of the work targets the skills which these pupils have. The strategies allow them to hypothesise, plan, direct and assess their own learning firmly within a whole class teaching and learning approach.

The strategies demonstrated here are flexible and have endless scope for development for any unit of teaching. With the Interpretive Approach as the pedagogical foundation, we have a teaching and learning methodology which allows all our pupils to engage with religious traditions represented in a dynamic fashion in an academic and rigorous fashion whilst being constantly challenged to re-evaluate their own position in relation to the wider religious traditions.

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