

Discovery Primary School helps children to navigate, respect and value the cultural diversity of modern Britain using Interfaith Explorers

Charity that promotes interfaith understanding has powerful impact on pressured Peterborough primary school

The Discovery Primary School in Peterborough is one of the best places in the UK to see at firsthand how school children navigate the diverse cultural terrain of modern Britain.

Helping its pupils to respect and value religious and cultural diversity has been a key objective for the school as its student population has increased over the past few years, reflecting Peterborough's new migrant communities who have been drawn to the city in recent years.

Becoming three-form entry in September 2011, Discovery is a larger than average primary school with 500, rising to 620, pupils with an above-average number from ethnic minority groups, including those from Muslim and Jewish backgrounds. Twenty-two languages are represented in the school.

So when Headteacher Anne Hampson heard about the Interfaith Explorers bank of resources to promote interfaith understanding she saw an immediate application for it.

"We are a changed school," she said. "While we've always had an international focus and felt that we wanted to teach our children about all different faiths, the new make-up of the school made that even more important. With Interfaith Explorers, I really like their angle that, ok, we may all have a different religion, but we also have a tremendous number of things in common," she said.

This premise, that there is more that unites us than divides us, is at the heart of the Interfaith Explorers programme. It is a UNESCO-endorsed free online primary educational learning resource designed to add value to RE and PSHE lessons and to develop core personal and social competencies.

It is based on an idea by Professor Nasser David Khalili, founder and chair of The Maimonides Foundation <http://www.maimonides-foundation.org/> a charity committed to encouraging dialogue, co-operation and understanding between the three Abrahamic faiths - Judaism, Christianity and Islam - through cultural and academic programmes. School improvement specialists EdisonLearning. <http://www.edisonlearning.net/> developed the resource <http://interfaithexplorers.com/> and organise and support it on an on-going basis.

Designed to give teachers a trustworthy bank of resources to use when helping pupils explore different faiths, the Interfaith Explorers programme is highly interactive and promotes enquiry-based learning. One of the school's favourite activities is 'The Lemon Activity' which teaches children about challenging stereotypes.

Each child chooses a lemon and at first everyone views the lemons as all appearing to be the same, with shared characteristics including being yellow and having a similar shape. But, on closer inspection of their own individual lemon, the children discover that all the lemons are actually different and find varieties of shapes, sizes, colour and texture. By the end of the activity a child can pick their own lemon out of a large group – "I think I'll call mine Keith," said one pupil. By the end of the lesson everyone has got the idea that, like lemons, people who appear to be similar are not necessarily so.

"Although community cohesion work is not top of the agenda under the coalition government, it was key under the previous administration and is still a core part of what we do here at Discovery," said Anne. "Education is a great way of promoting community cohesion and the Interfaith Explorers resources are very good at demonstrating the commonality between faiths. Getting on together is what we are about at this school and this promotes it. We feel there is a lot of good stuff in it."

While race relations in Peterborough have improved significantly since a low in the early 2000s, community leaders are conscious of the need for vigilance. Ofsted's last report acknowledged Discovery Primary School's strength in 'the weaving in of opportunities for pupils to develop their spiritual, moral, social and cultural understanding.....pupils and carers say that the school keeps them exceptionally safe. Bullying is not tolerated. Pupils say there is very little of any kind.... [including racist bullying].'

So the Interfaith Explorers ethos sits well with the school, which is already recognised by the British Council as an International School for its work on instilling a global dimension into the learning experience of its pupils.

As well as fitting in with this, the Interfaith Explorers resources work across a number of different subject areas, most notably literacy and art, helps teachers pressed for time to deliver the packed primary curriculum. For example, in art, pupils looked at, discussed and used three paintings from Professor Khalili's Peace Collection that show the three different quarters of Jerusalem as their starting point. Discovery is an Artsmark Gold school and has found discussions on art and design from different faiths really interests the children.

Another Discovery initiative is to choose pupils from different cultures to be a 'Language Ambassador' for a week, with one of their duties being to lead an assembly where they talk about their faith and culture.

"With a topic such as interfaith there is little hard data to use to assess our efforts, but what I can say is that, considering some of our white working class families don't always appreciate the changing nature of the place, we have very few racist incidents, if any," commented Anne. "Staff here say it's brilliant and the activities are really good. They pick and choose the ones they want to use.

"We mainly use it, as suggested, at the end of the summer term as part of the pupils' preparation for senior school life. Obviously it best complements our RE curriculum, but we mould it for our own context and use it across a few different subject areas.

"At the last count, our pupils were speaking 22 different languages between them, so anything we can do to help them respect each other's cultures and customs has got to be a good thing."