

INNOVATIVE RELIGION AND WORLDVIEWS IN SCHOOLS

Whole school religion and worldviews, lived religion and meaning-making

The school fosters a highly conscious whole-school ethos which strives to make the links between its Church of England foundation, collective worship, school values, operational policies, and classroom practice. The goal is an embedded ethos that helps pupils to develop and reflect on their own meaning-making and worldview as well as those of others. This is intended to counter the common experience of ethos as either too vague to grasp, or too fragmented to make sense except as an aspiration on paper. A test of success is that pupils, parents and teachers know what the school's ethos is, and can connect it to daily experience.

Easier said than done. Pupils talk enthusiastically and convincingly about the ethos and what it means for them. For them the school is 'a family' where they feel nurtured and also safe to explore and challenge who they are. This includes a spiritual dimension. Though in some ways intangible, it feels real. When posed with the question 'what if this ethos wasn't here?', one group of pupils gasped, appalled. In unison, they objected to the very idea. One said he would simply have to find another school.

How is this achieved?

The head teacher and governors are highly focused on the importance of a genuinely experienced ethos. They are also very aware of having to work hard to generate and sustain it. Every week includes 'thoughtful', a dedicated time to stop and reflect on feelings, relationships, experience and meaning, outside of the formal curriculum. This is undertaken as an individual exercise by each pupil.

Each week has a dedicated value and the pupils are helped to be very conscious of what it is, and to explore throughout the curriculum what it might mean for them, as well as how they can live it out.

Every classroom has a 'thoughtful space', created by the children to reflect things that matter to them. Many of these are filled with objects from nature: leaves, stones, bark, representations of natural elements like the sun and the moon, which feels inclusive of any pupils who want a more open exploration rather than solely for Christians.

The pupils reflect on their spaces in quite broad, spiritual terms.

There are similar spaces around the rest of the school: a meditation tent on the hall balcony; school values painted in huge whimsical letters in the dining hall and assembly space; a thoughtful trail around the grounds, with quiet groves and openings.

Collective worship is one key space intended to bring all this together. It happens within classes on some days, where it tends towards a spiritual, reflective time. On other days it takes place in a whole-school assembly. Here pupils are helped to make the connections between thoughtful elements across the rest of the week. Thought-provoking images and memes from children's literature are projected on the wall. Pupils can post reflections and questions for assembly in a thoughtful box throughout the week. Peers, and sometimes teachers, pull some out to feedback and reflect on. A playful character, 'Opera Sue' (a teacher in costume) appears each week with a short one-person operatic play in which key themes in a variety of operas are explored in relation to the school's ethos. There is some silent time and a candle is lit. Pupils are well-drilled in forming neat, respectful lines which are understood as acts of kindness to others in the school community, taking account of each person's space in the school.

In classrooms, this ethos-as-behaviour and as values is also played out across the curriculum. Within RE itself, the emphasis is on lived religion – that is, how religion and belief might be lived out in relationships between people. In one lesson the pupils were asked to consider a series of questions: 'Why was Jesus born and was there an alternative?'; 'If God is all-powerful, why did he have to let Jesus die?'; and 'Do you think God had any other options?' Pupils were supported to focus on meaning as individual, experienced and constructed and on humans as interpreters of meaning. The Bible is explained as one expression of this. Christian stories are put forward as containing truths rather than being true. Pupils' attention is drawn to the possibility of alternatives. There is an invitation to question the logic, including the whole story. One pupil observed 'If I was God I'd have just forgiven people and not bothered

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with killing Jesus'. This class ended with the invitation to consider 'If you could ask God one question, what would it be?'. Responses included 'when will I die?'; 'what gender are you?'; and 'why create earth if it's all just to go wrong?'. Alongside these quite theological questions, which might commonly be expected in an RE space, pupils broadly and consistently bring up the issue of climate change and their strong sense of stewardship of a stressed planet. They talk repeatedly of the importance of working together on this. Examples include 'stopping pollution', 'becoming vegan', 'making cars electric' and 'taking all the plastic out of the sea'. This theme was widespread, and entirely unprompted, and consciously connected to the school value of 'seeing heaven in the moment'.

What makes innovation possible?

In this case, the governors have played a particular role in opening up the space. One, also a former teacher in the school, had taken a funded sabbatical during which he toured twenty-three schools gathering ideas about ethos. While many had seemed quite ordinary, he spoke of being blown away by some of what he saw. Many of the practices in this school come from that tour, in particular the simple but radical idea of pupils using teachers' first names, and the garnering of governors' self-conscious support for a focus on making ethos real.

The school works hard to refresh and reconnect to ethos at leadership level through an annual staff residential before the October half-term. This provides an opportunity to remember ethos, reflect on what's worked in the past year, think about how it can best relate to the pupils who are in the school now, and make links to social, community and global issues, such as hospitality for migrants and climate change.

This 'conscientisation' of ethos is key. It means the whole school knows what the ethos is on paper – something which is not necessarily true in every school - but also what it really feels like and looks like: what it means for them, their values, their behaviour and relationships, their learning and their decisions about how to act and be as people and citizens.

Key Messages:

- Meaning making is part of lived worldviews and happens in and outside the RE space.
- Ethos is best when it is made conscious in every school space – teaching and learning, operational policies, assembly, collective worship, relationships.
- A combination of individual spaces (thoughtful; the thoughtful box; the ethos trail) and community spaces (collective worship; RE; assembly) reflects different characters and aptitudes, and helps everybody to be included.
- Ethos is both intangible and felt: schools need to accept that it is often 'sensed' rather than 'measurable' but this shouldn't diminish its value.
- Strong, self-conscious leadership is essential to keeping ethos fresh and alive.
- Reinventing the ethos for each pupil in each year through explaining involving, exploring