

Stab Vests and Butter Knives

*A Comparison between the Teaching of Key Stage 3 and
4 Religious Studies in an Inner City State Secondary
School and an Inner City Independent School.*

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by

Fr Robert Easton

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For a copy of the Appendices please e-mail to

farmington@hmc.ox.ac.uk

Introduction

My name is Fr Robert Easton and I am Chaplain of Brighton College, an independent co-educational school for children aged 3-18, situated on the South Coast. My background, before I became a priest, was in journalism and academic publishing, and I spent four years as a vicar in the London Borough of Hackney before taking on my current role. For the first few years, I was head of department, but now, owing to increased pastoral responsibilities, I have stepped down and teach Religious Studies, primarily to years 7-11. Initially I applied for a Farmington Fellowship to write an introduction of the psalms to children and to share some ideas of how this might be used in the classroom, but as things do, things changed. And what you have from me is not Biblical but something rather slight and anecdotal about my recent return to London's East End.

Earlier this summer I exchanged roles for three weeks with the Community Cohesion Officer of Kingsford Community School in East London. I worked in Beckton, and Fr Fred Ashford-Okai worked in Brighton, and I would like to present some of my findings to come out of this intriguing "Rev Swap."

But first a little background. Some five years ago, the new head Master of Brighton College announced that Brighton College was to make the teaching of Mandarin in Year 9 compulsory. Few other schools in the country had implemented a similar policy, but one that had was Kingsford Community School in Newham. The heads (PIC) exchanged e-mails and soon a link was forged between the two very diverse institutions – a link that was given a unique property when HSBC agreed to sponsor a scholarship programme, in which two or three bright Kingsford pupils were awarded full bursaries to attend Brighton College's sixth form.

Kingsford

Kingsford School is at the end of the line, 500 yards from the Dockland Light Railway's easternmost terminus. It is north of North Woolwich, south of East Ham and, for many people, the back of beyond. It stands on ground that once formed part of the industrial site that contained the Beckton Gas Works, the largest gas works in Europe, as well as factories of commodities such as ink, dyes, mothballs, and fertilizers - all by-products of the gas making process. An extensive toxic spoil-heap from the Gasworks, known ironically as 'Beckton Alps' was turned into an artificial ski slope and opened in the 1980s with great fanfare by Princess Diana. It is now derelict. With the gas works closing their gates in the 1960s, Beckton had to find a new industry to call their own and today it is the home of Britain's largest sewage plant.

Kingsford School opened its doors for the first time in 2000, and in 2005 became a specialist language college. There are some 1500 pupils, with approximately three hundred in each year group. The vast majority of all students are from minority ethnic backgrounds; the main groups being Black African, Black Caribbean, White Other (where interestingly Lithuanian is the largest group) and Bangladeshi. Two-thirds of pupils do not have English as their first language (together, they speak more than 50 languages) and some 15 per cent are refugees. A third are on the register of special needs and about a half of the pupils are eligible for free school meals. Three pupils have been murdered over the last few years, and several others have been seriously injured in gang-related violence.

Brighton College

Brighton College is situated in chic yet still raffish district of Kemptown in the east of the city. Formerly a run-down and rather seedy backwater, Kemptown is now seen as a hot-spot of bohemian elegance and is a vibrant maze of coffee shops, pubs and clubs. It is the gay district of the gay capital of Britain where any violence is usually drink-related.

Brighton College itself was founded in 1845. It is an independent school for children aged 3 to 18, with a separate Prep and Pre-Prep school and a Senior College with approximately 900 pupils in years 7 to 13. Unusually both the Senior School and Prep School have pupils in years 7 and 8, those in the Prep School sitting Common Entrance exams at the end of Year 8, those already in the College taking internal exams. The fees are in the region of £15,000 a year for day pupils and £25,000 for full boarders. Pupils are mostly white British – with a small but significant minority of students from Hong Kong and the Chinese mainland, and all pupils are able to speak English fluently.

In its recent Independent Schools Inspection, Brighton College was deemed excellent in all areas. Kingsford's recent Ofsted report, on the other hand, was disappointing. Academically Brighton College is proud to claim itself as the most successful co-educational school in the country. Kingsford is significantly lower in the league tables.

The Exchange

I instigated the exchange between myself and Fr Fred of Kingsford partly to get out of my comfort zone and explore and develop my roles as both teacher and chaplain, but also to experience teaching in a decidedly more raw environment – and to give myself a smidge of credibility at the Farmington Conference.

I had been to Kingsford several times, so knew in part, what I letting myself in for, but when the Rev Swap was announced we were mutually surprised about the preconceived ideas that colleagues at our respective institutions, thought about the other. Some, for example, think that Brighton College children all spend their days learning polo and the proper use of a butter knife; they are exclusively the sons and daughters of the landed gentry or new money property developers. For them, Brighton College is the Rugby School of Arnold's days or the Brookfield School that played host to Mr Chips, where fourth formers are only allowed to walk on the Chapel lawns if they have double barreled names, and this only on a Thursday

Kingsford pupils, on the other hand, according to some of my colleagues, are all thugs, with flick knives in their back pockets ready to pounce if you say one word against them. I knew better, of course; Kingsford pupils are in the main charming, and at Brighton College children with double-barreled names can walk on the Chapel lawn only on a Tuesday, not Thursday. Fr Fred, my "oppo" in all this, had visited Brighton College several times and knew, too what he was letting himself in for. He said – several times – how he was more than happy to take over the chaplaincy reins at Brighton College, and joked about how he would have to polish his shoes every day, and learn to speak "posh".

In his role as Community Cohesion Officer, Fred does not teach, and so our exchange was held at a time when Brighton College GCSE pupils were just taking their exams or on study leave, but when years 7, 8 and 9 in the college, and the pupils at the pre-Prep and Prep school were still very much in situ. Following my normal practice, he taught some eighteen periods a week and led an assembly or a chapel service every day, prepared weekday and weekend services, and visited the boarding communities or attended cultural events (Jazz Night, Fourth form boarders' bowling and pizza, Prep School dance show and the like) pretty much every evening.

Going the other way, I was to observe lessons in RS and Sociology and teach where the Head deemed appropriate, and take over the pastoral reins as the Community Cohesion Officer, liaising between the school and surrounding areas of Beckton, East Ham, Custom House and beyond. This entailed, amongst other things, visiting homes of pupils and attending local council events where the school required representation. Based in the Ethnic Minority Base rooms, I was to spend several hours a day listening to, and trying to help, pupils with a variety of problems, both major and minor.

And so the swap began... and what I had NOT expected as I moved from my basement flat in a regency terrace to the Beckton Premier Inn, was the impact the shape of the day had on pupils and on teachers.

The Shape of the Day

Brighton College's day is long – and here I am talking exclusively about the College's senior school for pupils aged between 11 and 18. We start with registration and a chapel service or assembly at 8.30 and finish, nine 35-minute lessons later, at 4pm. The next couple of hours are filled with revision clinics, and opportunities to take part in sport / drama / dance / art / music etc. Buses are on hand to take day pupils home from 5pm, and boarders, who make up about a quarter of the pupil body, have two evening Prep Sessions of 45 minutes apiece.

During the day there are two main breaks – 25 minutes in the morning and, depending on the day and year group, up to an hour at lunch time (during which there are an array of clubs and activities taking place). Pupils move freely from place to place.

At Kingsford the day begins with registration at 8.30 followed by three one-hour lessons, then a break for 25 minutes for the entire pupil body, followed by two further one-hour lessons. Movement around school is strongly constrained. Pupils cannot move from one part of the building to another, as the doors are only accessible with the use of a key-card pressed against an electronic reader. Between lessons pupils have to walk quickly from class to class as the first minute or so of Mozart's Symphony Number 40 is played over the school tannoy. Pupils have to be in their new classrooms before Mozart's up. School finishes at 2.10 and, as the school prospectus states, the "core school day" ends at 2.15pm. The extended school day ends at 3.30.

Physical Resources

As to physical resources, Brighton College has, as one would expect, myriad classrooms, but interestingly not one is actually specified as an RS classroom. As a part consequence, I teach in ten different classrooms this year, ranging from the back of the art room (in which, out of principle rather than actual need, I demand that I wear a smock as there is danger of getting covered in paint) to a lecture theatre, where there is no opportunity to move around. By contrast the rooms are big and utilitarian at Kingsford, and there is ample space for group work, and for the teacher to see and assess the work of each pupil.

While the Kingsford pupils themselves may be economically deprived, Kingsford Community School has money, and the RE classrooms are fully stocked with “Smart Boards” and white boards, books and visual aids.

The Curriculum

Years 7 and 8

In years 7 and 8, Kingsford Community School introduces its pupils to the six major faiths. Under the banners of “Ideas about God”, “Ideas about Humanity”, “Ideas about Journeying” and “Sacred Time and Space”, pupils learn of the key beliefs of Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Sikhism and Buddhism and Christianity.

Fundamentals of three faiths - Hinduism, Islam, and Buddhism - are presented in two of the half-yearly sections over two years, while Judaism and Sikhism only crop up one half year. Christianity, on the other hand, is taught throughout the two years, alongside what is termed “Humanism” – an overview of critical non faith-based issues, as well as agnosticism, atheism, what is meant by ‘the spiritual’ and turning points in life.

In years 7 and 8, Brighton College does something very different. The College’s Lower School (that is Years 7 and 8) has only been in existence for two years and decided to write its own new curriculum. Its highly publicized “Story of Our Land” course is a conflation of history, geography and religious studies in which pupils learn of the history and culture of Great Britain.

The religious studies element of this two-year course is, I have to confess, something of a bee in my bonnet. After the briefest of looks at Judaism, the Lower Third – Year 7 – learn the basics of Christianity but through a historical perspective – learning objectives include, for instance, understanding the importance of the synod of Whitby in 664 and the reasons behind Henry II’s assassination of Becket. Year 8 pupils consider Christianity again, but this time through the lens of the reformation. They are asked to learn the key features of Calvinism as opposed to Presbyterianism and consider the nature of Edward VI’s Protestantism. At Brighton College, years 7 and 8 pupils do not study any aspects of Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism or Sikhism – faiths that some may argue have an important role to play in British history and culture.

Years 9, 10 and 11

Year 9 at Kingsford is the beginning of two years preparation for the OCR GCSE short course. “Religious Studies B – Philosophy and Applied Ethics” is a compulsory “core subject”, in which the topics of peace and justice, poverty and wealth, human relationships, abortion, euthanasia, medical ethics and prejudice and equality are studied against the backdrop of religion. Those Kingsford pupils who opt to continue with a full course GCSE, spend Year 11 looking at notions of good and evil, peace and justice, the media and spiritual experience.

Year 9 and Brighton is a “fallow” internally-examined year. It is divided into two sections. “Religion and Society” addresses issues such as sacred space, religious dress and music, psalmody, poetry, spirituality and something new to some of our pupils – Scripture, while “Human Rights and Human Wrongs” is the philosophical element of the course, introducing pupils to the virtue ethics, philosophy of the mind, Kant, Bentham, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and what it means to be human or to be good.

In Year 10, about half the Brighton College year group (about 75) opt to take the two-year AQA “Religious Studies B” Full Course (the short course is not offered), comprising “Religion and Life” issues (Abortion, Prejudice, Animal Rights, War and Peace, the Environmental Ethics etc) and “Religion and Morality” (including poverty, issues of life and death, drug abuse and crime and punishment). Pupils are offered to choose which two religions to specialize in, and the course is normally taught using the teachings of Christianity and Islam.

Contact Time

Before any comparison can be made as to content, it is important to note the actual amount of contact time in the two very different educational institutions. At Brighton College, the triple-subject “Story of Our Land” is taught over five 35 minute lessons a week, while Year 9 pupils have only one 35 minute lesson a week. By contrast, Kingsford Pupils in years 7 to 9 have one hour a week of Religious Education – twice as much as their independent school counterparts.

Contact time for GCSE is a different kettle of fish. Year 10 and 11 pupils have one hour of “Philosophy and Applied Ethics” a fortnight, (pupils have actively petitioned for more classroom time in the subject) while those studying RS for GCSE at Brighton College are taught over two and a quarter hours a week. In 2010 Kingsford achieved 85% A-C in its full course, less so for the short course; Brighton College, you will probably not be surprised to learn, achieved 100% As and A*s.

The Teachers

Some anecdotal remarks about the teachers themselves. At Kingsford, the head of Department is the only subject specialist. He is a person of faith as are several of his colleagues. At Brighton College we have two subject specialists, both of whom are atheist philosophers. (I used to be head of department and teach RS exclusively, but now my need to meet as many young pupils as possible means that I also teach Latin, Geography as well as RS).

Delivery

Finally, but crucially I would suggest, I want to compare the delivery of religious education at the two schools outside the classroom. As mentioned before, my role as Chaplain at Brighton College includes leading services or assemblies in each of the three schools (Pre-Prep, Prep and College at least once a week). In addition to this, there is a weekly Holy Communion service, Bible study classes, prayer meetings, confirmation classes, and addresses in Chapel on matters religious or spiritual by other members of staff. The school is situated in what is often described as the secular capital (as well as the gay capital) of Britain, and most pupils come through its gates for the first time never having set foot inside a place of worship. There is no communicant member of the Church of England on the Senior Management Team, and my line manager - in charge of all matters related to the Chapel - is an avowed atheist. The work of a chaplain is therefore hardly preaching to the converted.

Brighton College does not teach Christianity confessionally, and pupils of other faiths are not just tolerated but celebrated, but a priest in clerical attire is part of the fabric of the institution.

At Kingsford, there is no chaplain. Fr Fred is the Community Cohesion Officer, and spends much of his time working with pupils whose home lives can often be in a state of turbulence. Sometimes he wears his clericals, sometimes he wears a jacket and tie. And while I did not come across a specifically faith based extra-curricular activity at Kingsford, anecdotal evidence suggests that there are, in fact, more religiously practicing pupils in Beckton than in Brighton. The Head Teacher told me how she went recently into a class where the pupils were giving a substitute teacher a hard time and found, amidst all the mayhem, a pupil quietly reading their personal copy of the Bible. During my three weeks there, I spent some time during my exchange chatting with a group of Muslim girls about our respective faiths – something I have rarely done with any of the few Muslim pupils at Brighton.

Preliminary Findings

The Physical

The first thing I was reminded of was the tangible difference that physical surroundings have in delivering religious education both in and outside the classroom. While both Brighton and Kingsford do not have dedicated RE classrooms, the Humanities block classrooms at Kingsford are all uniform in size, with sufficient space to enable full participation from each pupil to be expected and monitored. On my return to Brighton, I was struck how I had to bring my resources to the classroom rather than house them in a specific classroom. This must and surely can be addressed without too much grief, I suggest, in order to use what precious little contact time we have with our pupils at Brighton College most beneficially.

And while on the matter of resources, I recognised how comparatively poorly funded the RE department at Brighton appeared to be; every College pupil has their own textbook or workbook and every room its own “Smart Board,” yes, but other materials are simply not to hand.

In contrast, the freedom of movement allowed Brighton College pupils creates a less stressed, less tense atmosphere. While I am sympathetic to the needs to reduce the mobility of Kingsford pupils, I do wish a way could be found to enable some element of freedom, especially at the 25-minute break-time, which had all the hallmarks of a prison allowing inmates the opportunity to use the exercise yard.

As for the delivery of RE outside the classroom, I was struck how there really isn’t an educational world outside the classroom for the Kingsford children. With the exception of the weekly assembly, to which I will return briefly, contact time is minimal and often one of encouragement to move from “a” to “b”. The provision of extra tuition offered to Kingsford pupils is scattershot, while at Brighton it is the norm.

I spoke at some length with the Headmistress of Kingsford about soft skills. At Kingsford the walls are decorated with A* quality work from pupils, and posters along the corridors encouraging pupils

to believe themselves and do their best in all areas of life. But, given the physical layout of the school and the demands of the timetable, it was hard for these values to be expressed; the noise that was heard as pupils moved from class to class drowned out Mozart, and manners were subsumed by a need to be themselves for one minute every hour.

Ms Deslandes lamented the lack of opportunity for basic manners – saying hello, holding open doors, etc – to be exhibited at her school. I lamented with her; manners are essential to getting on in life and while not the exclusive preserve of the RE department curriculum, do find their meaning there. I was acutely aware how the values, shared and espoused by all religions – values of kindness, and courtesy, tolerance and service – are celebrated at both institutions, but lived out very differently.

The Temporal

a) The one hour Beckton lesson, almost twice as long as the Brighton College lesson, allows for greater depth and exploration into a project, but I did find it was stretched both teacher and pupil to the limit. The half-hour College lessons, by contrast, are comparatively fast-paced, if not manic. I'm no OFSTED inspector or educationist, but I did wonder if one sixty-minute lesson once every two weeks really is the optimum means to teach the final year of RE at GCSE level.

b) And as mentioned before, the difference in the two schools shape of the day affected me profoundly. Maybe this is the state sector norm, but the three one-hour lessons, followed by 25-minute lunch and then two further one-hour lessons seemed to me to be harsh and over-demanding on the pupil body. Few people work successfully three hours on the trot, and I felt that it was simply not a healthy way to learn any subject, especially one like RE that so often welcomes lateral and critical thinking.

c) The lack of contact time outside the classroom, meanwhile, did create a feeling of “them and us” at Beckton, which is not present at Brighton. This was one area where, I was acutely aware, the school fees go.

The Spiritual

I wonder whether there might be any mileage in considering a programme to encourage and develop the spiritual side of Kingsford pupils. The weekly assembly slots are there pretty much exclusively for information delivery with, if they are lucky, five minutes max for something non-curricular to be addressed.

Anglican Foundation Brighton College, in contrast, has a glorious chapel, for which I am deeply grateful, and pupils do visit it regularly and some claim to enjoy it, but I do wonder (and I would say this wouldn't I?) if an Anglican foundation needs to be so very secular, where the staff, if not the pupils, appear to be less open to matters spiritual and religious than at Kingsford.

The Personal

It is the people, not the place that make a school. And I have to say I love both Kingsford Community School and Brighton College. I have a fantastic job at the latter that pulls me wonderfully this way and that and challenges me daily. But I also enjoyed a fabulous three weeks in Beckton and, hand on heart, I am really looking forward to my next visit.

It is people rather than policy that binds us together, and I have been especially proud of the scholarship programme between the two schools.

Conclusion

RE is taught with passion at both Brighton College and Kingsford in diverse “inner city” surroundings. Brighton College is not about butter knives and searching for Amelia’s hockey stick, but about getting the best out of a child. Kingsford community school, meanwhile, is not about breaking up gang knife fights in the corridors and teachers daily facing potential abuse ... but also about getting the best out of a child.

Those who teach RE in both schools, and I include those like Fr Fred in his role as Community Cohesion Officer, are battling somewhat against the tide - Michael Gove and his “Ebacc” policy is just one example - but as long as they teach with passion, they will remain an extraordinary force for good in our schools. I’m a lightweight in that I only teach eighteen periods a week, and I take my metaphorical hat off to those who devote themselves full time to the RE classroom, be it in the state or independent sectors. You are an inspiration.

Acknowledgements

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This small piece of research is dedicated to the memory of Jennigan, a courageous young man from Kingsford who put everything into perspective.