

# Religious Education



## Holmfirth High School

**AW, Headteacher:** Holmfirth High School's a school of thirteen hundred children, we're in a semi-rural location, a little above the national average in terms of socio-economic mix, but a fairly typical comprehensive school.

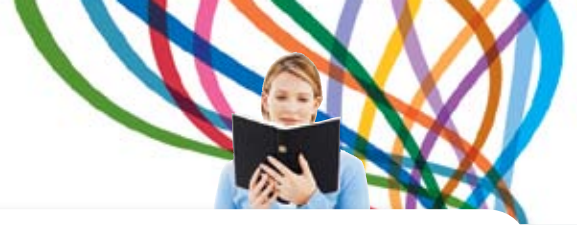
Local networks are very important for us because it gives us an opportunity to share ideas with other teachers, stimulate thinking and share some of the burden of creating the resources and ideas that we need to develop here with children.

**AR, Subject leader** (in class): Well we're going to take this big key question today: did the universe happen by chance or did somebody make it?

**AR:** When we listened to students, we found they were very keen to look at what we would call ultimate questions, and in particular the question: did the universe happen by chance or was there a creator behind it. In response to that, we developed some teaching resources, some research materials that would help them access those really quite deep philosophical questions.

**AR** (in class): So there are three arguments about why God exists, first cause: design and experience, OK? I'm going to give you in a moment a resource we've developed to help you, so a card with one of those arguments on and some points about it and I want you to think of the points that are good about it, the holes you can pick in it, and one question you might like to ask the person who came up with this theory.

**AR:** The question, did the universe happen by chance, links very well to the key concepts in the new secondary curriculum of beliefs, teachings and sources and also meaning, purpose and truth; so we've tried to design it to link to those basic bits of architecture.



**Pupil:** This could just be, kind of, what persuaded him to become a Christian in the first place so he might just be relaying that, I mean if it's enough to convert him, why would he have to make it biased?

**Pupil:** What question have you got for Thomas Aquinas?

**Pupil:** Well we can ask him about God and what caused him,... because according to his theory, everything should be caused by God.

**AR (in class):** So we've had a chance to look at the different theories about God's existence that you've been given ..., let's see what you thought about them. So first of all let's think of the first cause theory, Thomas Aquinas.

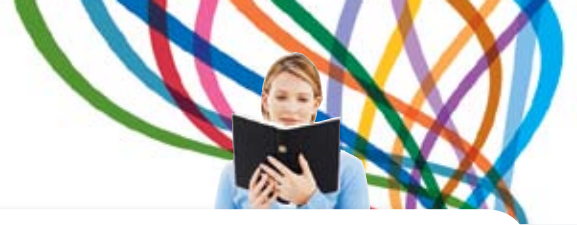
**Pupil:** I think the scientific theory is probably the best one because that's the only one which has been proved.

**Pupil:** Well I just think the first cause is a good argument because if you keep on going, you know, past events in history including the big bang, you kind of eventually hit a barrier that we just can't comprehend.

**AR:** Students like to be stretched, they don't always say it but actually they do, and this was a deeper question than I think they originally thought. They also really valued the teamwork, and the task of presenting something together to the rest of the class and hearing what they had to say.

**Pupil (giving presentation):** So many religious texts say that the Earth was made by God, they must be right. What else could have happened?

**AR:** What I really liked about their presentations was first of all that they enjoyed it, and some of them said it was scary but having done it, they felt a sense of achievement; and then secondly, they learnt about digging around about a question, that there wasn't a simple answer, and to me that's one of the key things about RE is you ask questions why and you don't settle for simplistic easy answers, so the fact they discovered that I think was really important.



*[Applause]*

**AR:** One of the things we've done is apply to NATRE for a grant to do some work for the new secondary curriculum so we've carefully listened to what students thought, through questionnaires and in other ways and we've set up a group of writers, split them into pairs, basically to write some units of work and resources for the new curriculum based on those student needs.

*[Planning meeting]*

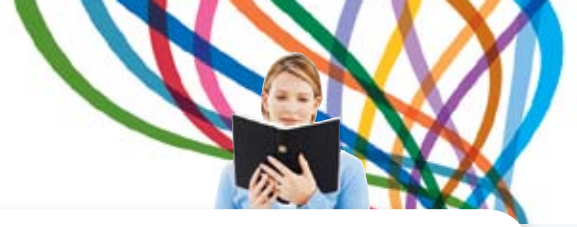
**AR:** It seems like they've really gone for those ultimate questions, I mean looking at the questions on the front page, one's like what happens after death, is there a God, where do we come from, there's other topics too and they were keen to cover those as well, but those ultimate questions are key ones so obviously (absolutely) we need to make sure our learning is designed around that.

**Teacher A:** I think there's a big interest from the children on philosophical units so topics where we could possibly use the P4C approach, because they enjoyed discussion in whole class, and it's a really really valuable tool either at the end of a unit or at the beginning of a unit to use those higher-order thinking skills.

**AR:** Right, if we think of the kind of, the three questions that we want to work our planning around, what we're trying to do, how are we going to do it and how do we see if it works. What we really want to do, I think we're coming to the conclusion, is get our gang of teachers together to work together on some units that will excite and interest pupils around the topics here that they've, they've identified,... that's what we're going to do that interests them and engages them and extends their learning.

**Teacher B:** And it's very important as well that with such a philosophical question we'll enable them to access the spiritual, so how can they ... create a personal response, maybe response which has a degree of, sort of, awe and wonder attached to it, so that they actually then make a real connection between their own lives and what is essentially a philosophical question.

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**Pupil:** I'm a pretty firm atheist and I don't believe God exists but, out of most of the theories for God existing I believe the design theory is the best because, well I read somewhere that the human eye can make 250 calculations in about ... 3 milliseconds I think it was and it would take our most powerful super-computers to do that in, like, two lifetimes so it is pretty complicated, our human body and other things around us so it probably didn't happen by chance.

**AR:** You can listen to students in lots of different ways – sometimes it's just teachers' nous, you hear it, you're used to it, but there is a use as well in resorting to more formal methods so we've done some questionnaires with some classes, we also have here at Holmfirth a,... what we call a pupil voice group where we have some students from each year group who meet with us regularly to reflect on the curriculum, the things they like, the topics they'd like to cover and the way it's taught.

**JE, Teacher** (in class): ... much like you did with Year 8 'cos you did a great job with Year 8, have that discussion in your groups and then we'll come back together and see what you think about Year 9. OK? Off you go then.

**JE:** I think with the focus group the important thing is to listen to students with regard to their experience of the whole school curriculum.

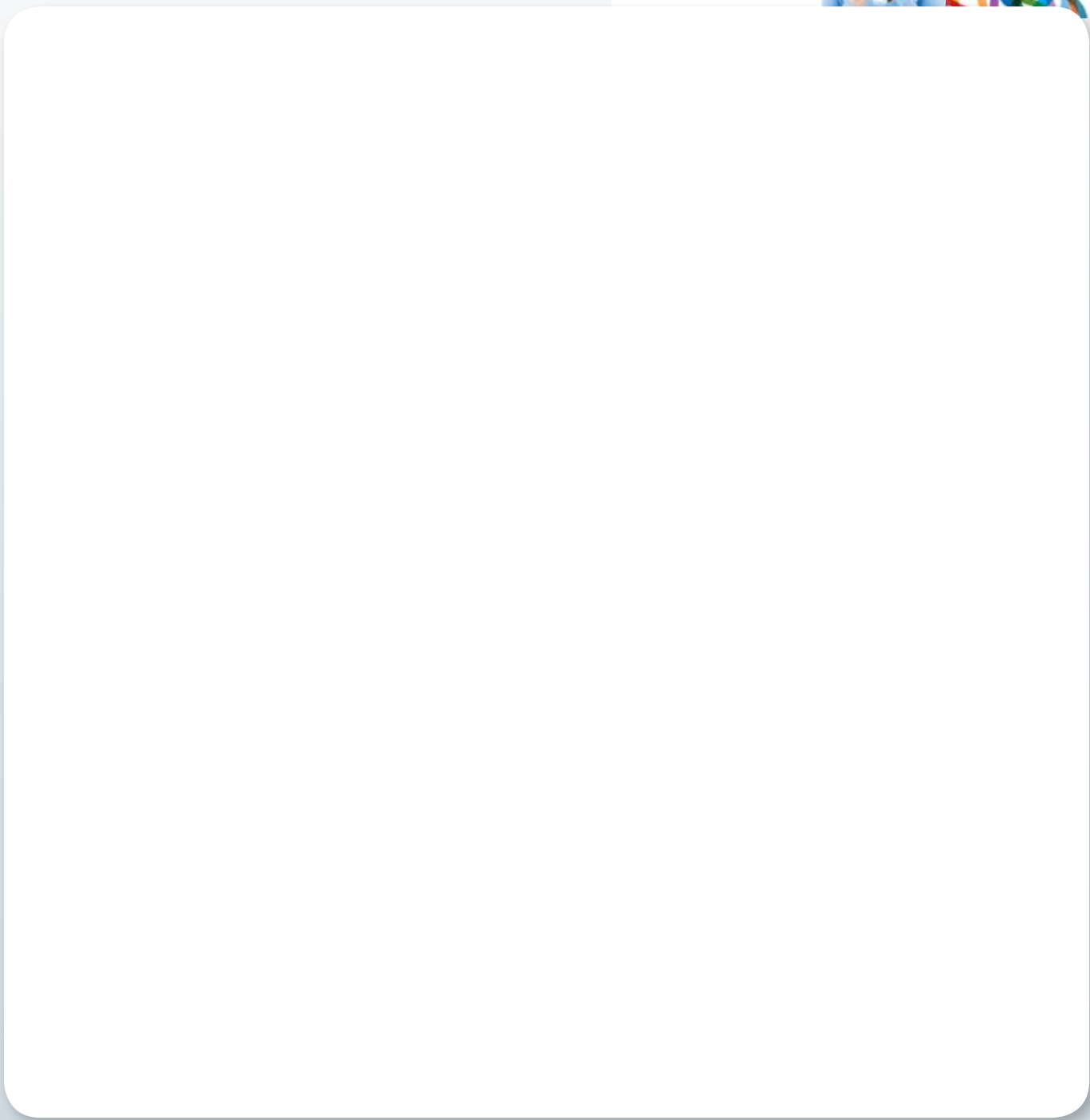
**Pupil:** We thought that you should have more ultimate questions, like if there's an afterlife ... and you could link that in with the RE to make it really interesting.

**JE** (in class): So did you feel that the ultimate questions was not high enough profile in Year 9.

**Pupil:** No.

**AR:** The three key questions in the new secondary curriculum are the same as for any project really – what do you want to do, how are you going to do it, and has it worked? and I think they've really helped us just focus on the task so we've listened to students, we've thought about needs, we've planned what we want to do. We've set about it with the group that we've put together and it remains to be seen how that evaluates in the future.

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National  
Curriculum

Working in partnership to support  
delivery of the new National Curriculum  
Part of the 14–19 education and skills programme