The vestments activity

The Bangor Cathedral Research Project
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Learning outside the classroom

It has been said that for much of human history people have used the exterior world for learning, only relatively recently has this been located within a classroom. There has been much talk in recent years about the merit of 'Learning Outside the Classroom', a government initiative committed to 'raising achievement through an organised, powerful approach to learning in which direct experience is of prime importance'. Out of classroom learning offers experiences that cannot be replicated within the classroom, and can raise learners' self-esteem, motivation and appetite for learning. While much has been written about the impact of outdoor education on participating learners, particularly in enhancing learners' knowledge, understanding and appreciation for the natural environment, relatively little evaluation has been made of out of

The Christmas carol activity

classroom experiences in the context of a place of worship.

Setting the scene

There has been a growing interest among academics in recent years in the function, role and impact the nation's cathedrals have in society. A number of research projects have been initiated which seek to assess different aspects of engagement cathedrals' have with their communities. One such research project has focused on cathedrals' work with schools and in education more broadly. The project has a number of key elements. First, to gain an overview of the educational work cathedrals are involved in across England and Wales. Secondly, to locate this work within cathedrals' wider mission brief and third, to establish whether cathedral education has any effect on its participants. This article is focused on the latter of these research aims.

The research is set in the context of Bangor Cathedral, an Anglican church in North Wales, as it has sought to develop its ministry among schools and young people. Central to this was the creation of activities and workshops that mapped onto the National Exemplar Framework for RE in Wales. This was achieved in collaboration with CYNNAL, Conwy, Denbighshire and Flintshire LA and the St Mary's Centre, a charity with a focus in generating original curriculum resources and high-quality research. This fruitful collaboration led to the establishment of the first annual RE Day at Bangor Cathedral on 21 November 2011, which involved groups of learners from 17 schools from across North Wales. The day's activities were focused around the theme of 'Christmas'.

The Christmas Crib activity

The research sought to ascertain what impact, if any, the experience of RE in a cathedral would have on the participating learners and their understanding of the Christmas season. Six activities or workshops were devised: a Godly Play story about Advent, bible stories around a Christmas Crib, building a Nativity scene with Lego blocks, enacting the story of Mary and Joseph with hand-puppets, learning and singing Christmas carols, and Christmas vesture, liturgical colours and the Christian year. Each workshop lasted twenty minutes.

To gather the data necessary, an activity booklet was created that asked pupils to reflect on the question: 'What is the meaning of Christmas?' The booklet was designed in two parts; the first part was administered to participating learners before their visit to the cathedral, and the second part was administered after the visit. Both parts asked the same question, with the second part adding an emphasis on reflecting on their cathedral based experiences. The response was very high. Of the 350 learners present in the cathedral, 310 completed and returned the activity booklets.

An analytical framework was created based on the learners' responses, and 17 categories were identified from recurring words and pictures, ranging from Food and Drink and Family to Weather and Religious Language. The data was then analysed to see how many times each category occurred in each part of the activity booklet.

Results

The results revealed a dramatic decrease in occurrences of items belonging to most of the categories in part two of the activity booklet, after the cathedral visit. For example, prior to the visit, there were 210 incidences of items belonging to the Family category. This decreased to 33 after the visit. Conversely, three categories experienced a dramatic increase after the visit. These were Explicit Religion, defined as 'reference to specifically Christian beliefs and practices', which increased from 177 to 289, Music, which increased from 32 to 65 and Religious Language, which increased from 22 to 44. These data show that the cathedral-based education activities helped to focus the learners' understanding of the meaning of Christmas, and deepened their knowledge of Christian beliefs and practices. The increase in incidences of items belonging to the Music category after the visit evidences the success of the musical workshop, and suggests that the musical activities such as carol singing had sufficient impact for learners to incorporate music into their understanding of the meaning of Christmas. Additionally, the large increase in the use of religious vocabulary indicated that learners possessed a greater confidence of expression after their visit than before.

Table: frequency by category before and after the visit

category	before visit	after visit
Gift-receiving	282	66
Implicit Religion	244	33
Food	210	33
Affective	203	106
Family	196	32
Explicit Religion	177	289
Weather	136	20
Play	120	16
School	65	7
Gift-giving	37	10
Music	32	65
Citizenship	27	15
Religious Language	22	44
Community	19	11
Shopping	19	3
TV/Film	18	5
Thanksgiving	14	5

Conclusion

The research project set out to evaluate the impact of Learning Outside the Classroom in the context of an Anglican cathedral in Wales. The results of the research show the extent to which the cathedral workshop activities affected learners' understanding of the meaning of Christmas, through enhancing their knowledge and appreciation of particular aspects of the celebration, and through providing a context in which a broader use of religious language could be used. It is hoped that future events can build on the good work that has already been achieved.