

TEXTS
AND
TEACHERS

OPENING THE DOOR TO HERMENEUTICAL RE

THE FINDINGS REPORT



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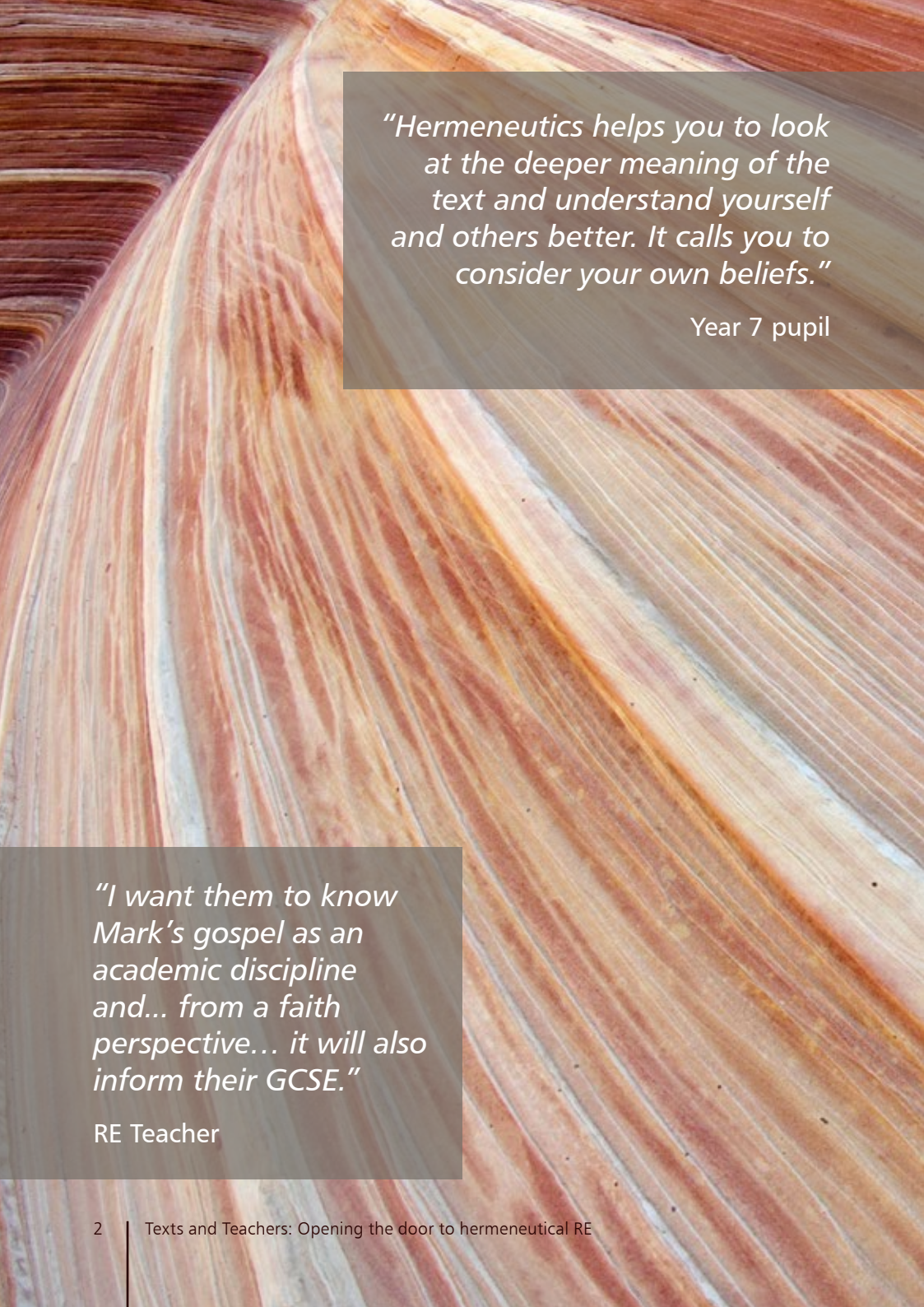
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"Hermeneutics helps you to look at the deeper meaning of the text and understand yourself and others better. It calls you to consider your own beliefs."

Year 7 pupil

"I want them to know Mark's gospel as an academic discipline and... from a faith perspective... it will also inform their GCSE."

RE Teacher



BACKGROUND

Should schools help students become good interpreters of religion, worldviews, and sacred texts? Should they help students explore what it means to be a sacred text scholar?

This report is for all those interested in teaching sacred texts, in particular the Bible and texts sacred to Muslims including the Qur'an. This project was part of *REsearch 7*, a Culham St Gabriel's initiative. Academic papers about the project will be forthcoming in research journals and monographs. It took place between October 2018 and July 2019.

Many secondary pupils encounter texts in fragments, collected by topic, and used as proof texts for argumentation.¹ The texts themselves are rarely studied in their own terms. Currently, curriculum debates are framed by the language of powerful knowledge and disciplines, and therefore it is timely to consider a scholarly *hermeneutical* approach to connect the classroom subject to advances in understanding sacred texts. Hermeneutics is the art or science of interpretation, concerned with meaning and significance. In this project we also refer to *Sacred Text Study* and *Sacred Text Scholarship* to describe the hermeneutical aspects of disciplinary study, especially in relation to studies of the Bible in Christian faith, and the Qur'an and Hadith in Muslim faith.

Anthony C. Thiselton, English Anglican priest, theologian, and leading scripture scholar, observed that when his students studied hermeneutics their understanding and approach to sacred texts changed.² The hypothesis of this project was that exposure to hermeneutics and sacred text scholarship might improve classroom confidence, competence, practice and understanding.

1 Bowie, R. and Coles, R. (2018) 'We reap what we 'sew': perpetuating biblical illiteracy in new English Religious Studies exams and the proof text binary question' *British Journal of Religious Education* 40(3) 277-287

2 Thiselton, A., C. (1992) *New Horizons in Hermeneutics*, Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA, Zondervan, 199

WHAT WE DID

We recruited ten participant teachers from seven secondary schools with diverse pupil population profiles and socio-economic and cultural contexts. Initial telephone interviews were followed by drawing up some plans of the teachers' ideas about what they might want to test in their classrooms.

The teachers were given some CPD about hermeneutics and its application. A CPD day involved an introduction to hermeneutics, sacred text scholarship, and expert guidance on classroom hermeneutics. There was also time for planning discussions. The CPD also involved six online 'bookclub' sessions on a group video conferencing system following a set of readings.

The participant teachers were introduced to a range of hermeneutical questions and how this applies in sacred text study, including:

- questions around the intention of authors, how audiences first heard sacred texts, the significance of the settings in which texts emerged.
- exploring the norms that developed in reading sacred texts such as how the books within the Bible reference each other, and how the Bible is traditionally read as a whole in Christian life, rather than in fragments.
- an introduction to key hermeneutical ideas such as the polyphonic nature of texts, where layers of meanings exist within texts. One example of this is how the New Testament Gospels contain both the stories of Jesus, and the early Christian understanding of their experience of the post Easter event, and then that these are all read now in present minds living in new conditions.
- participants were introduced to readerly approaches to the text, how texts are understood in light of different contexts and conditions and why this leads to different understandings and how they are read from the present into the past through those layers of meaning.

- philosophical questions such as the question about where meaning resides (in the author's mind, the audience's hearing, the community of faith understanding, the particular reader's consciousness).
- an exploration of some issues around hermeneutics in the Christian Bible and the Qur'an and the relationship between teacher activity with texts in classrooms with pupils of different faith perspectives.
- specific advice and guidance was given on techniques around exploring texts with examples and there was an overarching emphasis on teaching longer extracts from texts.
- exploring language and key terms relevant to sacred text study and scholarship. Here are some of those terms:

Audience

Author

Chain of meaning

Context

Death of the author problem

Hermeneutics

Historical Critical

Interpretation

Literal

Literary Form

Meaning

Multi-dimensional

Polyphonic

Pretext

Reader

Reading

Rereader

Rereading

Sense

Setting

Significance


Spiritual

Symbolic

Text

"The text we are teaching in Year 7, just looking at Muhammed's final speech. We're actually unpicking text and looking at what's important in the text and what's being said and why and the context that they've learnt about when Muhammed was living."

Frances



"I thought 'This isn't going to work, the kids don't like reading', but actually they enjoyed it."

Frances

Resources that explored certain texts and also readings from the scholarship of hermeneutics were provided to the participants and discussed.

The participants then planned a sequence of lessons taking ideas from the CPD and readings and adapting their curricula. The teachers identified part of their curricula and made changes to lessons which they taught in spring and summer terms. They drew up change/adaptation plans which they shared with the researchers and each other. The researchers decided that it was important to support the participants in interpreting their context and applying hermeneutical techniques that they saw as achievable in their setting, rather than asking them to deliver a preconceived sequence of lessons. A change in the way people saw sacred texts was thought by the researchers to be a precursor to classroom practice change.

At the end of the summer term there were in-depth individual interviews of all the participants, carried out by the principle investigators. They were narrative in style and went into considerable depth, with participants relating aspects of scripture scholarship and hermeneutics to incidents in their classrooms. Participants referred to examples of their planning and students' work which they had collected. The evidence that interviewing can be empowering is important here not least as in the initial stages of the project the participants had expressed some concerns about their confidence in this area. Interviews were transcribed and analysed for commonalities and contextual differences.

A premise for this study was that teachers could change aspects of their curricula, if given some subject specific support, and that if they saw advantages to what was being done, they might transfer it more generally into their general practice and planning for the future.

WHAT WE FOUND

This is a general summary of the key findings. Names have been changed.

1 The teachers described a sense of agency that hermeneutical tools gave students in activities around the interpretation of sacred text.

Rather than simply passing information on to students, whether a singularly conceived set of information, or a set of contrasting views, the project opened up some of the processes that sacred text scholars used to analyse texts, including methods that reflected on traditional readings and also the process of new readings with the student as reader. Teachers in half of the schools saw in this approach, a way to integrate personal responses into this academic hermeneutical approach. Rather than simply rehearsing information, classrooms become sites of active exploration of meaning.

We have done more explicit teaching of interpretation of text with them so whatever stories we do look at they've got tools so they don't just say "Yeah but how could they fit all those animals in an ark" but instead say, "Hang on a minute, let's just think... It depends what your interpretation of the story is to why it matters" That was her, that wasn't me teaching ... it's them becoming more independent in those skills. (Frances)

2 The teachers reported that pupils were positive about engaging with longer extracts of sacred text including students who they had thought would struggle or lack motivation on such activities.

Studying longer passages was something that the participants felt was something they needed to do, in part to counter the overuse of short quotes, which they had not seen ways of doing before. The focus on sacred text study permitted longer text study. Despite some prior concerns about students not enjoying this, the encounter with the texts, in context and at length, went well with the pupils.

The majority enjoyed that lesson, to my surprise, because it was with Year 8's and was heavily based on reading texts, and they loved it, because they could have this physicality, I would say autonomy to get the texts, to read the texts, comment on the texts. They enjoy having the book in front of them, it was something interesting. (Hazel)

We would normally have a set regime of how we would do the reading ... a first reading which we would use to clear any misunderstandings, make sure any vocabulary issues were cleared up, make sure everybody could access the text. And then there would be a second reading, ... together or they'd do it individually,

... they would become more independent about this ... We would start looking at different types of commentaries and discussions and start to look at where there might be variants in understanding and conclusion coming from the text and discuss how it is that that was coming about, why it was coming about ... without necessarily coming to too many conclusions about those questions ... Again, in a sense trying to focus on where some of those transferable skills were in terms of becoming more sophisticated readers in again what I understand to be the, that kind of ideal reader. (Jim, talking about the systematic approach to reading sacred texts he developed.)

3 Hermeneutical approaches in these cases led to a deeper quality of conversation in lessons about texts.

Many of the teachers spoke in similar terms about doing something new with texts. A threshold was crossed that had not been crossed before. Even experienced teachers found this, and these changes happened irrespective of the nature of the school or the age of the children taught, across the whole secondary age range including Year 7 pupils. This resulted in a quite different kind of classroom conversation that the teachers found compelling. Students picked up the idea of hermeneutical tools and applied them.

I think it's definitely a higher-level knowledge than they would have known before... So I think the lesson changed from being them picking out stuff in a picture and me telling them what it is, to them being able to do it themselves to a certain degree because they could. They had the picture and they had the text. And they could cross reference it themselves. (Jen, talking about a lesson where she focussed on a long extract of text before looking at the art.)

4 Hermeneutics was seen as a valuable dimension in curriculum design allowing for progression through multi religious study.

All of the teachers expressed an intention to change their curricula to focus more on texts and hermeneutics after the project. Teachers in two of the schools developed ways of teaching hermeneutics in a curriculum that progressed from Christianity to Islam.

If you asked the kids they could tell you that there are different interpretations of a Bible, literal, spiritual and symbolic ... we've used those terms with them and they would be able to, hopefully, confidently tell you the difference between them. And we've tried to look at more Arabic in Islam, we've tried to look at some Arabic words ... and then we've talked about the issues around that. (Jen, talking about how her class developed a multi-dimensional approach to meaning.)

5 Almost all of the teachers developed competent hermeneutical lessons, some with excellent examples of student work.

Though this is a study of teachers there were multiple striking examples of excellent students' work and classroom conversations retold that were positive. Though some participants were interviewed months after the classes they taught, they recalled in some detail the specifics of lessons where they were impressed by the outcomes. Many expressed a wish for better resources to help and many identified handling texts sacred to Muslims as a key area for resources.

So this was on the prodigal son ... So pupils read the text. I asked them to find 5 quotes from the original text which they thought was significant and summarise the story. They wrote it in the middle. And then around it, they considered what it teaches us about God, humanity, the world and for today. ... I gave them a series of titles and they had to pick which title would best summarise the story and explain why they've picked that title. And there were some very interesting interpretations. One pupil said the parable was a condemnation of the society that produced the prodigal son and that's like pseudo-Marxist reading isn't it, condemning capitalism. (Geoff)

6 From their key stage 3 changes, several teachers thought that hermeneutics would lead to better GCSE responses, particularly in explaining differences within religions. They also felt that a better space for hermeneutics could be included in exams.

All of the participants were familiar with the concerns about the use of quotes in exams, and they had these concerns themselves. Having participated in the project, several teachers said that better GCSE questions would elicit and recognise deeper understandings of text and improve GCSE answers. They noted that currently, GCSEs do not encourage students to show deeper understandings of text. They thought they could be changed and made better.

Yes it really is a hope because obviously at GCSE they've got to be able to do this whole evaluation thing. Obviously, you can learn set responses but actually if they truly understand the context of text, it would be a natural thing for them to say, "yes, but" in their arguments and in their writing. (Frances)

So for this year's GCSE they have a better understanding of interpretation of holy text but also translation. So the things that we focussed on with them is, there are key things that if translated in one way might mean one thing and if you translate it in another way might mean something else. So the classic one that we always focus on in Islam is the Arabic word Mawla and depending on whether you think it means leader or friend will determine whether you think that Ali was the next leader or if he was just Muhammed's friend and the implications of one word on beliefs from that. (Frances)

CONCLUSION: A HERMENEUTICAL HYPOTHESIS

This is a *findings* report of a pilot qualitative study. The researchers found the teachers in these cases made changes to their teaching of sacred texts that brought rich results, including how students could better approach long-answer GCSE questions.

Sacred text scholarship allows students to investigate the layers of meaning that people find significant. In making the hermeneutical process more explicit teachers help students become conscious of the process of reading sacred texts, and the place of the reader in making sense of a text, as well as the senses held by communities, and those held at different times and places. This may apply to all religions and worldviews, although this particular project considered texts sacred to Christians and Muslims.

There is a greater possibility for change and for reform of religious education if the idea of inhabiting the place of a sacred text scholar becomes part of Religion and Worldviews in schools. It offers one pathway to unlocking a disciplinary study of how people find significance and read meaning through worldviews. Students can progress between the study of different worldviews through the scholarly study of sacred texts. Progression is vital for a more powerful knowledge model of curriculum. This subject could be a place to offer some hermeneutical space that could enrich the whole curriculum.

“I think their understanding’s a lot better... I think definitely their recall of what they can remember and the significance of it was a lot more detailed that would have been had we not looked at the text.”

Jen

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"I would say the great benefit of it was it has refreshed my thinking."

Becky

"I think I got much more value out of doing it with them because you could see they were really keen. And they were more independent."

Jen

