

RESPECT FOR ALL: PROMOTING COMMUNITY COHESION THROUGH RELIGIOUS EDUCATION – JOYCE MILLER

Introduction

In March 2003, teachers of religious education and citizenship from eight secondary schools in four different local education authorities came together for a training day at the Interfaith Education Centre in Bradford to begin a project that culminated in a national conference, funded by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES), in September 2005.

The purpose of the first meeting and the project that developed from it was, as the title of this article clearly shows, to find effective and innovative ways of promoting community cohesion through religious education. The story of the project, which will be told here has not been one of simple development — inevitably. This has been a complex undertaking and we have in the process of development discovered problems and pitfalls as well as opportunities for our pupils and teachers to learn together and from each other. If I say that we lost two schools and two LEAs and gained new members, that teachers moved jobs, that schools went into special measures — then those facts in themselves give some indication of the difficulties of maintaining a project over a period of time. This report is of 'work in progress' and our key message is that we have had some successes and, crucially, we have increased commitment from both staff and students to the continuation of this essentially important work in the future.

The participants

This was an unusual and ambitious project in that it brought together a whole range of teachers and organisations from across the RE spectrum. Developed as a project to be managed jointly by the Professional Council for RE (PCfRE) and Education Bradford, initial funding came via John Keast, then Principal Officer at the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority. This enabled us to kick-start a project to involve four LEAs and bring together teachers from eight schools serving very different populations: some mainly white and some mainly Pakistani-heritage; some inner city, some suburban, some rural; some affluent and some poor. As the project developed and circumstances changed, we ended up with three LEAs — Bradford, Cumbria and Leeds — and seven schools: five from Bradford, one from Cumbria and one from Leeds. Two of the main professional organisations were also involved: PCfRE through its officer Lat Blaylock, who was the originator of the project, and the Association of RE Inspectors, Advisers and Consultants (AREIAC), of which I am the current vice-chair.

One of the crucial elements in the successes of the project was the involvement of the staff at Bradford's City Learning Centres whose enthusiasm, expertise and equipment enhanced the quality of the work we were able to do. Their contribution has been inestimable and we would urge anyone attempting similar work to seek such partners where they exist. Funding for the project was also received from the Innovation Unit of the DfES and paid for supply cover, transport and costs and officer time.

The questions

There were four main sets of questions that we sought to address. First, there were questions about how schools can promote community cohesion (and indeed what we mean by that), given ever-changing complex demographic patterns. To talk of 'self-segregation' and 'white flight' is too simplistic because all populations

are moving and changing and there are new arrivals from Europe and elsewhere, adding to the variety, challenges and possibilities for all schools.

Secondly, there were questions about how we can enable young people to engage with others across and within schools. Some of our students had no day-to-day contact with fellow teenagers from different ethnic or religious backgrounds from themselves — and this was true of both white and Pakistani-heritage students. There are also schools where there is a significant 'mix' of students but where relationships can too easily degenerate or fail to develop because of stereotyping, fear, suspicion and a lack of acceptance of difference. What was heartening for all of us involved in this project was the fact that the students in our schools genuinely wanted to make contact, not least because they recognised for themselves that they live in a complex 'multi-cultural' world and they need to understand it and each other.

Our third question was about the role of religious education in promoting respect for diversity. It has too often been assumed that this happens as if by osmosis in RE: teach them the facts, let them 'learn from it' (though that isn't always clearly defined) and, hey presto, they have respect for difference. If that were the case, after nearly 20 years of multi-faith RE by law and nearly 40 years in practice — the first Shap conference was in 1969¹ — we wouldn't be asking these questions today.

And this leads to our last question: how can we develop inter-faith as well as multi-faith religious education? What do we mean by inter-faith RE and what is inter-cultural education? Inter-faith RE is an uncomfortable term for it implies that everyone has a 'faith' and to use it synonymously with 'world view' diminishes the term and, for me, patronises those who would say they have no faith. So, the nomenclature is wrong. 'Inter-cultural' is a little better but then it seems to be too secular and brings in a dichotomy between religion and culture which most adherents of most religions probably don't recognise. Nonetheless, there is a clear need for our students in all our schools not just to develop respect for difference but to recognise the commonality that exists between them at all sorts of levels. They have a great deal to learn from each other, their families and their communities, and from engaging in a process of shared dialogue to explore the fundamental questions that lie at the heart of being human so that they can develop mature and informed opinions and relationships.

Key concepts and working principles

There were two pairs of key concepts that underpinned this project: identity/ies and community/ies; and diversity and respect. All of them were essential in promoting community cohesion using the definition of a cohesive community set out in the report of the committee chaired by Ted Cantle, following disturbances in northern cities, including Bradford. Central to our understanding was the view that identity and community are not 'fixed' and they are not singular. Each of us possesses many identities and we work and move and live in a range of communities. All communities are diverse, including religious communities, and all are in a process of change. Commonality and difference co-exist within and between different communities and these must be identified, recognised, talked about and worked with.

¹ The Shap Working Party on World Religions in Education was set up in 1969 to 'broaden the basis of education at all levels by encouraging the study and teaching of world religions': <http://www.shap.org>

There were three phrases which became important as we talked about the process of promoting community cohesion. The first is from **Paul Ballard** — **'skilled cultural navigators'**² — to describe young people who can move with ease and confidence between the different communities of their home and family and their wider worlds. This term seemed to us to be applicable to teachers and pupils in all communities so that they could move with confidence, understanding and sensitivity between different 'cultures'. Because of their training, inclination and expertise this is probably true of many RE teachers but if we are to enable pupils to engage with a range of people from different communities, then it has to be true of all school-based staff. There are huge issues here for whole school training and development.

A second and linked term comes from **Sissel Ostberg's** work, in which she talks of **'integrated plural identity'**.³ It is essentially important, for example, that we have confident and articulate young British Muslims — and that our young white students have a pride in and knowledge of their own heritage and all that their communities and forebears have contributed to the life of the region and the nation.

The final term is from **Professor Denise Cush** who neatly sidesteps the current complexities of the 'multi-cultural' debate and finds a more neutral term: **'positive pluralism'**.⁴ It seems from a recent opinion poll that the majority of people in Britain support living in a multi-cultural country, which is good news, but we need a discussion about what that actually means. What is better about multi- rather than mono-cultural communities? How does it improve the quality of our lives? What have we actually learned from each other and what potential is there for further learning?

Teaching and Learning

As part of our preparation we defined some of the characteristics that would constitute effective teaching and learning in the context of this project. None of this is rocket science and yet, as we all know, these basic principles are not always put into practice: and mediocrity (and worse) is still the experience of young people in some RE classrooms. We said that: learning must be active and participative; teaching and others must challenge young people and their thinking; dialogue must not be an exchange of ignorance; and pupils and teachers must identify ground rules for engagement and dialogue.

It is, in fact, dialogue that is at the heart of this project and that was key to all the methodologies we employed. We realised that our young people — and their teachers — would engage in dialogue across a wide range of areas: social, theological, moral, personal, anecdotal and political, and that all of these areas were valid for discussion in our classrooms. Key to the quality of the dialogue that would develop was the ethos and the quality of the relationships which teachers and their pupils were able to develop and sustain. There is also a recognition that dialogue is not easy, that difficult issues arise, that there is a need for compromise or an agreement to disagree, that opinions can be changed, that

² Coined by Roger Ballard in 'The Construction of *Desh Pardesh*' (1994).

³ Coined by Sissel Ostberg in articles in 2000 and 2003. Cited in Robert Jackson, *Rethinking Religious Education and Plurality* (2004), ch. 1.

⁴ Denise Cush with Francis, D., 'Positive Pluralism to Awareness, Mystery and Value: a Case Study in RE Curriculum Development', *British Journal of Religious Education*, 24/1 (2001), 52–67.

contradictions and challenges occur and that the skills of both teachers and students will be stretched if real engagement is to take place.

The schools' activities

We had three pairs of schools working together and one school where a drama-based project was developed with senior students from a very wide range of backgrounds.

The teachers had planning time built into the project's costs so that they could develop work that was appropriate to their own circumstances. Where there were pairs of schools, students began communicating through letters, e-mails and DVDs which, of course, they very much enjoyed creating and sharing with their partner school. This was a particularly effective way of enabling them to begin to get to know each other, their lives, their likes and dislikes, their interests and their hobbies. It also meant that when they did finally meet, they had already seen each other and had exchanged communications in a number of ways.

One of the keys to the success of the project was the use of neutral space: it is important that no single group has territorial supremacy if young people are to meet as equals. In one case students from a mainly Pakistani-heritage school in Bradford and a small all-white school in Cumbria shared joint visits using our Sacred Spaces materials, developed especially for this project.⁵ In another instance, sixth form students from an affluent white comprehensive school met with students from a very wide range of backgrounds in a small restaurant, where no alcohol was served, so that they could have a social event that involved a range of activities exploring their experience of religious education. Their engagement and commitment that evening were immensely impressive.

Another pair of schools began a project when they explored their families' stories. They were asked to go home and talk to their parents and grandparents about their experiences. What were their impressions and their memories? What was it like to arrive in Britain in the 1960s? What were the benefits and the difficulties? What was it like to be living here and find local communities changing as new populations moved in? For white and Pakistani-heritage students to gather these stories and then share them with their partner school is one of the ways in which real lives can be part of a learning experience that is significant and that changes perceptions. Some of the youngsters were shocked to discover that their grandfathers had fought for the British during World War II and this made them reflect on their own understanding of what it is to be British and what it really means to them.

We were always clear that this project was about learning and not 'social engineering', nor could it be a 'bolt-on'. If these activities were to work then they had to be part of the normal curriculum: the context might be different but the same work would be done. It was therefore important for students to share the work they would have been doing anyway and one pair of schools made careful plans about ways in which students could work, share their work and celebrate their achievements jointly. This included visits to each other's schools.

One of the schools that had joined the project initially and then underwent a series of changes, re-joined on a different basis. A teacher used drama workshops to explore our key themes of identity and community and what these terms meant in the life experiences of students who had come together from

⁵ http://www.rumple.co.uk/cem/acatalog/The_Online_Shop_Multi_Faith_RE_15.html

across the world, speaking a range of languages and trying now to establish themselves in a totally new environment. They created a performance that was deeply moving and professionally executed. Their self-esteem and their understanding of each other grew exponentially, both key ingredients in the development of cohesion and respect for difference.

For all the teachers and officers involved, there were changes and opportunities for professional engagement and discussion. In some schools the project resulted in curriculum development, timetable restructuring, the use of new methodologies, including thinking skills and the use of questionnaires to assess pupils' attitudes and values. None of us would say that this project achieved all it set out to or that any of it is easily replicable (though Lat Blaylock's articles show a whole variety of ways in which the lessons learned can be taken by teachers, Local Authorities and SACREs and put to good use).⁶ But we were all agreed that it was well worth doing, that we had all learned from it and, most importantly, that we couldn't stop now.

Difficulties

The story of the project so far will have given readers a clear understanding of some of the problems that arose. The key issues were about time and logistics, and we recognise that RE teachers already have heavy teaching and marking commitments and that any project, even one that is designed to complement what is already being done, is going to make even greater demands on hard-pressed professionals. Inevitably there are issues about costs, supply cover in particular, and there is no simple answer to this without designated funding from external sources. The large school linking project we run in Bradford is evidence of that and the need for officer time to help support teachers. At another level, there are also challenges for teachers and other adults in dealing with the issues that can and do arise — stereotyping, prejudices, misinterpretations, misinformation — all of these are present in the minds and attitudes of some students and some adults and it requires considerable skill, courage and sensitivity to address them. Ignoring them is not an option in a project that is seeking to promote cohesion.

Final words

There is no doubt that students, teachers and officers benefited from their involvement in this project. Of particular note has been the enthusiasm of the young people and their desire to maintain contact with their new friends and of the teachers to continue to plan joint learning in the future. The student questionnaires as well as their comments during lessons and visits have given us ample evidence that changes are being made through work such as this and that we must therefore continue our efforts and find other ways of promoting cohesion and respect for diversity. Whilst this is important for those of us who live and work in the northern cities where relationships between communities are all too often in the national news — the riots of 2001 and more recently the London bombings — we are convinced that these questions are for everyone who lives in this country, wherever that may be. And the joy of working in such a northern town is that every single day I have the privilege of observing people of different faiths, languages, cultures and ethnicity meeting and working and living together

⁶ These are to be found at:

http://faithandcohesion.org/index.php?option=com_docman&task=doc_details&gid=39
http://faithandcohesion.org/index.php?option=com_docman&task=doc_details&gid=38
http://faithandcohesion.org/index.php?option=com_docman&task=doc_details&gid=36

— just as human beings. As Sir Jonathan Sachs, the Chief Rabbi,⁷ says in his excellent book *The Dignity of Difference*, 'society is a conversation scored for many voices'.

And what an interesting and immensely rewarding conversation it is.

(This article has been reproduced from PfcRE by kind permission of Joyce Miller and Lat Blaylock)

⁷ <http://www.chiefrabbi.org/>

