



GATEWAY DOCUMENT 2.5

Advantages and challenges of diversity within communities

WHY IS THIS RELEVANT TO *REsilience*?

A vision which schools should share is that of making all students feel equally valued and of giving them, as far as is realistically possible, high academic aspirations, a commitment to the common good of society, and equal opportunity to fulfil their potential.

Whilst diversity can enrich a society, attitudes towards it are not always positive. For some, the advantages of living in an integrated, diverse society are outweighed by the challenges. This can particularly be the case where a significant number of people feel that others have better life opportunities than they do, and that their own cultural heritages are not valued as highly as those of others. In areas where social and economic changes have been to the disadvantage of longstanding inhabitants (e.g. in areas of traditional manufacturing industry where former employment opportunities no longer exist), the sense of disempowerment and disregard may sometimes result in hostile attitudes to the existence of diversity brought about by immigration.

Such social tensions will affect schools and may make it even harder than usual for discussion of contentious issues related to religious or non-religious belief to be open, impartial and fair to all involved.

KEY QUESTIONS

How can this help teachers and students to increase their understanding of contentious issues?

Students will almost certainly value the opportunity to talk about the issue of what an ideal society would be like, the circumstances under which people can live together in harmony and how much and in what contexts differences between people matter¹. The challenge for teachers is to enable discussion of this kind to take place in such a way that students express their views honestly but with respect for other members of the group, and that

¹. This opportunity was identified by Ofsted in its report, 'Transforming RE' (2010) as one of the things students most valued about RE as a subject (p.16)

particular care is taken in relation to all those in the group who might feel vulnerable. Teachers of RE will want to take time to find out individual pupils' stories in order to be suitably sensitive when discussing contentious issues, but the number of students seen each week by many teachers of RE makes such personal knowledge of individual students problematic. Here, good systems and good communication within schools can ensure that important information known by a form-teacher or a head-of-year will be shared with other staff who need to know it.

Consideration of the advantages and challenges of a pluralistic society can give all schools, whatever the composition of their local catchment and population, opportunities to show how they recognise and value diversity. This can broaden students' awareness and experience of their own and others' identities and concerns beyond the more obvious dimensions of ethnic background and religious affiliation to embrace academic achievement, socio-economic status and sexual orientation.

What classroom challenges might arise in RE?

- A school will aim to have an inclusive ethos but the community the school serves may not always share or reflect this vision.
- Further, there are groups in society whose worldviews make living alongside those who live lives based on different religious or moral convictions difficult. This kind of tension is addressed, for example, in Stonewall's guidance for employers on how to manage perceived tensions between gay people and people with particular religious or moral positions. Stonewall reports that although most people of faith do not have any problem working, living, or socialising with lesbian, gay and bisexual people, a minority do see this as an issue. So the concept of diversity can be contentious. Some groups may choose to live relatively separately from the rest of the community for these reasons, e.g. some Orthodox Jews and groups like the Christian Brethren.
- The desire to emphasise harmony and downplay tensions may lead a teacher, either unwittingly or intentionally (to diffuse difficulties), to brush differences and disagreement under the carpet, particularly when students begin to express strongly negative views. On the other hand, finding common ground and shared values is an important starting point for healthy debate and is most likely to encourage openness to new ideas.
- Obvious differences **between** different religious or non-religious beliefs and cultures may lead students to overlook the great diversities **within** faiths, traditions and cultures (see also Gateway 1.4, 1.5, 1.6).

How can teachers address such challenges?

- By not making assumptions about students' standpoints and by using effective strategies to discuss issues of diversity (see Gateways 2.6/2.9, 2.7/2.8, 3.1, 3.3);

- By modelling good practice and being able to recognise and tackle negative stereotyping, and by choosing resources carefully so that diversity of belief and practice within different traditions is fully recognized;
- By avoiding any suggestion that 'We're all the same really'; celebrating diversity means being willing to acknowledge differences and to celebrate the breadth of individual and community difference;
- By making sure that in the celebration of diversity there is an appropriate level of emphasis on the religious, historical, geographic, social and cultural traditions of the school's locality and region, as well as an emphasis on shared British institutions and values;
- By ensuring that RE teaching avoids discrimination against anyone for reasons of race, ethnic or national origins, language, culture, religion, belief, disability, gender, sexual orientation, or social class (see Equality Britain below);
- By exploring belief systems in depth and developing students' awareness of the diversity within them;
- By ensuring that the RE curriculum as a whole, insofar as this is compatible with the locally agreed syllabus or other syllabus required to be used in the school, meets the Ofsted recommendation that RE should enable students to make sense of religion in the modern world and its role in issues of identity and diversity.

NEXT STEPS

Signposts for further reading

Transforming RE (2010) The Ofsted report on religious education in schools 2006-9

Gaine, C (1995) *Still No Problem Here*, Trentham Books

Richardson, R (2009) *Holding together: equalities, difference and cohesion*, Trentham Books

Thompson, Neil (2003) *Promoting Equality* (second edition), Palgrave Macmillan

Weller, P (2008) *Religious Diversity in the UK: Contours and Issues*, Continuum

Signposts for further resources

www.Multiverse.ac.uk Multiverse is a website for teacher educators and student teachers addressing the educational achievement of pupils from diverse backgrounds.

www.wdwtwa.org.uk Who do we think we are?² A project with its basis in history, geography and citizenship education which provides resources, toolkits, case studies and other guidance. It has a section on 'Relationships, belonging and faith'.

www.sifre.org.uk *Diversity* game, Suffolk Inter Faith Resources

<http://www.britkid.org/> Britkid is a website on questions related to race, racism and life.

See also Gateways 2.1, 2.2, 2.3, 2.6/2.8, 2.11

Signposts for further action

The school could consider:

ways of addressing the needs of a diverse community within the school and prepare students for life outside it; this should not be regarded as the sole responsibility of the RE department.

monitoring the effectiveness of CPD relating to diversity for staff and governors.

ensuring that appropriate interventions and actions take place when cases of harassment and discrimination are identified.

developing a culture and ethos where students and staff are sensitive to the significance of diversity. Without this there is a heightened risk of discrimination.

². The website www.wdwtwa.org.uk is now defunct but many of the materials that were on that site can be found on the websites of the Association for Citizenship Teaching, the Citizenship Foundation, the Historical Association, the Royal Geographic Society and the Schools Linking Network. Other related resources can be found at the website of the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games, <http://www.london2012.com/get-involved/education/index.php>