



GATEWAY DOCUMENT 2.11

Equality, diversity and building resilience to extremism

WHY IS THIS RELEVANT TO *REsilience*?

Schools, being at the heart of their communities, are uniquely placed to help promote equality of opportunity, foster integration, and encourage good relations between people of different groups.

When schools strive to make all their students familiar with the multi-faith, culturally diverse, and otherwise pluralistic aspects of British society, and at the same time promote the principles of equality, tolerance and concern for the common good of all, they contribute powerfully to making Britain a land more at ease with itself and more optimistic about its future. Religious education encourages students to engage with the lives, beliefs, and practices of adherents of a variety of faith and belief communities. RE must, though, emphasise what is held in common and, perhaps most especially, demonstrate the power and importance of dialogue, conducted in a spirit of goodwill, as an instrument to reconcile differences and to find a way forward when none is immediately apparent.

Developing skills of listening to a variety of different and sometimes challenging views, and entering into serious dialogue about them, can lead to enhanced understanding between students of different religious or non-religious beliefs. It is, however, to be expected that some students and parents may not initially share a positive attitude towards diversity. Indeed, in some communities there may be widespread hostility to certain communities or beliefs that goes beyond political disagreement to support, at some level, for violent extremism.

Why is RE relevant to this topic?

- RE makes a significant contribution to building resilience to extremism. Inclusive RE uses the different experiences students bring so that all of them feel their contributions are valued. Every student should feel valued first as a human being and secondly as a member of the school community, irrespective of family background. Work in RE extends students' horizons by introducing them to a range of different perspectives whilst also promoting the virtues of tolerance and rational thought.

- The UK-wide and global contexts are significant for religious education too. Many pupils will have an increasing awareness that they are a part of a greater whole beyond their local area. This should help them to define who and what they are and enable them to see their unique place within that bigger picture.

KEY QUESTIONS

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

The legislation relating to equality¹ and the widely accepted principle of tolerance for diversity in Britain are part of the backdrop against which contentious issues are studied. They are part of a context in which, for example, the right to freedom of speech is balanced against the right not to be subjected to racial abuse.

What classroom challenges might arise in RE?

- The need to deal with strongly held views which are hostile to social, cultural and religious diversity (e.g. students who express hostility to, or fear of, Islam or Muslims, or anti-Jewish sentiments)
- A lack of teacher knowledge and confidence about statutory requirements regarding equality, and effective approaches to celebrating diversity within an overall context of building, within the school context, national integration (see Signposts, *Equality and Human Rights Commission* website)
- Parental opposition to a curriculum which involves learning about a range of faiths and beliefs; increase in the number of parents exercising their right to withdraw children from RE
- The lack of understanding amongst colleagues, parents or students about the value of religious education's contribution to the education of all young people.
- The danger that students may feel threatened or potentially vulnerable and may not want to engage in any discussion.
- In schools in predominantly white and mono-cultural areas there may be a feeling that diversity is not an issue with which their community needs to concern itself.

¹ Current legal requirements for schools in relation to equality, diversity, non-discrimination and human rights are given on websites referenced amongst the Signposts in Gateway Document 2.5

How can teachers address such challenges?

- By demonstrating respect in the way they talk and teach about cultures, religions and beliefs (see Gateway 2.1/2.4).
- By building links with the religious groups represented in the school's community, including arranging visits to places of worship and visits from community members to the school when appropriate (see Gateways 2.10 and 2.12). Fieldwork and encounters with members of different communities should enrich students' understanding of diversity in human terms (as recommended in '*Transforming RE*', Ofsted, 2010).
- By making sure that the study of world religions reflects those traditions globally as well as in the UK. Teaching resources should be audited with this in mind.
- By planning the curriculum with colleagues from other departments and subjects to provide opportunities for promoting shared values. This can help students to value differences as well as commonalities and to challenge prejudice, discrimination and stereotyping: this could occur, for example, in RE, history and citizenship.
- By including in the curriculum consideration of both diverse communities and more mono-cultural ones. It is important to avoid the pitfall of seeing diversity only in terms of those who belong to religions other than Christianity. Some schools are in areas where there are significant members of immigrant communities from Eastern Europe, who are white and mainly Catholic or Eastern Orthodox. Some may also live near traveller communities and need to consider the influence of Romany culture alongside Roman Catholicism (the religious background of the traveller community is predominantly Roman Catholic).

NEXT STEPS

Signposts for further reading

Huddleston, T (2007) *Identity, diversity and citizenship*, Association for Citizenship Teaching, downloadable from www.citizenshipfoundation.org.uk/lib_res_pdf/0747.pdf

www.homeoffice.gov.uk/about-us/equality-and-diversity1/ This government website charts progress towards the aims of protecting everyone from discrimination, improving life chances for all and building a sense of community 'togetherness'. It includes a number of reports on different aspects of this work.

Signposts for further resources

www.multiverse.ac.uk This TDA funded website for teacher educators and student teachers addresses the educational achievement of pupils from diverse backgrounds. All materials are subject to rigorous quality assurance. The 'Diversity Scenarios' section covers 12 scenarios typical of areas less experienced teachers may find difficult e.g. 'Issues of religious diversity and identity'.

www.equalityhumanrights.com/ The Equality and Human Rights Commission's job is to promote equality and human rights and to create a fairer Britain. It does this by providing advice and guidance, working to implement an effective legislative framework and raising people's awareness of their rights.

www.cohesioninstitute.org.uk/home The Institute of Community Cohesion was established in 2005 to provide a new approach to race, diversity and multiculturalism. Its work focuses on building positive and harmonious community relations, using applied research to develop practice and to build capacity of all the agencies and individuals involved. The site has a very wide range of case studies illustrating approaches schools may find useful.

Signposts for further action

Schools wishing to develop links with schools that have a populations with different demographics to their own can find guidance and support from the Schools Linking Network. Its role is to facilitate links between schools in England to help children and young people explore their identity, celebrate diversity and develop dialogue:

www.schoolslinkingnetwork.org.uk

The use of professional youth theatre companies can often be effective in addressing issues of equality and diversity e.g. 'The Hate Play' written by Michael Wicherek, produced by Box Clever Theatre Company www.boxclevertheatre.com

Consider the opportunities offered by assemblies for involving members of the local and wider community. Such occasions can be a valuable chance to express a school's ethos and values (see Gateway 2.12). Visitors always need to be briefed by a teacher about the nature and purpose of such visits, so that any questions and uncertainties can be resolved beforehand.

Muslim students have a dedicated resource in the Muslim Youth Helpline which offers a free (from UK landlines) evening and weekend helpline (0808 808 2008 - not 24 hours), an email advice service at help@myh.org.uk , and an internet webchat facility. The website is at <http://www.myh.org.uk/>