Using contact theory to promote better community relations in RE

Rachael Jackson-Royal

A team of Religious Education teachers, who are members of NATRE (National Association of Teachers of Religious Education), have combined forces with researchers at Bristol University to start work on a project to identify the best ways of promoting community relations in RE, with a particular focus on ‘contact theory’. This idea, developed by social psychologists, explains how individuals of different cultural, religious and social backgrounds can interact meaningfully with their cross-group peers in shared social spaces, such as a classroom, lecture theatre or the beach. The project is investigating whether or not this theory could be usefully applied to the RE setting. Two separate successful bids were made to fund the work, one to the Westhill Trust and another to the ESRC (Economic and Social Research Council).

What is the project about?
The project has two main aspects at its heart. The first involves disseminating contact theory to Religious Education teachers. This has included creating a questionnaire to ascertain teachers’ views on the theory, as well as the practices they use to promote better community relations in their classrooms. The second is a ‘knowledge exchange’ between teachers and researchers, whereby a small group of teachers spends time at Bristol University during 2016–17, while members of the Bristol team spend time with RE teachers at conferences, local group events and through visiting schools. These events will raise awareness of contact theory among those teachers of RE who are already engaged with promoting better community relations, and lead to the creation of new teaching and training resources for RE by the end of the project.

I have mainly been involved in the second stage of the project, as one of the lucky teachers who was selected to spend time at Bristol University. So far I have spent two days at the University with Dr Janet Orchard, senior lecturer and subject lead in the PGCE for RE at Bristol University. Towards the end of October 2016, I met representatives from the Bristol SACRE (Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education), the Theology Department at Bristol University (especially Professor Gavin De Costa), and members of their interfaith chaplaincy, as well as other interested teachers and lecturers within their Graduate School of Education.

How can contact theory be applied in RE classrooms?
Such encounters have enabled me to reflect upon my own practice, particularly on the seating arrangements used within my classroom, and the need to provide opportunities to discuss the varying religious and cultural views represented in the class. For example, I am now more aware of the need to consider different religious and ethnic backgrounds when organising seating arrangements, rather than just basing these on desired behavioural and learning outcomes. In addition, I have also realised that it might be necessary to include specific lessons that enable discussions to occur around the different worldviews present in the room, in a manner that supports pupils in feeling safe during such explorations.

I believe such opportunities could enrich the learning experiences of my pupils. If these discussions are handled well, the atmosphere of the classroom could become more cohesive. This will also enable pupils to comprehend more directly the diversity of faith and worldviews reflected in their own classrooms. An
example of when this was particularly brought home to me was when a local teacher of RE in a primary school spoke of an opportunity she created for two children in her own class, who were representative of a minority faith view and who were being excluded within the larger group dynamic. She created a space so that these pupils were able to positively instruct their peers about their beliefs and the practices that they follow. She found that this not only enriched the knowledge and understanding of the particular worldview concerned within the group, it also provided an opportunity to foster better community relations between them.

During my time in Bristol I also made an inspiring visit to a local Catholic church, which has adapted to changes in their congregation that now comprises believers from more than fifty different ethnic backgrounds and cultures. I was inspired by the ways in which they have helped to develop better community relations within their own congregation through shared hospitality (food was a constantly recurring theme of the visit!), and this made me realise the need to include more examples of such initiatives within my own teaching. More important still, I came to appreciate how the promotion of better community relations within the RE classroom could contribute positively to learning within RE. Sharing space in RE goes further than simply contributing to another generic, whole-school initiative. To me this is an important consideration and it is still an area that I think warrants more thought and reflection.

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How to get involved

I will be spending three more days at Bristol University during my holidays in the coming year and I will be able to update you in future issues on how this opportunity has further enriched my teaching. In the meantime, here are a series of opportunities for other teachers to be involved directly in this exciting project:

1. Attend a NATRE local group event attended by the Bristol University researchers. For example, they will be attending a local group run at the University of Birmingham on Thursday 26th January from 5pm at the School of Education, University of Birmingham. Any Religious Education teacher would be more than welcome to attend. Please contact me by email if you are interested through localgroups@natre.org.uk.

2. Look out for details of further events around the country and some of the useful resources that will be created once the work has reached its fruition on the NATRE website (http://www.natre.org.uk).

3. Learn more about contact theory. More information is available on the Westhill website (http://www.westhillendowment.org/natre/Home) and will soon be posted on the NATRE website too.

4. Contribute your views on contact theory to the survey. A questionnaire has been designed to capture these and has now gone live, being advertised on social media sites which include NATRE, Save RE and others. It is essential that as many Religious Education teachers as possible complete this survey. Depending on these results, data can be generated in order to support the case for RE with policy makers and bidding for more resources to develop this important RE work. Please do pass this message on to all those you think will be interested and can help. The link is: www.tinyurl.com/contactinRE.

Rachael Jackson-Royal

The Oxford Teacher Handbook for GCSE Islam

Rachael Jackson-Royal is the co-author of The Oxford Teacher Handbook for GCSE Islam, which covers everything you need to know about teaching Islam for the new GCSE Religious Studies specifications. View sample material from Chapters 1 and 4.