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**Religious Education in the Experience of Young People  
from Mixed-Faith Families**

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**Abstract**

On the basis of recent ethnographic study at the University of Warwick of the religious identity formation of young people in 'mixed-faith' families, this article focuses on their (and their parents') experiences and perceptions of religious education (RE) and of religious nurture in the community. The young people's experience of RE differed between primary and secondary school and only a few were engaged in supplementary classes. We highlight the complementarity between school and home in young people's religious learning and draw out implications for RE.

**Keywords:** mixed-faith families, religious education, religious identity, UK

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**Introduction**

This article arises from a three-year ethnographic study (2006–09) at the University of Warwick of the religious identity formation of young people in

'mixed-faith' families. It was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC). 'Mixed-faith families' refers to families in which parents were any combination of Christian, Hindu, Muslim or Sikh. Our focus was topical as mixed-faith families are increasing in the UK (Census 2001; Platt 2009) and elsewhere (ARIS 2001).

We first report the young people's parents' accounts of their own experience of, and views on, schooling (and especially religious education), noting their decisions regarding supplementary religion-related classes, and choice of school for their children, and their mentions of religious discussions at home. Secondly, we report young people's accounts of their religious education (RE) at school and of religious nurture. Thirdly, we indicate our study's implications for RE, both insofar as it possibly suggests perceptions of RE by pupils more widely and also in relation to the relevance for RE of the increase in 'mixed-faith' families.

Our research context was the ethnographic tradition of the Warwick Religions and Education Research Unit in tracing the religious identity formation of young people in Christian, Hindu and Sikh families and relating their experience to how their faith traditions were represented in RE (Jackson 1997; Nesbitt 2004). This had led us to anticipate dissonance between the 'mixed-faith' young people's experience of their two parental traditions and these traditions' representation in RE. Theoretically, our work was informed by the concept of 'narrative identity' (Ricoeur 1990) and 'integrated plural identities' (Østberg 2000). Following James and Prout (2007) we regarded

young people as ‘agents’.

Ours was not a study comparing ‘mixed-faith’ with single-faith families. Nor was a key intention to produce generalisable findings, but rather to explore cases in depth and detail. Our sample comprised 28 nuclear families (2 Hindu-Sikh, 10 Hindu-Christian, 6 Christian-Sikh and 10 Christian-Muslim), with one to four interviewees from each. Parents’ ages ranged from early 30s to late 40s and the young people’s from 5 years to early 30s, the criterion for their eligibility being that they still lived with their parents.<sup>i</sup>

Regarding terminology, we use ‘RE’ for the curriculum subject, religious education,<sup>ii</sup> and (following Jackson and Nesbitt 1993) ‘religious nurture’ for religious socialisation in home and community (Arweck and Nesbitt 2010). ‘Supplementary classes’ refers to extra-curricular religious or cultural tuition, such as Sunday school or instruction in language, dance or music related to parental heritage. We use ‘assemblies’ (the term interviewees used) and ‘collective worship’ (the legal term) interchangeably.

### **Parents’ Experience and Views of RE and Religious Nurture**

The parents’ experience of schooling, including RE, showed considerable overlap, as did their reactions to it. Most had been educated in the UK and had attended primary and secondary schools which (whether faith-based – Church of England and in one case Roman Catholic – or not) had a predominantly ‘Christian’ ethos. This had been evident in, for example, the daily collective worship and in the fact that peers of non-Christian

background were few. For those Christian parents who had attended church services, Sunday School and church-based youth clubs, the ethos of schools' collective worship and RE had been culturally reinforcing.

However, most parents reported having had little or no explicit religious nurture at home during their own childhood. For white 'Christian' parents from non-observant families, school was sometimes the only context for religious learning. In the case of parents from Hindu, Muslim and Sikh families, their own parents' lack of interest in deliberate transmission might have resulted, one mother suggested, from wanting their children to integrate into British society and considering any 'ethnic' elements obstructive. Two Punjabi Sikh parents had resisted their own parents' increase in overt Sikh religiosity during their childhood.

The parents' views on how their children should be educated about, and nurtured in, religion reflected their expectations of RE lessons. Generally speaking, they expected school to provide their children's grounding in religion(s). Regardless of personal stance towards religion, all wanted their children to know about religions so that they could make informed choices.

The way parents articulated and rationalised their reliance on school and RE varied. Jack<sup>iii</sup> (British Christian by background), who had distanced himself from Christianity but remained interested in religion, stated that school gave his children long-term exposure to religion. This was important to him, and to Kish (Gujarati Hindu, without strong religious allegiance) in equipping them to decide whether to embrace a religion. Jack stressed that

religion should be conveyed in a non-proselytising way. He wished that his children's RE covered more religions and more deeply. His wife Sukhi (Sikh Punjabi) concurred, pointing out that the school's obligation to provide an act of worship and to look after the children's SMCS (Spiritual, Moral, Cultural and Spiritual) education filled any gaps left by religious learning at home.

Exceptionally, Sue (Punjabi Christian married to a Sikh) did not rely on school, because she saw herself as the primary formative influence in her children's upbringing. The defining message for her children was what was taught and lived at home and in the Mormon church (including Sunday school). The other parents' reliance on school for religious learning is consistent with their reluctance to influence their children regarding their choice of religion.

Most parents regarded home and school as complementary, as school filled gaps, stimulated interest in religion or triggered discussion at home about, say, euthanasia or abortion, as well as leaving gaps which a parent or grandparents felt impelled to fill. In the view of Sukhi (Punjabi Sikh), what was taught at school connected with children's experience at weddings and other religion-related family gatherings, thus combining formal and informal learning. Stella (UK Christian) said that school taught her daughter sacred stories across the traditions and gave her experience of church. Parents mentioned their limited familiarity with their family's tradition.

Jiti (Sikh Punjabi) explained that the school would reinforce what his daughter learnt at home through the values and general behaviour it

expected. For Stephen (British Christian background, married to a Punjabi Hindu), what his daughter Nikita (9) learned at home helped her in RE. For example, in a project on ancient texts, Nikita used her own book of Vedic stories and worked with a pupil who knew nothing about such stories to give the whole class a poster presentation.

Regarding supplementary classes, although most parents saw them in a positive light, they had not tried to enrol their children. The reasons varied: time management in the family (when children already pursued extra-curricular activities), parents not feeling a strong need for such classes (e.g. about learning Punjabi or Hindi when the family all spoke English), lack of provision (no local Punjabi classes), dissatisfaction with the classes' calibre, and fear of privileging one tradition over the other. Therefore, the few young people who attended supplementary classes did so both because the opportunity had arisen and from personal choice. Thus 14-year-old Rohini (European Christian/Hindu Gujarati<sup>iv</sup>) had been drafted into a Hinduism course by a relative and 14-year-old Monika (Christian/Sikh) chose to help out at a Sunday school when she could. The only parent who made a point of sending her children to the *gurdwara's* Punjabi classes was (the Christian Punjabi) Sue, who felt strongly that her children should become fluent in Punjabi. Eleven-year-old Gopalan, from a white British Christian/South Indian Hindu background, enjoyed both singing in the (Anglican) church choir and learning classical Indian music.

## Parents' Choice of Schools

The parents' choice was generally determined by the schools' (a) academic achievement and (b) ethnic composition: ethnic minority parents did not want their children to repeat history by being part of a tiny minority, especially where schools' intake was largely white. The RE curriculum was another factor. These considerations led some parents to Church of England schools. Other parents decided against faith-based schools for their children, either because of the specific character of such schools locally or on principle. To quote Rachel (British Christian background) on faith schools' exclusivity:

I have a *big* problem with faith schools ... if they serve the community ... as an act ... of faith, that's fine, but if they only serve their *own* community ... then I have [a] big problem. It's like a big private club ... [The church school] only had pupils who had been baptised, who had been confirmed, whose parents had attended sort of three Sundays out of four for the past four years.

Similarly, Jiti (Sikh Punjabi married to a white British Christian), speaking from a secularist stance, opposed his daughter attending any faith school, but conceded that, if there were a nearby faith school of a high academic standard, this would be the overriding criterion. Some parents voiced opposition to only certain types of faith schools—for example, regarding a Church of England school as acceptable, but not a Catholic or Muslim school.

Again, the one exception among the parents was Sue, the Punjabi Mormon. Her perspective on school choice stemmed from her children's strong embedding in the family (nuclear and extended). Which school they attended was immaterial, provided it was near home, so obviating lengthy

journeys or exposure to unfamiliar parts of town.

### **Family Discussion of Religion**

Overall, our interviewees indicated that family discussion about religion was limited. Given busy schedules, with both parents often combining professional and parental commitments, the opportunities for such discussions were few. Parents tended to leave it to their children to raise religious matters, unless reports in the media prompted them to initiate conversations. Sometimes homework required parents' help: when Monika's RE class tackled 'ultimate questions', her project involved interviewing her best friend and her mother. This allowed her to explore different viewpoints, which she set against her own views and recorded in her RE exercise book. Whether the young people involved their parents in this way depended on the style of RE and (often related to this) the young person's attitude to the subject. Thus Monika's younger brother Rikki (10) turned to his mother less often for RE homework because, to quote his mother:

I think he finds RE *boring*... And the teacher that he has is more of a 'copy this out of a book' [variety] and perhaps doesn't instigate too much of a discussion around ... things... so he hasn't really come to me with anything ... deep or philosophical.

Sometimes, homework, ostensibly unrelated to RE, led to questions about culture and religion. When 9-year-old Margarita (Christian/Sikh) worked on an autobiography project, her father encouraged her to include references to his Punjabi Sikh background.

Whether young people took the initiative to raise questions seemed to be unrelated to age, but related to how communicative they were. Rohini was preparing for GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Examination) in Religious Studies and brought home issues such as abortion and euthanasia. Being a teenager, her mother said, she pushed her parents and questioned everything, whereas her younger sister's conversation was very sparse.

Sometimes, circumstances such as a family bereavement or serious illness, prompted children to ask questions or led to family discussions. The death of Rohini's paternal grandmother sparked questions and led to her embarking on the Hinduism course—her grandmother had been part of the temple with which the course was linked and had helped establish it. In Ferhana's case, serious illness led to discussion about religious practice, especially with her teenage son. For Ferhana (from an Asian Muslim background), the illness raised issues about the fragility of life, which combined with reflections on funeral rites in Islam—her family's faith. The duties which normally fall on the oldest son in Muslim families became points of family discussion.

As mentioned, news reports generated discussion. For example, when John Paul II died, Mrs Pande (from a European Christian background) talked to her daughters about the issues and procedures involved in the Pope's death and the election of his successor. William (from a UK Christian background) mentioned commenting on religious matters when reading the newspaper, with his teenage children present. He said:

I must say that I'm a bit dismissive about religion. Therefore, we don't have many discussions, but when we do, I try to make them think objectively about that.

In the light of theories which argue the importance of gender in the transmission of religion (Pearce and Axinn 1998; Hoge, Petrillo and Smith 1982; Marks 2006; Yuri 2005), the question arises whether gender determines whether they discuss religion and with which parent they prefer to do so. Our data do not point to strong associations with gender. The choice of 'dialogue partner' was determined by the families' daily rhythm. As conversations often occurred just after school, these involved whichever parent was present. This parent knew more about the day-to-day learning of the young people in school and their thinking on particular matters, but still left scope for surprise on fresh discoveries about their children's reflections.

Having described the parents' experience and views of schooling and religious education, their choice of school and religious nurture for their children and their articulation of the link between religious learning at home and in school, we now turn to their children's disclosures regarding RE and religious nurture.

### **Young People's Perceptions of Religious Education and Religious Nurture**

Moving from the parents' accounts to the young people's, this section provides information about the young people's schools and particularly their experience of RE. As outlined, the young people variously attended community schools, Church of England schools and independent schools. The

data had suggested that, for the parents, the ethos of the school was more important than its status. Although this was not a focus of our research, the young people's descriptions suggested that some community and independent schools had an underlying Christian ethos which shaped RE and assemblies. During interviews, the young people were asked about assemblies, what they learnt in RE, and whether and how religious festivals were celebrated at school as well as whether RE helped them understand their parents' traditions and whether they discussed anything to do with religion with their friends.

Our data suggest no difference between boys and girls at primary level regarding their interest in religion, but that girls were more interested in religion than boys at secondary level. Some, especially those at primary school, found it boring, but still acknowledged that RE was a way of learning *about* religion. Individuals' reasons for finding RE boring varied, including the teacher's teaching style; the fact that RE lessons were repeating Judaism year after year; that the class did nothing but copy from a book. The younger the pupils, the more RE apparently consisted of copying text or drawing—what God looked like or the story of Genesis—or colouring in religious symbols.

School was where most children said they learnt more *about* religion than at home. However, the young people (especially the younger ones) did not experience their RE lessons as learning *from* religion or making the link between lived religion and religion as described in textbooks or indeed as

understanding religion's role in individuals' lives. They tended not to connect what they learned to their own (both nuclear and extended) family situation. For example, 10-year-old David (Christian/Sikh), who identified himself as 'Christian', said that, in RE, 'We were learning about churches and other kinds of churches, like Methodist ... Roman Catholic or different churches', but nothing about his own church. He said, 'It's like different ... how ... they're worshipping and everything and like bapti[sm] ... and christening...'. David's perception of these differences arose from his being nurtured as a Mormon. Exceptionally among the young people he learned most about religion in his church, especially the Sunday school which he attended almost every week.

In cases where young people did link what they learned in school with religious practice in their (extended) family, they applied textbook criteria to their relatives. For example, 10-year-old Rikki (Sikh/Christian) commented that his maternal grandfather and uncle were not really 'strict Sikhs', because

... if they were full Sikh and they believe everything that God ... that's said in the holy Bible<sup>v</sup>, they ... wouldn't cut their hair at all... They would always wear a *kirpan* ... wear some shorts under your trousers, baggy trousers which ... like are tight at the end and a special top over the thing.<sup>vi</sup>

(Nesbitt has discussed [1999; 2000], in relation to the representation of Sikhism in RE, the widespread practice among Sikhs—young and old—of distinguishing 'Sikhs' from 'strict', 'proper' or 'true' Sikhs). On another

occasion, Rikki said his relatives were not 'full Sikh', 'because they did not pray five times a day, [or wear] the holy Bible or a *kirpan* or ha[ve] it in the house' (see below for comment on the evident confusion). His older sister Monika (14) cited similar rules about being a 'strict' Sikh:

... if they ... take *amrit*, a nectar ..., and it's basically like taking *baptism* ... you really *do* have to be strict ... really really strict ... about what you do ... And ... you have to pray five times a day or something ... or three [times] ... You have to *not* cut your hair ... you have to wear a turban [as a woman as well] yeah, so ... you'd have to wear the traditional ... [clothes] ... I remember doing this in RE [laughs] ... [but] I forgot it.

Both Rikki's and Monika's comments also suggest what they learnt in RE, although such judgements may have derived in part also from other family members. They recognised and remembered teaching content when it was referred to by others, but, as Monika indicated, found it hard to convert passive knowledge into active knowledge. If RE neither stimulated their thinking nor connected to their experience, the low retention rate is unsurprising. Thus, 8-year-old Chloe (Christian/Muslim) agreed that she learned about Christianity and the other religions at school, but could say little about *what* she had learnt. Asked about the Qur'an, she answered, 'it's a religious book – like a Bible, but for a different religion', but she did not know which. Eight-year-old Nathan (Christian/Hindu), who was reflective and interested in religion, commented that what he learned in RE was 'kind of useful', but 'I know it for about a week, [then] I forget again.' However, regular contact with his practising paternal Hindu grandmother had attuned

him to ritual and as soon as RE had introduced him to Hinduism, he reported what he had learnt and illustrated this with drawings of the 'Om' sign and various deities.

Although most primary schools included activities which related to major festivals, the religious content of these had not registered with the young people. Therefore, when asked about festivals, Chloe commented, 'We make stuff or have plays. I was the narrator in the Eid play', but could not say which religious tradition celebrated which festivals. Similarly, all that Chloe's brother Samy (11) remembered from RE was the five pillars of Islam. When asked what they were, he (incorrectly) cited respect and friendship. During a subsequent interview, Samy said that they had only one RE lesson so far in the school year. That lesson had covered 'the pillar of Haj', as he put it; it was too long ago for him to remember details, except that 'people go to this temple and they have to walk round it four times.'

Typically of the young people, Samy's comments (like Rikki's and Monika's quoted above) show that both his knowledge of religion(s) and the relevant vocabulary was fragmentary. Elements of traditions were mixed up with one another. Thus, when asked what people do at a synagogue, Rikki said, 'You take your shoes off and you always sit cross-legged, with your ... toes pointing [to] the Buddha.'

The conversations with the young people also revealed that, in primary school, RE lessons lapsed, either because the subject was not considered important or because other activities (preparation for Standard Assessment

Tests or the end of term play) were prioritised. To quote Nathan: 'We hardly do RE any more, because it's not a glam subject'.

By contrast, secondary school RE appealed more. Apart from covering religions at a higher academic level (for GCSE, for example), several teenagers appreciated discussing ethical and social issues (e.g. abortion, euthanasia) and existential questions. Monika found such discussions interesting, not only because of the subjects concerned, but also for the forum they provided for different opinions to be aired. She wanted to know her peers' views, especially as their religious stances differed. For Rohini, such discussions were useful, because religion

gives a lot of answers. The contrast to it is science. To weigh them [against one another] is something I enjoy doing.

Further, hearing her peers' comments made Rohini realise how open-minded her parents were. Referring to a friend 'whose parents are very Catholic', she commented:

These debates we have make me think, I can't see why he [the friend] just accepts things he is told—he does not question anything.

However, these debates also revealed common ground:

We have more argumentative debates when it comes to things like abortion. I don't believe in abortion. We [the friend and I] share that [view].

Thus classroom discussions of this kind allowed young people to discover what they thought and believed in relation to others' views, so reinforcing the situational aspect of religious identity formation (see e.g. Giddens 1991).

Monika relished learning what other religions were about, even if it was hard at times to comprehend their teachings and practices. Islam and Buddhism, for example, were difficult to 'really understand',

because [Muslims] believe that everybody was born into the religion. I don't understand why they believe that, because there are so many religions to choose from [...] – and Buddhism – it's nice to have a shrine in your house, but shaving your head and wearing certain clothes I don't really understand, because it takes away being a person and [being] unique.

At secondary level, young people still learned most *about* religion in RE. As both Monika and Rohini indicated, whether they themselves took religion seriously or not, they also learned from their friends and peers, for example, during class discussion or during Ramadan or when some pupils were not able to join in certain activities, including a Jewish friend of Rohini's sister, who could not come to netball practice on Saturdays.

That some young people had a curiosity about religion was reflected in their statement that the range of religions covered was too limited: 'We're only hearing about certain religions, like Islam and Christianity', Monika commented, 'and, because my cousin is in my class, [...] we touch on Sikhism.'

She thought that

These religions were chosen because most people in the school are Christians and a lot of the world is with Islamic beliefs. But it does not ... give a choice which one you would like to learn about. To be honest, I would really like to learn about all of them.

To quote Rohini,

We talked about the Jews. The GCSE course will deal with Christianity, in particular Luke's gospel, and Judaism. [...] we should study all the faiths and Christianity more widely.

She, too, indicated the amount of repetition over the years—'I do know Judaism already, because we have done it before' — and regretted that '[i]n RE we only learn about the mechanical parts of religions, we don't look into their ways of thinking.'

Religion involves not only knowledge but also commitment. Data showed that even where RE was interesting, it had no effect on individuals' level of commitment to either parental faith tradition. Thus one of the older young people in our study, a student in her early 20s, with a Hindu mother and a Christian 'father figure', had attended a boarding school with a strong Christian ethos, with almost daily chapel attendance. She had enjoyed RE and acknowledged that 'It all had an effect on me, but it did not make me more religious.' Monika was aware of fellow pupils who took religion seriously, although this did not show in school. She added:

I don't think I'm taking religion as serious[ly] as I would like to, because it offers you a whole new community to work with. But some of the things that they [different religions] believe in, I don't agree with. Because, when you take *amrit*, there are strands attached to it [which go too far for me]. And communion, even that's saying that you commit yourself, which is a bit hard at the situation anyway.

In summary, primary school pupils tended to find RE repetitive and lacking in

stimulation and they made few connections with their family's religious traditions. Both primary and secondary school-age young people appeared to use 'text book models' to describe and judge their relatives' practice – at least in the case of Sikhs. Young people of secondary school age had progressed to the stage of wanting to know about *all* religions, even if they mixed them up and felt that they could not grasp some aspects of particular religions. These young people also related what they learned to their own situation and interrogated their attitudes in the light of what they heard in class, especially from their peers.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion we acknowledge the glimpses which our interviewees gave us of RE and religious nurture across two generations and the possible implications of our study for RE in relation to mixed-faith families and more generally. We do so by briefly reflecting on the young people's experience of learning about religion, on the complementarity of school and home, on the relevance of RE to their religious identity formation, on RE's responsibility to mixed-faith families in particular, and its pedagogy and representation of religions and interfaith issues.

As our study did not include young people from single-faith families, we can only tentatively suggest that some findings are true of pupils generally: for example, that assuming age to be an indicator of maturity in young people can be erroneous. Educators know that young people go

through formative stages (e.g. Helve 1994), with a tendency to see this as steady progression over the years, whereas our data suggest that some young people were more religiously literate than others, regardless of age.

Crespo et al. (2008) point to the importance of rituals, especially in 'interfaith families' for family interaction, and for communication, transmission of values to the next generation and sense of belonging. However, religious rituals hardly featured in our data. School was where young people learned most about religion(s), despite the shortfalls and drawbacks they reported about RE. This finding accords with parents' reliance on school to provide foundational knowledge about religion. The data revealed interactive complementarity between religion-related inputs of home and school. How much discussion about religion took place in the home varied, depending on factors such as time, individuals' dispositions and particular circumstances.

Despite the parents' religious, ethnic and cultural diversity, there was considerable unanimity regarding their criteria for selecting a school (academic calibre and inclusive ethos) and the key role that school would play in providing teaching on religion.

With regard to their religious identity formation, the untypically explicit nurturing that David received as a (Mormon) Christian clearly had a deep impact, while connecting only minimally for him with the representation of the Christian tradition in RE. For young people from a

partly Sikh background, RE (as anticipated) presented the faith in ways that apparently reinforced the sense that relatives were not 'strict' or 'full' Sikhs.

Our data undermine commonly held stereotypes about 'mixed-faith' families, for example that religious adherence is diluted as a result of intermarriage (Froese 2008; Voas 2009), since they show that a young person's religious engagement might be strong (as in David's case, whose parents were Mormon and Sikh) and that dilution and distancing from a tradition had in many cases occurred years before parents entered a relationship with spouses of other faith backgrounds.

Such findings highlight the importance of teachers avoiding generalising about mixed-faith families or judging young people by their physical appearances and names or assuming knowledge about their family situation (Caballero et al. 2008). Monika pointed to one such assumption when she mentioned that people expected her to be an expert in her parents' two religions. By trying to draw on the experience of religiously dual heritage pupils, a teacher can all too easily embarrass pupils whose acquaintance with one or both of the faiths concerned is insecure or hard to articulate, and also make them feel self-consciously unusual when (our data suggest) most accept their family's cultural and/or religious diversity as matter-of-fact and unproblematic. Conversely, such young people are often assumed to have only shallow acquaintance with a parent's faith. Thus Jasmin's RE teacher had decided on the strength of her physical appearance that she was not a 'real Muslim'. RE teachers need to be wary of making such assumptions. Clearly

RE teaching and pupils' sense of identity and self-worth can benefit from a teacher's sensitive awareness of pupils' religious backgrounds and of their family's strength of commitment.

The fact that increasing numbers of pupils have parents whose faith (and often ethnic) backgrounds differ and that this demographic change has not been acknowledged, let alone explored, in RE literature and curriculum materials, does mean that we are initiating, we hope, a more comprehensive attention to inclusiveness both in how religions are presented and the preconceptions that teachers may have of religiously dual – and indeed multi-heritage pupils.

Thus, religious educationists need to take into account diversity of the type which characterises the families who participated in our study within the context of a plural society (Arweck and Nesbitt forthcoming 2010a, b). With regard to the representation of religions in RE, the increasing presence of mixed-faith families challenges the notion that religious or cultural 'communities' are separate and bounded. Parents and young people, and indeed teachers, tend to envisage religions as discrete systems, as presented in syllabuses and publications on 'world religions'; for example, Jackson et al. (2010) in fact discloses that in primary schools especially, teachers focus on faiths sharing 'something in common' (138). This has implications for classroom materials, as they need to show religiously diverse as well as religiously homogeneous families.

The plurality which young people experienced in their lives, in terms of religions and the internal diversity of religions, was (judging by their accounts) not reflected in RE. This may account for the fact that young people could not readily relate what they learned to their family context. Thus the representation of Christianity omitted Mormonism, the tradition of the religiously most observant family in our study. This omission accords with religious educationist Owen Cole's concern that even those who espouse 'diversity' marginalise some groupings, including Mormons (2009: 118). Stereotypical RE textbook representations (certainly of Sikhism) provided or reinforced the standard against which lived religion was perceived.

Several young people, especially those in their teens, pointed to the value of learning about religion through peers, either in classroom discussions of particular matters or simply by observing activities, such as practice during Ramadan or finding out by accident about a Sabbath-related restriction. Therefore, teachers could enhance learning by creating more opportunities for peers to engage with one another.

Education and discussion in the classroom could reduce misconceptions and unease, arising from young people's engagement with the media. Some non-Muslim interviewees' views indicated uncertainty and nervousness about how to relate to Islam and to Muslims. In fact, the current political climate, still overshadowed by the events of 9/11 and subsequent incidents, had affected all the families in our study.

Our recent data on young people from mixed-faith families are

consistent with earlier insights from fieldwork among young Christians, Hindus and Sikhs (Nesbitt 1998, 2000, 2004), in highlighting the challenge for religious educationists in their representation of faith traditions and communities, and suggesting the multiple relevance of ethnographic research to religious education (Nesbitt 2006). Young people rely on RE as a source of dependable information on 'religions'. At the same time, mixed-faith families exemplify for RE teachers one of the ways in which traditions and communities change over time and the multiple interactions between them. RE which presents only 'strict Sikhs' or church-going Christians can slip into anachronistic representation of a society that consists of insular 'religions'. We hope that RE teachers (and producers of curriculum materials) are starting to pay attention to negotiating cultural and religious difference—skills of especial importance to the increasing number of pupils who will themselves 'marry out', given present predictions. In terms of incorporating an inter-faith element in RE, many of the families in our study, with their emphasis on respect for others' traditions and their openness and flexibility, provide positive exemplars.

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## NOTES

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<sup>i</sup> For further details about the project's aims, rationale and design, see Arweck and Nesbitt forthcoming 2010 a and b, under review; Nesbitt and Arweck forthcoming 2010.

<sup>ii</sup> Religious education (RE) is the term used at school, while religious studies (RS) is used in higher education (and in a minority of schools at secondary level).

<sup>iii</sup> All the names used in this article are pseudonyms.

<sup>iv</sup> In order to help situate the young people in their respective family context, the faith combination of the parents is indicated by the mother's faith background being stated first.

<sup>v</sup> Rikki most likely refers here to the *Guru Granth Sahib*, the central sacred text in Sikhism.

<sup>vi</sup> Rikki's words attempt to convey the observance of the five K's (*kesh* – uncut hair, *kangha* – comb, *kirpan* – sword, *kachh* – cotton breeches, *kara* – steel/iron bangle) by initiated Sikhs (see Nesbitt 2005: 51-54). It was beyond the project's remit to explore how Rikki's relatives viewed themselves. His maternal uncle was born and brought up in the UK. However, according to Rikki's mother, the grandfather had some involvement in the local *gurdwara*.