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Does Religious Education as an examination subject work to promote community cohesion?

An empirical enquiry among 14- to 15-year-old adolescents in England and Wales

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Abstract

This study begins by examining the way in which, in both England and Wales, Religious Education has become implicated in political discussion regarding the role of education in promoting community cohesion. The relationship between taking Religious Education as an examination subject and attitude toward religious diversity (as an affective indicator of community cohesion) is then explored among 3,052 14- to 15-year-old students. After controlling for contextual factors (school type and geographical location), personal factors (sex and age), psychological factors (psychoticism, neuroticism and extraversion), and religious factors (Christian affiliation, worship attendance, personal prayer, and belief in God), a small but significant positive association was found between taking Religious Education as an examination subject and attitude toward religious diversity. This finding may be interpreted as supporting the view that Religious Education works to promote community cohesion, although the wider debate that the community cohesion agenda has generated among religious educators needs further exploration.

Keywords: community cohesion, social integration, Religious Education, school examination, religious diversity.

Introduction

Within the context of the AHRC/ESRC Religion and Society Programmes a challenge was placed for the Religious Education community by the provocative title of the project initiated in Glasgow University by Jim Conroy: ‘Does Religious Education Work?’ (see Conroy, Lundie, & Baumfield, 2012; Conroy *et al*, 2013). In the introduction to his study, Conroy properly observes that the structure of his research question (‘Does Religious Education Work?’) entails asking the prior question, ‘What would count as religious education working?’ (Conroy *et al*, 2013, p. 2). Clearly a variety of different (and potentially opposing) answers can be given to this prior question, including (but not restricted to) the answers implied in Conroy’s own study. The purpose of the present study is to test the extent to which Religious Education works to promote community cohesion. The examination will proceed in three steps. The first step and the second step examine the ways in which Religious Education has been positioned as a mechanism for promoting community cohesion in England and Wales. Although Barnes (2012a, p. 22) argues that there ‘is a case for considering England and Wales together’, he also cautions against being misled by failing to recognise the differences between the two nations. Although England and Wales share in a related history and common legislation, the process of devolution in Wales has meant that education provision in Wales has become increasingly distinctive (ap Sion & Francis, 2014). The following examination confirms the wisdom of respecting the differences between the two nations. The third step draws on data provided by the Young People’s Attitudes to Religious Diversity Project (Francis, Croft, Pyke, & Robbins, 2012) to offer a means of testing whether or not in practice Religious Education works in the sense of having a measurable impact on young people’s attitudes toward religious diversity and hence as a key aspect of community cohesion in England and Wales today.

Community cohesion and Religious Education in Wales

Community cohesion has been promoted by Welsh Government as a priority, cross-cutting policy area, which was initially launched in 2009 in the publication, *Getting on Together: A community cohesion strategy for Wales* (Welsh Assembly Government, 2009), and focused on the call for local authority mapping of communities and the development of strategies for resourcing community cohesion at local level through five key areas articulated as housing, learning, communication skills, promoting equality and social inclusion, and preventing violent extremism and strengthening community cohesion. The Welsh Government renewed its commitment to the strategy in the 2011 Programme of Government, explored the embedding of community cohesion at local level in the research and guidance publication, *Mainstreaming Community Cohesion: Guidance for Local Authorities in Wales* (Bashir *et al*, 2012), and set out a targeted delivery plan with measurable outcomes for community cohesion in the publication, *Community Cohesion National Delivery Plan: 2014-2016* (Welsh Government, 2014).

The understanding and definition of community cohesion provided by the Welsh Government is drawn from the UK Government's definition published by the Department for Communities and Local Government in 2008:

Community Cohesion is what must happen in all communities to enable different groups of people to get on well together. A key contributor to community cohesion is integration which is what must happen to enable new residents and existing residents to adjust to one another. Our vision of an integrated and cohesive community is based on three foundations: people from different backgrounds having similar life opportunities; people knowing their rights and responsibilities; and people trusting one another and trusting local institutions to act fairly. And three key ways of living together: a shared future vision and sense of belonging; a focus on what new and existing communities have in common, alongside recognition of the value of

diversity; and strong and positive relationships between people from different backgrounds. *Department for Communities and Local Government*, 2008 (Welsh Assembly Government, 2009).

The recognition of the key place of young people and schools within the community cohesion strategy was further developed and supported by the Welsh Government publication, *Respect and Resilience – Developing Community Cohesion: A common understanding for schools and their communities* (Welsh Assembly Government, 2011). *Respect and Resilience* explicitly identified the potential of learning for the promotion of integration and mutual respect and the potential of schools to provide safe and supportive environments for asking questions, developing understanding and nurturing respect and tolerance within their communities. In addition, explicit connections were made between learning, community cohesion and the prevention of violent extremism.

References to the specific contribution of Religious Education to the community cohesion strategy appeared in both the original strategy document, *Getting on Together: A community cohesion strategy for Wales* (Welsh Assembly Government, 2009) and the school-related document, *Respect and Resilience – Developing Community Cohesion: A common understanding for schools and their communities* (Welsh Assembly Government, 2011). In terms of the former document, Religious Education (as understood within the context of the *National Exemplar Framework for Religious Education*, Welsh Assembly Government, 2008) was recognised as focusing on ‘developing an understanding and respect for world religions and the impact that they have on individuals and society in order to support community cohesion’ (p. 25). In terms of the latter document, Religious Education was included within a section on teaching and learning strategies and made reference to the UK Government-funded REsilience project, where the contribution of Religious Education in schools extended beyond that of helping pupils to explore faiths, beliefs and values in their

communities (p. 60). With the REsilience project the focus was placed on responding to contentious issues and religious extremism through offering professional training to secondary school teachers of Religious Education to raise confidence levels and skills in a particularly relevant subject area. In Wales, the REsilience project was carefully adapted to be relevant to Welsh contexts (see further ap Siôn & Francis, 2014).

In addition to these two specific references to Religious Education, however, the distinctive contribution of the subject to community cohesion may also be interpreted within the intentionally generalised statements found in the policy documents relating to schools and the curriculum more broadly. For example, in the research and guidance document, *Mainstreaming Community Cohesion: Guidance for Local Authorities in Wales* (Bashir *et al.*, 2012), many of the statements relating to embedding community cohesion within schools, colleges and young people's services and to the relationship between schools, colleges, and universities and Prevent and far-right extremism are particularly relevant to Religious Education at the curriculum subject level, where they intersect with religion. For example: schools should use 'teaching, learning and the curriculum to build resilience to violent extremism' (p. 40); schools are recognised as places where young people from different backgrounds come together and the creation of 'positive encounters can help to counter misconceptions and misunderstanding that underpin intolerance and prejudice' (p. 41); the school curriculum should include 'teaching and learning strategies that enable learners to raise questions in a safe, non-threatening environment where wide-ranging issues and alternative views can be discussed and evaluated' (pp. 45-46); and the significance of 'community focused' schools to community cohesion and the prevention of violent extremism (p. 42).

In terms of practice, these community cohesion policy statements may be argued to play out in Religious Education in Wales in two basic ways, which relate to teaching and

learning in Religious Education and monitoring and support for Religious Education. First, as a consequence of the curriculum review of 2008 in Wales, there have been important changes affecting teaching and learning in Religious Education in Wales. Although these changes relate directly to statutory Religious Education they are also of relevance to examination-level Religious Education because they represent an intentional pedagogical shift from ‘content’-led education to ‘skills’-led education, across the whole curriculum. This shift is apparent in the *National Exemplar Framework for Religious Education* (Welsh Assembly Government, 2008), which was adopted (or adapted) by all 22 local authorities in Wales as their locally agreed syllabus. Here, three inter-related core skills are presented as: engaging with fundamental questions; exploring religious beliefs, teachings, and practices; and expressing personal responses. These core skills are then explored through a ‘range’ of areas relating to ‘The World’, ‘Human Experience’ and ‘Search for Meaning’, and differentiated according to the key stages of learning. A pedagogical approach that focuses on ‘skills’, with particular emphasis on identifying and asking human and religious questions, exploring different responses, and reflecting on one’s own personal responses, provides a natural context for encountering challenging areas of direct relevance to community cohesion and violent extremism, where they intersect with religion.

Secondly, the increasingly diverse range of faith groups present in many local authority areas in Wales have resulted in significant developments relating to the statutory local monitoring of and support for Religious Education provided by local Standing Advisory Councils on Religious Education (SACREs). The survey of the 22 local SACREs in Wales, conducted by ap Siôn (2014), portrays SACREs as bodies that require, as part of their constitutions, the bringing together of representatives from a variety of faith backgrounds with a clearly defined remit which enables them ‘to meet and to collaborate on initiatives and projects of common concern in relation to religious education and young people’ (p. 165),

including examination-level Religious Education. This kind of collaboration reflects good practice in relation to the provision of a rich context (the SACRE) for promoting positive interfaith relations and community cohesion at local level, as well as providing schools with important local community connections in terms of both building relationships and accessing resources and events. These are described and documented in the Wales SACRE survey (ap Sion, 2014) and the Welsh Government review of SACRE annual reports (Welsh Government, 2013) and, in terms of process and local authority structures, indirectly provide a response to challenging areas of direct relevance to community cohesion and violent extremism, where they intersect with religion.

Community cohesion and Religious Education in England

The concept of community cohesion has also played an important part in government documentation in England. The Cattle Report, published by the Home Office in 2001, introduced the concept to public debate (Cattle, 2001), and the following year the Local Government Association (working with the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, Commission for Racial Equality, and Inter-Faith Network) published *Guidance on Community Cohesion* (Local Government Association *et al*, 2002). This document produced the first official definition of community cohesion as embracing the following characteristics:

- There is common vision and a sense of belonging for all communities;
- The diversity of people's different backgrounds and circumstances are appreciated and positively valued;
- Those from different backgrounds have similar life opportunities; and
- Strong and positive relationships are being developed between people from different backgrounds in the workplace, in schools and within neighbourhoods. (Local Government Association *et al*, 2002)

In this and other definitions the emphasis was placed on developing understanding between different groups and building mutual trust and respect by breaking down stereotypes and misconceptions about the 'other'. It was soon recognised, however, that an emphasis on a 'sense of belonging' and 'respect' was too limited and the concept needed to be more inclusive of active policy concerns with regard to deprivation, inequality and racism. The Commission on Integration and Cohesion (2007, p. 21) noted that 'integration and cohesion policies cannot be a substitute for national policies to reduce deprivation...tackling inequality is an absolute precondition for integration and cohesion.'

A full and detailed year-by-year breakdown of all government legislation and guidance on community cohesion from 2001 to 2014 is provided by Cantle (2014). The discussion that follows will be limited to those elements that relate in the first instance to schools and then specifically to Religious Education.

Early practical guidance on community cohesion was issued for many professional areas including schools (Home Office 2004) with the concept being widely adopted in UK educational outputs. Initially the legal 'duty to promote community cohesion' formed part of the Education and Inspections Act (2006) with all English schools being required to embed community cohesion within teaching and learning across all curriculum areas with the provision being subject to the inspection process (this requirement to inspect community cohesion was removed in 2011). The subsequent non-statutory guidance (DCSF 2007), drawing heavily on the earlier Local Government Association *et al* (2002) definition, defined community cohesion as:

Working towards a society in which there is a common vision and sense of belonging by all communities; a society in which the diversity of people's backgrounds and circumstances is appreciated and valued; a society in which similar life opportunities are available to all; and a society in which strong and positive relationships exist and

continue to be developed in the workplace, in schools and the wider community.'

(DCSF, 2007, p. 3)

This guidance further required that 'Every school – whatever its intake and wherever it is located – is responsible for educating children and young people who will live and work in a country which is diverse in terms of cultures, religions or beliefs, ethnicities and social backgrounds' (DCSF, 2007, p. 1). To achieve this schools were required to show how they provided 'reasonable means for children, young people, their friends and families to interact with people from different backgrounds' (DCSF, 2007, p.7). As Cantle (2014) summarises, the intention was that every school age child would be introduced to 'others' virtually or actually, and provided with more positive experiences of difference.

Many areas of the curriculum have been viewed as a means to promote community cohesion (DCSF, 2010). For example, citizenship was introduced into the English secondary national curriculum in 2002 making its own impact on both community cohesion and Religious Education (see Jackson, 2003). For Religious Education, in particular, there is a high expectation that the subject can and should contribute significantly to social and community cohesion (Grimmitt, 2010; Woodward, 2012; Miller, 2014). It is argued that Religious Education provides an opportunity to celebrate and foster awareness of differences within the school and wider world. As a subject Religious Education can serve educational outcomes whilst also working to increase understanding and potentially celebrate diversity and challenge stereotypes. Religious Education is viewed as a curricular tool which can support schools' efforts to promote community cohesion, whereby children can be taught to understand and appreciate diversity, value differences and challenge prejudice, discrimination and stereotyping.

Although in accordance with the legislation of the Education Act 1944 (Dent, 1947) and the Education Reform Act 1988 (Cox & Cairns, 1989) Religious Education remains

locally determined through the Locally Agreed Syllabus required of each local authority, since 2004 a *Non-Statutory National Framework* for Religious Education has attracted widespread support (QCA, 2004, p. 12). The framework positioned Religious Education as a subject for learning about the different religions represented in the country and for dialogue between pupils from different religious and secular backgrounds. Through its focus on identity and diversity, Religious Education plays a significant part in ‘developing pupils’ knowledge and understanding about the diversity of national, regional, religious and ethnic identities in the UK and the need for mutual respect and understanding; enabling pupils to think about topical spiritual, moral, social and cultural issues including the importance of resolving conflict fairly.’ (QCA, 2004, p. 17).

The non-statutory guidance offered in 2010 stated that effective Religious Education will promote community cohesion at each of four levels:

- the school community – RE provides a positive context within which the diversity of cultures, beliefs and values within the school community can be celebrated and explored;
- the community within which the school is located – RE provides opportunities to investigate the patterns of diversity of religion and belief within the local area and it is an important context within which links can be forged with different religious and non-religious belief groups in the local community;
- the UK community – a major focus of RE is the study of the diversity of religion and belief which exists with the UK and how this diversity influences national life; and
- the global community – RE involves the study of matters of global significance recognising the diversity of religion and belief and its impact on world issues.’ (DCSF 2010, p. 8)

This potential contribution to community cohesion has been claimed by Ofsted (2007, p. 41) as a primary purpose of Religious Education. This report argues that ‘at its best RE equips pupils very well to consider issues of community cohesion, diversity and religious understanding’ (p. 5). However, the same report notes considerable variations in the quality of Religious Education teaching and learning across schools in England, observing that Religious Education cannot make an effective contribution to community cohesion without significant reform. Likewise, in a government funded project, Jackson *et al* (2010, p. 1) examined classroom resources used in schools to teach about world religions with a particular focus of their contribution to community cohesion and found that such principles were often not explicitly stated in materials or in policies and Religious Education lessons.

In contrast with Wales, with the election of a Coalition government (consisting of the Conservative Party and Liberal Democrats) in May 2010, the explicit focus on community cohesion in England has diminished. The new government, as Cattle (2014) notes, prefers to use the term ‘integration’ rather than ‘cohesion’ and has reduced expenditure on all types of community-based activity. It has also been claimed that the dropping of community cohesion as a priority in England, along with some other measures, has had negative effects on Religious Education in schools. These include privileging certain school subjects other than Religious Education, diminishing the level of local authority support for Religious Education, reducing the role of specialist Religious Education advisers, and not requiring the use of Agreed Syllabuses for Religious Education in Academies and Free Schools. The new Government also stopped the school inspections on the duty to promote community cohesion, although the duty and statutory guidance remains in force (Chater, 2011; National Association of Teachers of Religious Education, 2011; All Party Parliamentary Group, 2013; Orchard & Whately, 2013).

Although in England, an explicit focus on community cohesion was reduced following the establishment of the Coalition Government in May 2010, a non-statutory *National Curriculum Framework for Religious Education* (NCFRE) produced by the RE Council of England and Wales (2013) continued an explicit reference to community cohesion. This new framework states that pupils at Key Stage 3 will be able to ‘examine and evaluate issues about community cohesion and respect for all in the light of different perspectives from varied religions and worldviews’ (p. 30) and at Key Stage 4 and beyond that students should be taught to ‘use a range of research methods to examine and critically evaluate varied perspectives and approaches to issues of community cohesion, respect for all and mutual understanding, locally, nationally and globally’ (p. 25).

Community cohesion and Religious Education as an examination subject

In both England and Wales during the past decade, there has been a discernible shift in both the numbers of students studying religious education to examination level and the specification ‘content’ of these examinations, reflecting the increasing popularity of the subject and its perceived relevance to life in contemporary society. For example, in the publication *Religious Education in Secondary Schools* (Estyn, 2013), Estyn (the Inspectorate in Wales for quality and standards in education and training) reports that ‘more pupils gain a qualification in religious education than in any other non-core subject in Wales’ (p. 2). Specification content at examination level has also undergone significant change, with teachers and students now preferring and selecting options that focus on the study of philosophy and ethics, world religions, and religion and contemporary society. A review of these more popular options shows provision of content and development of skills that are significant for exploring and critically evaluating many challenging areas of direct relevance to community cohesion and violent extremism, where they intersect with religion. These potential contributions to community cohesion, however, are more likely to come from a

contemporary pedagogical approach to the subject rather than an intentional and systematic inclusion of a policy area within the subject. In addition, a critical study conducted by Rudge (2010) explored in detail A-level and GCSE course syllabuses to establish whether they adequately addressed issues of social and community cohesion. He found that at A level the majority of course syllabuses made no explicit or implicit reference to community cohesion. In contrast the majority of GCSE courses, while not necessarily using the terminology of ‘community cohesion’, did display some of its key concepts particularly where religion in contemporary society could be studied as a core element in courses. However, from his detailed survey of the actual material made available across a number of examination boards, Rudge comes to the conclusion that public examinations in the subject do not adequately address issues of social and community cohesion:

They are too hit and miss because most courses treat the issue as a matter of choice. In some GCSE courses it appears to be more important for the words ‘community cohesion’ to be included like a mantra in a specification, to meet a particular directive, than for a more profound understanding of the issue to inform the material for coherent courses. (Rudge, 2010, p. 257)

Research question

Against this background, the aim of the present paper is to draw on the Young People’s Attitudes toward Religious Diversity project in order to assess the impact of religious education on promoting community cohesion. This broad research question, however, needs refining in light of the nature of provision for Religious Education in England and Wales. In one sense all pupils attending state-maintained schools in England and Wales are exposed to Religious Education, apart from the small minority who are withdrawn from attending Religious Education classes by their parents. In another sense, however, there is a clear differentiation in the amount of time and attention given to Religious Education by

students who opt to follow this area as an examination subject and by the students who do not pursue Religious Education as an examination subject. The precise research question is therefore formulated in the following terms: ‘Does Religious Education as an examination subject work to promote community cohesion?’

The precise formulation of the research question requires further clarification regarding the specification of the outcome variable that may be indicative of fostering community cohesion. The view taken by the present study is that Religious Education may be expected to promote community cohesion by generating a more positive view of religious diversity. Within the context of the Young People’s Attitude toward Religious Diversity project this outcome could be accessed by the Scale of Attitude toward Religious Diversity (SARD) included within the survey.

Recognising that attitude toward religious diversity has been shown by previous studies (see Francis & Village, 2014) to be related to personal, psychological, religious and contextual variables, such factors will need to be taken into account by regression analyses before testing for the specific effect of Religious Education as an examination subject.

Method

Procedure

The Young People’s Attitude to Religious Diversity Project set out to obtain responses from at least 2,000 13- to 15-year-old students attending state-maintained schools in each of five parts of the UK: England, Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales *and* London. In each nation half of the students were recruited from schools with a religious character (Anglican, Catholic, or joint Anglican and Catholic) and half from schools without a religious character. Within the participating schools questionnaires were administered by the Religious Education teachers within examination-like conditions. Students were assured of anonymity and confidentiality and given the option not to participate in the project.

Participants

The present analyses were conducted on a sub-sample from the Young People's Attitude to Religious Diversity Project, drawing on information provided by 3,052 students from schools in England, Wales and London who self identified as either 'no religion' or as Christian. In terms of sex, 47% were male and 53% were female. In terms of self-assigned religious affiliation, 63% identified as Christian and 37% as 'no religion'.

Measures

Attitude toward religious diversity was assessed by the 13-item Scale of Attitude toward Religious Diversity (SARD). This instrument combines items concerned with social distance, items that embrace a wider view of an affective response to religious diversity, and items concerned with the acceptance of religious clothing and symbols in school. Two examples of social distance items are: 'I would be happy to go out with someone from a different faith' and 'I would be happy about a close relative marrying someone from a different faith'. Two examples of wider affective items are, 'We must respect all religions', and 'Having people from different religious backgrounds makes my school/college an interesting place'. Two examples of items concerning religious clothing and religious symbols are: 'Christians should be allowed to wear crosses in school' and 'Sikhs should be allowed to wear the Turban in school'.

Personality was assessed by the abbreviated version of the Junior Eysenck Personality Questionnaire Revised (JEPQR-A) developed by Francis (1996) who reported the following Cronbach alpha coefficients: extraversion = .66; neuroticism = .70; psychoticism = .61; lie scale = .57.

Sex and school type were recorded as dichotomous variables: male (1) and female (2); schools without a religious foundation (1) and schools with a religious character (2).

Religious affiliation was recorded by a checklist of world faiths and Christian denominations in response to the question, ‘What is your religion?’ For the current analysis all the Christian categories were collapsed into a single group and those affiliated with other world faiths were omitted, producing a dichotomous variable: no religion = 1, and Christian = 2.

Religious attendance was assessed by the question, ‘Apart from special occasions (like weddings) how often do you attend a religious worship service (e.g. in a church, mosque or synagogue). Responses were recorded on a seven-point scale: never (1), sometimes (2), at least once a year (3), at least six times a year (4), at least once a month (5), nearly every week (6), and several times a week (7).

Personal prayer was assessed by the question, ‘How often do you pray in your home or by yourself?’ Responses were recorded on a five-point scale: never (1), occasionally (2), and at least once a month (3), at least once a week (4), and nearly every day (5).

Belief in God was assessed by the statement ‘I believe in God’. Responses were recorded on a five-point scale: disagree strongly (1), disagree (2), not certain (3), agree (4), and agree strongly (5).

Results

The religious variables included in the survey offer a thorough profile of the religiosity of the participants. In terms of self-assigned religious affiliation, 63% identified as Christian and 37% as having no religion. In terms of frequency of worship attendance, 43% reported never attending, 29% attended less than six times a year, 6% at least six times a year, 6% at least once a month, and 16% every week. In terms of frequency of personal prayer, 58% reported never praying, 22% occasionally, 3% at least once a month, 7% at least once a week, and 10% every day. In terms of belief in God, 42% agreed or agreed strongly that they

believed in God, 27% were not certain whether they believed in God, and 31% disagreed or disagreed strongly that they believed in God.

The first step in data analysis explored the scale properties of the Scale of Attitude toward Religious Diversity in terms of the correlations between the individual items and the sum of the other items, and in terms of the item endorsement on the sum of the agree and agree strongly responses. These data, presented in table 1, demonstrate a good level of internal consistency reliability with an alpha coefficient of .92 and correlations between individual items and the sum of the other ten items ranging between .57 and .78.

- insert table 1 about here -

The second step in data analysis explored the scale properties of the four scales employed in the analyses in terms of the alpha coefficient and in terms of the means and standard deviations. Table 2 demonstrates that the extraversion scale and the neuroticism scale both achieved alpha coefficients in excess of the threshold of .65 proposed by DeVellis (2003). The lower alpha coefficient achieved by the psychoticism scale is consistent with the recognised difficulties in operationalising this dimension of personality (see Francis, Brown, & Philipchalk, 1992).

- insert table 2 about here -

The third step in data analysis explored the correlations between personal factors, psychological factors, contextual factors, religious factors, taking Religious Education as an examination subject, and attitude toward religious diversity. Given the size of the sample the five percent significance level will not be taken into account in interpreting the correlations presented in table 3. Regarding sex differences, these data confirm the more general finding in the social scientific study of religion that females endorse religiosity more highly than males (Francis, 1997; Francis & Penny, 2013). In these data female students are more likely to report Christian affiliation, to attend religious worship, to engage in personal prayer, to

believe in God, to take religious education as an examination subject, and to record higher scores on the Scale of Attitude toward Religious Diversity.

The correlations with personality variables presented in table 3 demonstrate that in terms of the religious variables, psychoticism provides stronger prediction of individual differences than either extraversion or neuroticism. This finding is consistent with the general conclusion within the psychology of religion as recorded historically by Francis (1992). In these data there are significant negative correlations varying from $-.08$ to $-.16$ between psychoticism scores and Christian affiliation, religious worship, personal prayer, and belief in God. Smaller, but significant positive correlations varying from $.05$ to $.07$ were recorded between neuroticism scores and two of the four religiosity measures, personal prayer and belief in God. Significant correlations were recorded between extraversion scores and two of the four religiosity measures. Extraverts were less likely to report personal prayer and worship attendance. Table 3 also demonstrates that sex and all three psychological variables are significantly correlated with scores recorded on the Scale of Attitude toward Religious Diversity. Greater openness to religious diversity is associated with being female, with lower psychoticism scores, lower extraversion scores, and higher neuroticism scores.

Finally, table 3 demonstrates the significance of the contextual variables. Taking England as the reference point, students in Wales recorded significantly lower scores on all four religious variables (affiliation, worship attendance, personal prayer and belief in God), and also a significantly less positive attitude toward religious diversity. Students in London recorded significantly higher scores on all four religious variables and also a significantly more positive attitude toward religious diversity. Taking schools without a religious foundation as the reference point, students in schools with a religious character recorded significantly higher scores on all four religious variables, but not on the Scale of Attitude toward Religious Diversity.

- insert table 3 about here -

The fourth step in data analysis explored the interconnection between attitude toward religious diversity, and the four religious variables. These data, presented in table 4, demonstrate two main points. First, all four religious variables are significantly intercorrelated. For example, within this context self-assigned religious affiliation as Christian predicts greater levels of worship attendance, personal prayer, and belief in God. Second, all four religious variables function as significant predictors of a positive attitude toward religious diversity. Students who self-assign as Christian, who attend religious worship, who practice personal prayer, and who believe in God hold a more positive attitude toward religious diversity than those who do not embrace these religious characteristics.

- insert table 4 about here -

In view of these complex patterns of intercorrelations between the variables, the fifth step in data analysis proposes a sequence of regression models that take attitude toward religious diversity as the dependent variable. Model one examines the effect of the contextual variables (school type and geographical location) on attitude toward religious diversity. The beta weights confirm that students in London hold a more positive attitude toward religious diversity. Model two adds the personal factor (sex). The beta weights confirm the significant effect of sex (females hold a more positive attitude).

Model three adds the psychological factors (psychoticism, neuroticism, and extraversion). The beta weights confirm that psychoticism scores exert the largest effect (with low scores being associated with a more positive attitude toward religious diversity). High neuroticism scores are also associated with a more positive attitude toward religious diversity. When the psychological variables are in the model, the effect of sex is reduced. This highlights that some of the effect of sex differences reflected in model two have been

mediated through personality in model three, with females tending to record lower scores on psychoticism and higher scores on neuroticism.

- insert table 5 about here -

Model four adds the religious factors (Christian affiliation, worship attendance, personal prayer, and belief in God). The beta weights show that belief in God exerts the largest positive effect on attitude toward religious diversity. When belief in God is in the equation additional significant positive effect is carried by worship attendance and by prayer. When these positive religious effects are in the equation, one of the religious variables simultaneously shows significant negative effect. Christian affiliation without belief and practice (worship attendance and prayer) predicts a less positive attitude toward religious diversity. Also when the religious variables are in the equation, schools with a religious character show a small but significant effect.

Model five adds the educational factor (taking Religious Education as an examination subject). The beta weight shows that taking religious education as an examination subject exerts a small (but statistically significant) effect on enhancing attitude toward religious diversity. This effect is the case when the contextual, personal, psychological and religious factors are taken into account in the model.

Conclusion

Building on the provocative and challenging work of Jim Conroy, posing the research question ‘Does Religious Education work?’, this study drew on the Young People’s Attitudes toward Religious Diversity project to address the tightly focused research question, ‘Does Religious Education as an examination subject work to promote community cohesion among 13- to 15-year-old students in England and Wales?’. This research question was operationalised by accepting individual differences in attitude toward religious diversity as indicative of affective predisposition toward community cohesion.

Building on insights gained from previous research into predictors of individual differences in attitude toward religious diversity, the basic research problem (concerning the relationship between taking Religious Education as an examination subject and attitude toward religious diversity) was contextualised within a range of pertinent control variables, namely contextual factors (school type and geographical location), personal factor (sex), psychological factors (psychoticism, neuroticism, and extraversion) and religious factors (Christian affiliation, worship attendance, personal prayer, and belief in God). After taking these control variables into account within a regression model, the data demonstrated a positive association between taking Religious Education as an examination subject and higher scores on the scale of attitude toward religious diversity.

Within all the recognised constraints of a cross-sectional correlational study this finding is consistent with the causal hypothesis that taking Religious Education as an examination subject works to promote community cohesion among 14- to 15-year-old students in England and Wales. What the multiple regression model adds to this conclusion is that the positive association cannot now be dismissed as an artefact of the kind of contextual, personal, psychological, or religious factors already built into the model. The conclusion is, therefore, robust within the common constraints of the cross-sectional correlational form of educational research.

The natural next step, building on the present study and taking the research question further forward would be to invest in a longitudinal study across the school years in which Religious Education is an option as an examination subject, assessing the comparative *change* in attitude toward community cohesion during this period among students taking Religious Education as an examination subject *and* among students not so doing.

Although the results of the analyses indicate that taking religious education as an examination subject exerts a small (but statistically significant) effect on enhancing attitude

toward religious diversity, the notion that Religious Education in schools in England and Wales should occupy an *instrumental* role in promoting community cohesion has generated debate and diverse perspectives within the professional and academic communities. Those within the Religious Education community who support the role of Religious Education in community cohesion are, nonetheless, keen to place two caveats, namely that this end is not achieved by Religious Education *per se* but by good quality Religious Education, and that a particular approach to Religious Education is required to deliver this outcome (see Grimmitt, 2010a; Woodward, 2012; Miller, 2014). Other voices within the Religious Education community, however, take a much less positive view of the contribution that can be made by Religious Education to community cohesion, for example, Barnes (2012b), Copley (2010) and Conroy *et al*, (2013). Therefore, any further studies exploring measurable relationships between Religious Education and community cohesion need to be set within this wider debate.

Note

Young People's Attitude to Religious Diversity Project (AHRC Reference: AH/G014035/1) is a large scale mixed methods research project investigating the attitudes of 13- to 16-year-old students across the United Kingdom. Young people from a variety of socio-economic, cultural, ethnic and religious backgrounds from different parts of England, Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland, with the addition of London as a special case, are taking part in the study. Professor Robert Jackson is principal investigator and Professor Leslie J Francis is co-investigator. Together they lead a team of qualitative and quantitative researchers based in the Warwick Religions and Education Research Unit, within the Institute of Education at the University of Warwick. The project is part of the AHRC/ESRC Religion and Society Programme, and ran from 2009-12.

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Table 1

Scale of Attitude toward Religious Diversity: Scale properties

	<i>r</i>	%
We must respect all religions	.66	71
All religious groups in Britain should have equal rights	.60	65
I would be happy to go out with someone from a different denomination	.62	60
I would be happy to go out with someone from a different faith	.63	56
I would be happy about a close relative marrying someone from a different denomination	.68	58
I would be happy about a close relative marrying someone from a different faith	.63	61
Having people from different religious backgrounds makes my school/college an interesting place	.58	53
People from different religious backgrounds makes where I live an interesting place	.57	39
Christians should be allowed to wear crosses in school	.59	66
Muslims should be allowed to wear the Burka in school	.67	48
Sikhs should be allowed to wear the Turban in school	.77	58
Jews should be allowed to wear the Star of David in school	.75	61
Hindus should be allowed to wear the Bindi in school	.77	57
Alpha coefficient	.92	

Note % = sum of agree and agree strongly responses

r = correlation between individual item and sum of other ten items

Table 2

Scale Properties

	N	α	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Low	High
	Items					
Scale of Attitude toward Religious Diversity	13	.92	46.57	10.90	13	65
Extraversion	6	.70	4.68	1.55	0	6
Neuroticism	6	.69	3.11	1.81	0	6
Psychoticism	6	.57	1.16	1.28	0	6

Table 3

Correlations with personal, psychological and contextual variables

	Sex	Age	P	N	E	Wales	London	Sch. Type
<i>Religious variables</i>								
Christian affiliation	.05***	-.00	-.09***	.01	.00	-.09***	.10***	.40***
Religious worship	.05***	-.04**	-.14***	.02*	-.06***	-.15***	.21***	.34***
Personal prayer	.06***	-.04**	-.11***	.05***	-.05***	-.13***	.20***	.21***
Belief in God	.11***	-.03**	-.17***	.07***	-.01**	-.07***	.17***	.24***
<i>Educational variables</i>								
RE	.08***	.18***	-.05***	.06***	-.02	.01	.03*	.30***
<i>Religious diversity</i>								
SARD	.21***	.00	-.31***	.13***	-.03*	-.04***	.12***	.03*

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

Table 4

Correlation matrix for religious variables and Scale of Attitude toward Religious Diversity

	Christian affiliation	Worship attendance	Personal Prayer	Belief in God
Religious diversity	.09***	.22***	.20***	.29***
Belief in God	.55***	.54***	.57***	
Personal prayer	.42***	.62***		
Worship attendance	.49***			

*** $p < .001$

Table 5

Regression models

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
<i>Contextual factors</i>					
School type	.01	.00	.01	-.03*	-.04**
Wales	.02	.02	.01	.01	.01
London	.13***	.12***	.10***	.05***	.05***
<i>Personal factors</i>					
Sex		.20***	.11***	.10***	.10***
Age		-.00	-.00	.00	.00
<i>Psychological factors</i>					
Psychoticism			-.28***	-.24***	-.24***
Neuroticism			.09***	.08***	.08***
Extraversion			-.00	.00	.00
<i>Religious factors</i>					
Christian affiliation				-.11***	-.11***
Worship attendance				.09***	.09***
Personal prayer				.02	.02
I believe in God				.23***	.23***
<i>Educational factors</i>					
RE					.04***
Total r^2	.015	.056	.136	.193	.195

Note: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$