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Teaching Inclusive Religious Education Impartially: An English Perspective

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Abstract

The article draws on experience of teaching, teacher education and qualitative research related to an impartial approach to inclusive religious education (that is, including pupils from families who identify with or do not identify with religion or belief groups), in publicly funded schools in England. Such religious education is considered to be intrinsically worthwhile, and instrumentally important in contributing to pupils' personal and social development. The general approach considered is hermeneutical, bringing reliable information, provided mainly by teachers, into relationship with knowledge and experience of both pupils and teacher through processes of active learning, including classroom dialogue. Qualitative research on student and early career teachers, including students and teachers with strong personal religious or non-religious commitments, suggests that appropriate skills and attitudes supporting an impartial approach to teaching can be developed, facilitating a relationship of trust between teacher and students. A condition for this is the development of teachers' knowledge and understanding of the various stances of pupils in their classes. However, some student teachers or teachers with very firmly held views find it very difficult to adopt an impartial approach. On the basis of examples from various types of qualitative research, it is argued that good quality – well-funded – initial and in-service teacher education can assist in developing appropriate skills and attitudes in the case of those who wish to take an impartial approach. Further research, ideally involving partnership between researchers and practitioners, is recommended.

Keywords: impartiality; inclusive religious education; hermeneutical approach; teachers of religious education; teacher education; knowledge; skills; attitudes

Introduction

This article is written from the viewpoint of two educators who have taught religious education in secondary schools in England (including pupils from a variety of religious and non-religious backgrounds), have long experience in training teachers of such 'inclusive' religious education, and substantial experience researching various aspects of teaching and learning in religious education and of researching the life-worlds of children from various religious backgrounds in England. Both writers have also engaged in empirical and theoretical research and related activity (such as policy development) in wider UK, European and international contexts.

Our ideas are articulated within the context of:

- a view of teacher professionalism and academic integrity together with their associated values and attitudes;

- the development of what we might call ‘inclusive’ religious education in England and Wales (that is, inclusive of pupils from a wide range of family backgrounds, some engaging in religious activities and some not);
- a broad view of the aims of inclusive religious education, including its intrinsic worth as a study of a particular area of human experience and its instrumental worth, as contributing to both the personal and social development of students (Jackson 2015c; Jackson 2015d);
- a view that ‘understanding religions’ through inclusive religious education is, in principle, complementary to certain forms of religious nurture which aim to develop ‘religious understanding’ (Jackson 2014b; 2015d);
- a hermeneutical view of teaching and learning, as exemplified by the interpretive approach (Jackson 1997; 2009a), in which material provided by the teacher is complemented by interactions of students or of students and teacher, moderated by the teacher according to agreed ground rules (Jackson 2014a).

Without going into detail over the various debates, we adopt the following positions, all of which are consistent with the Council of Europe Recommendation on teaching about religions and non-religious convictions (Council of Europe 2008), including its views on teacher integrity and competence and the classroom as potentially a ‘safe space’ for dialogue and exchange (Jackson 2014a, 47-57). The process of inclusive religious education should:

- acknowledge democratic values as reflected, for example, in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights; these include accepting the principle of human dignity, and respecting each person’s right to freedom of religion or belief, while examining the relationship of rights to responsibilities (Jackson 2014a, 77-86; 2014c);
- acknowledge, ideally through common agreement, limits to expression and behaviour by participants and agreed ‘ground rules’ for classroom discussion (Jackson 2014a, 56-57);
- exhibit academic integrity through commitment to values such as accuracy, fairness and responsibility. This includes the maintenance of a spirit of openness, in which neither the theoretical positions nor the personal views of teachers are imposed upon students, together with an attitude of critical enquiry, in evaluating sources of information, for example.

- exhibit sensitivity to all participants, regardless of their religious or non-religious views (Jackson 1997).

Such an open, ‘active learning’ approach encourages the transmission of accurate information in the context of communication and dialogue between students, and between students and teachers. The approach requires teachers who not only have access to reliable information, but also have, or can develop, appropriate skills and attitudes for teaching impartially (Jackson 2014a, 33-46).

We acknowledge that a teacher exhibiting a form of atheism which regards not only religions, but the *study* of religions as worthless pursuits (Grayling 2015; see also Jackson 2015b) would not be able to function effectively as an educational professional in this field. Moreover, the view that regards initiation into ‘the religious life’ as the only approach to religious education that is not *inherently* secularist (Gearon 2013; replied to in Jackson 2015a) is not compatible with an open approach maintaining the sort of professionalism described above.

However, experience and the research considered below indicate that many teachers with strong personal commitments of different kinds are able to maintain a high level of educational professionalism. In our experience, such teachers can make constructive use of their own positions in contributing to an open, hermeneutical approach to religious education. This raises the question as to how effectively such skills and attitudes can be taught. Although more research in this field is needed, studies with student teachers and early career teachers have shown that some who initially found it difficult to maintain impartiality, were capable, through guided reflection on the relationship between their personal beliefs and professional practice, to develop relevant skills and appropriate attitudes. Examples from these studies, and from related UK research, need to be set in the context of developments in religious education in England since the 1970s.

Inclusive religious education in England

The processes of secularisation and pluralisation led to debates about the place of religion in publicly funded schools, leading to developments in educational policy. In England and Wales, where religious education is a specific subject on the school timetable, these developments began to have an impact on practice, theory and policy in the late 1960s, resulting in changes to legislation in 1988 (Dinham and Jackson 2012; Gates and Jackson 2014). The development

of religious education in England has tended to offer students (from a variety of religious and non-religious backgrounds) in inclusive schools (mainly fully state-funded community schools) a combination of ‘learning about religions’ and opportunities for personal reflection on their learning. This tradition is exemplified in various theoretical studies; for example, Grimmitt (1987) writes of ‘learning from religion’, while Jackson (2004, 2009a, 2009b) speaks of reflexivity, combining empathetic and critically distanced responses to new learning about religions, the latter including opportunities for a consideration of truth claims. Managing such approaches to religious education requires teachers with a combination of appropriate knowledge plus particular skills and attitudes enabling openness and impartiality.

Impartiality and neutrality

The view taken in this article is that teachers with a wide variety of religious and non-religious commitments or perspectives are capable, in principle, of teaching an open and reflexive form of religious education effectively and with a high degree of impartiality (Jackson 1997, 135-136). A distinction is made here between ‘impartiality’ and ‘neutrality’. The principle of impartiality involves organising teaching and learning without discrimination as to ethnicity, religion, class, or political opinions, with freedom of expression allowed within agreed limits. A key objective is to make the classroom into a safe space for dialogue and discussion, as well as a place for learning directly from the teacher (Jackson 2014a, 47-57). When appropriate, teachers may draw upon their personal views, provided they do this with academic integrity, and without the aim of persuading students to adopt their views. Neutrality, however, requires concealment of any personal commitment on the teacher’s part, and any personal views of pupils are set to one side. Such a ‘neutral’ stance has been taken by scholars whose methodological work is rooted in a particular style of phenomenological approach to religious studies (eg Jensen 2008). We acknowledge that a neutral approach might be required in certain education and legal systems, and be entirely appropriate in such contexts.

Impartial teachers of religious education are prepared to consider rival conclusions as well as those to which they are personally attached and have the skill and sensitivity to know how and when to contain their personal commitments and how to present material from a religion /religious tradition from the point of view of an adherent. This professional skill does not require teachers to disguise their own position. Experience and research indicate that pupils appreciate openness in response to questions and that teachers should answer questions about their own personal faith honestly and at a level appropriate to the age and aptitude of the pupils

concerned (Fancourt 2007; Jackson 1997; Religious Education Council 2009). It is also part of the professional approach of religious education teachers, however, to set their own comments about faith or doubt in a wider context. By operating in a professional way, teachers can draw upon their own religious or secular commitments as resource material alongside other resources in the classroom. In the same way, teachers may draw sensitively on the testimony of pupils and of parents and other members of religious communities who might be invited as guests into the school (Jackson 2014a, 87-97). Information about the specific religious positions of students and their families need to be examined in a hermeneutical relationship of comparison and contrast with overviews of the relevant religions or broad religious traditions with which they are associated (Jackson 1997). However, in addition to having access to reliable information (including some knowledge of the background of students in classes), being an impartial teacher involves making frequent and sometimes difficult judgements, requires skills and attitudes that take time and experience to develop and, especially during initial training, guidance and support.

In this article, the findings of qualitative research will be used to support the view of teacher impartiality outlined above, to consider some of the issues raised by the challenges of becoming and being an impartial teacher, and to reflect further on what impartiality involves and requires.

Teachers of religious education in England: empirical research

While issues related to the role of the teacher in providing and managing inclusive religious education received theoretical attention in the late 1970s and 1980s (eg Gates 1978; Grimmitt 1981; Hull 1982; Hulmes 1979; Jackson 1982), by the late 1990s there had been very little empirical research on teachers of religious education and none that provided an insight into how teachers viewed or attempted to deal with these matters. The neglect of religious education teachers as subjects of research led to the launch of a Life History study of a cohort of 14 secondary school student teachers of religious education which began in 1997, at the beginning of their one year training course, and continued throughout their first year as qualified teachers. Data were collected from participants' autobiographies, lesson plans and reflective writings, observation of their lessons and semi-structured interviews were conducted by a researcher. Over a period of four years, data from the study were analysed through a process of interpretive reading and contextualisation in order to identify a series of themes (Sikes and Everington 2001). Themes discussed in published work include teachers' commitment to and perceptions of intercultural harmony (Everington and Sikes 2001), gender and the management of religious

identity in secondary schools (Sikes and Everington 2004a) and the development of religious education teachers' professional identity (Sikes and Everington 2004b).

The Life History study was the first of its kind in Britain and laid the foundations for a series of studies undertaken between 2004 and 2014, in the context of the same university-based training course. In each case, research focused on groups of between 15 and 20 student teachers, from a range of social and ethnic backgrounds and with degrees in subjects ranging from Theology and Religious Studies to Philosophy and Sociology. Although these later studies were not Life History research, in the sense that they aimed to investigate particular issues, rather than allow issues to arise from the study of individual participants, all included a biographical element and data were collected and analysed using methods similar to those of the earlier Life History research. Common to all of the studies was a concern to investigate the relationship between student teachers' personal and professional lives, the ways in which they experienced and managed this relationship, and the implications for initial and continuing professional development in religious education. This overarching concern was explored through one year studies of student teachers' responses to pupils' anti-religious and racist attitudes (Everington 2005) and of teachers' interpretations of 'learning from religion' (Everington 2007). A later study, undertaken with two consecutive cohorts of student teachers (2009-10 and 2010-11), explored the use of their 'personal life knowledge' in their planning and teaching (Everington 2012). An extension of this research focused on participants from minority ethnic backgrounds and explored their use of 'personal life knowledge' in their first year as qualified teachers (Everington 2014; 2015).

An important benefit of the focus on student and newly qualified teachers is that it revealed issues that can confront teachers at a crucial point in the development of their professional identity and classroom persona, including issues raised by the challenges of becoming an impartial teacher of religious education. However, reference will also be made below to research on, or undertaken by, experienced teachers. Research undertaken by Everington as part of the Warwick contribution to a study for the European REDCo (Religion, Education, Dialogue, Conflict) project (eg Jackson 2012; Knauth et al. 2008; ter Avest et al. 2009; Valk et al. 2009; van der Want et al. 2009), focused on six experienced English teachers of religious education and used semi-structured biographical interviews to investigate the relationship between the teachers' perceptions of, and strategies for, dealing with classroom diversity and their personal biographies (Everington 2009). In other Warwick research, Nigel Fancourt's

study used a practitioner research methodology to explore the question, ‘Should teachers express their commitments in the classroom?’ through the perceptions of a group of 13-14 year old pupils (Fancourt 2007). In David Bennett’s research (Bennett 1998), the principles of ethnographic research and of the interpretive approach were combined to develop a teaching strategy and resources for use in the religious education utilising a study of Bennett’s own faith community, including his own role within it.

A retrospective analysis of the research cited above has been undertaken in order to identify key findings and themes related to impartiality in the context of inclusive religious education. These themes will be discussed below with reference to findings from and issues raised by specific studies.

Recognising the influence of personal beliefs, attitudes and experiences on the representation of religions

The research on *student* teachers indicates that their personal beliefs, experiences of and attitudes to religions can lead them to present them in a non-impartial way (for example by promoting religions as ‘a good thing’ or being intolerant or dismissive of pupils’ anti-religious views), or to act in ways which indicate a lack of impartiality (for example, by attempting to distance themselves from religions by proclaiming their atheism). Initial teacher education can play an important role in enabling teachers to reflect on the potential of personal beliefs and experiences to influence how they present religions in the classroom and to develop the skills to present these in an informed and objective manner which reflects and respects the right to hold a wide range of views, including those held by their pupils. However, in order for some with strong religious or anti-religious beliefs to achieve this, it may be necessary that they seek ways of achieving a harmony between their personal beliefs and professional responsibilities, so that they can feel comfortable and confident in adopting an impartial approach.

Exploration of one of the Life History research themes revealed the challenges that student teachers with strong personal beliefs can face. Everington and Sikes (2001) included the example of a committed atheist who had struggled to reconcile his personal anti-religious views with the role of a religious education teacher able to represent religions in an impartial manner. Through a willingness to explore and reflect on his life experiences and personal and professional beliefs, this teacher was able to realise that his key motivation in becoming a teacher of religious education was to combat prejudice and racism; that to do this it was

necessary to present religions impartially and from the perspective of insiders, and that focusing on this goal enabled him to overcome a profound concern that he was ‘living a lie’ as an atheist teacher of religious education. Another example focused on a student teacher committed to a conservative religious position, who was unwilling to accept or reflect on the differences between his personal beliefs and the professional aims and responsibilities that he was asked to accept. In this case, the teacher’s determination to pursue his personal goals for and understanding of the purposes of religious education resulted in a forceful classroom presentation of his views on the value of religion and religious education, and an intolerance of the anti-religious views held by many of his pupils. This led to confrontation and a breakdown of the teacher-pupil relationship. In line with Trevor Cooling’s recommendations (Cooling 2002), it was concluded that initial teacher education courses should enable student teachers to recognise the difficulties in viewing religion from a position of neutrality and that opportunities should be provided for reflection on how personal beliefs and professional responsibilities can be reconciled.

While strongly held personal views about religion(s) can be an obstacle to impartiality, the Warwick research cited above also indicates that student teachers’ personal knowledge and experiences of a *particular* religion can lead them to represent this in a non-impartial way and/or to create learning opportunities which reflect the teacher’s personal knowledge and experiences, rather than a broader view incorporating an understanding of the diversity within religions. For example, a Christian teacher might unconsciously present a particular interpretation of a Christian doctrine or practice as ‘the accepted meaning’ rather than as one interpretation; a teacher who has attended a Roman Catholic school might not realise that s/he has devised a learning opportunity that assumes that all pupils have a belief in God (Everington 2007). The research indicates that to develop from these positions towards a position of impartiality, teachers need to gain an awareness of, and reflect on, the ways in which their personal knowledge and experiences can affect their planning and teaching and to develop, or reflect further on, an understanding of the diversity within religions and the need to represent this in their teaching.

The need to develop a respectful openness and commitment to learning about pupils’ life-worlds and beliefs

The research findings outlined above include the view that impartiality, in the context of inclusive religious education, requires teachers to acquire a knowledge and understanding of

their pupils' life-worlds and beliefs. Unlike the teacher who adopts a 'neutral' position in which the teacher's and pupils' personal views are set aside, a teacher of a religious education that includes personal contributions from students and teachers must be able to work from and with pupils' personal views. However, acquiring knowledge and especially understanding of these, requires particular skills and attitudes, and these may take time to develop. In line with studies of teacher development in other subjects (eg Herold and Waring 2011), the research indicates that, at the beginning of training especially, student teachers of religious education may view themselves primarily as providers of subject knowledge, seeing pupils simply in terms of groups to be taught and managed. This assumption can be accompanied by a lack of awareness of diversity, both within religious groups and in classes being taught. As indicated above, lack of awareness can lead the teacher to make assumptions and adopt a teaching style or create learning opportunities based on his/her own life experiences, including experience of schooling. While the experience of school placements enables most student teachers to view pupils as individuals with differing learning needs, acquiring a knowledge and understanding of the backgrounds, beliefs and views of individual pupils makes different professional demands. The research suggests that an interest in pupils as individual persons (rather than simply learners) is key, but also that teachers must be sufficiently open and sensitive to recognise, understand and respect the right to have life-views and beliefs that differ from their own. In the case of pupils from religious backgrounds, teachers need to have sufficient knowledge of the diversity within religions to recognise the 'position' that a pupil holds or relates to.ⁱⁱ Teachers also need to learn about these matters in a sensitive way, and to make use of their knowledge without invading pupils' privacy. The ways in which *experienced* teachers of religious education acquire and utilise such knowledge are considered in sections below which discuss research related to this group.

The ability to share personal beliefs, views and experiences with pupils while maintaining an impartial approach

The research on which this article is based supports the view that impartiality need not require teachers to conceal their personal beliefs, views and experiences from pupils and indicates that student teachers can be skilled at introducing these in ways which support pupils' learning and the development of an 'inclusive' classroom atmosphere. However, it also indicates that teacher 'openness' in the classroom requires careful judgements to be made about when and how to be open and for certain conditions to be in place or created.

During the studies of *student* teachers' 'personal life knowledge' referred to above (Everington 2012, 2014, 2015) it was found that all teachers let pupils know of their personal position in relation to religion (commitment to a particular faith, agnosticism or atheism) and all believed it important to contribute their own views during class discussions, when they judged this to be appropriate. It was also found that all of the teachers were using personal experiences and knowledge gained through personal experiences, in their teaching. While the reasons given for this latter practice included addressing pupils' misconceptions (by giving 'real life' examples) and explaining a complex religious concept or belief (by using a personal example which illustrated this), the most frequently expressed reason was that it encouraged, in the words of one student, 'opening up'. That is, the intention was to use teacher self-disclosure to create an atmosphere of trust and openness and to break down barriers between pupils and between teacher and pupils so that there could be an open sharing of personal matters.

In Everington 2012, the student teachers' belief in the value of self-disclosure was examined in relation to concerns about this practice, including those of Aldenmyr (2010) who had argued that when teachers interest themselves in pupils' personal lives and use themselves as examples, there is a danger that pupils will be denied privacy and lose the sense of security that should be provided by an 'objective' professional who is focused on their learning. These concerns were contrasted with the findings of 'Communications' research which indicated the value of teacher self-disclosure for creating pupil-teacher affinity and promoting pupils' motivation (eg Cayanus and Martin 2008), and professional guidance to English RE teachers recommending the practice of teacher 'openness' (Religious Education Council 2009). A conclusion of the 2012 article was that student teachers should be made aware of the dangers of 'openness' and the need for limits to this. However, the research had found that, through their own experiences, the study participants had become aware of dangers and of a tension between the principles of impartiality and the practice of sharing personal information with pupils. In a group discussion of their views on teacher self-disclosure, student teachers raised as an issue, the fine line between a teacher openness that is aimed at encouraging pupil openness, and a teacher openness that has the effect of influencing, or is perceived as intended to influence, pupils' thinking. Several of the strategies that they had used in an attempt to avoid this were described, including disclosing personal matters only to pupils in the older (14-19 years) age group, and taking care that the words and tone of voice used were not strident. However, there was agreement that the most important precondition for sharing personal

matters, was that the teacher should know the pupils well and that there should be a well-established relationship of trust.

The ability to create a ‘safe’ and inclusive classroom atmosphere through trust and a knowledge of pupils

The studies of beginning teachers, referred to above, suggest that trustful teacher-pupil relationships and teachers’ knowledge of their pupils may be important foundations for teaching inclusive religious education impartially. Further evidence of and insights into this proposition have been provided by studies of, or undertaken by, experienced teachers of religious education in England.

In a study of religious education teachers in England, undertaken as part of the European Commission REDCo project (Everington 2009), all six teachers (aged between 24 and 55), emphasised the importance of creating an atmosphere in lessons that encourages every student to feel included and sufficiently ‘safe’ to share personal views, beliefs, feelings and experiences.ⁱⁱⁱ Two key strategies for creating this atmosphere, whilst maintaining an impartial approach, were described. One involved learning about the backgrounds and personal beliefs of pupils by providing opportunities for these to be disclosed in group discussions and private writing. The knowledge gained was used to create lessons and activities which would be sufficiently inclusive to enable all to contribute from their particular perspective. Although asking pupils from religious backgrounds, or with particular views, to make a contribution to whole class discussion was viewed as an invasion of their privacy, and potentially damaging to their sense of ‘safe space’, questions to the whole group were sometimes prepared with the intention of encouraging particular pupils to respond. A second strategy for creating an inclusive classroom atmosphere was for the teacher to share his/her personal views and experiences with pupils so that they would be encouraged to share their own. However, the teachers believed that great care was needed when deciding what personal information they would share with pupils, or on what issues they would express an opinion. Class discussion of topics related to life after death or racism were amongst the examples given of occasions when the teacher might offer a personal experience or view. Divorce and abortion were suggested as examples of the kind of highly personal and sensitive topics that teachers should not illustrate with an anecdote from their personal lives and, as in the case of the student teachers, it seems that these experienced teachers had a strong sense of, and wished to guard against, situations

in which their views might influence pupils inappropriately, or be perceived as an attempt to influence them.

A valuable insight into *pupils'* perceptions of impartiality and trustful teacher-pupil relationships is provided in Nigel Fancourt's examination of the question, 'Should teachers express their commitments in the classroom?' through practitioner research with a group of his own pupils (Fancourt 2007). It was found that pupils valued and enjoyed opportunities for whole group discussion in which all contributors' views were listened to, and they recognised the importance of the teacher in facilitating discussions but, in this context, they believed that the teacher should also contribute his personal views and beliefs. Pupils felt that a teacher who is able to contribute personal views or beliefs to a discussion is one who is actively taking part as a listener, respondent and contributor, and that this willingness to participate enabled them to benefit from hearing the teacher's views without feeling that these were being imposed or promoted. Pupils contrasted this approach with that of a teacher who had not contributed her views and beliefs in a discussion context, but had made her Christian commitment known in the classroom in ways that pupils had perceived to be 'pushing us towards Christianity' and which led them to distrust her (Fancourt 2007, 61). In Fancourt's view, a key factor in pupils' positive view of discussion-based lessons and of his personal involvement in discussion was the use of a dialogical approach based on Ipgrave's three stage model (Ipgrave 2001; Jackson 2004, 117-125). This advocates recognising the range of experiences and views in the class as a resource to draw on, promoting a classroom atmosphere which encourages engagement with different views by asking pupils about their own views, and the use of strategies that encourage and stimulate pupil-to-pupil dialogue (Fancourt 2007, 55). However Fancourt argues that a dialogical pedagogy is insufficient in itself. To be effective, it needs to be utilised by a 'dialogical teacher' who has the skills to participate in the dialogue, rather than stand above or outside it, and whose attitude to pupils' ideas and concerns generates trust (Fancourt 2007, 63).^{iv}

Teachers with a religious commitment using their personal knowledge and experiences as a resource

Studies which have focused on teachers from religious backgrounds and with on-going religious commitments indicate that they can draw on their personal knowledge and experiences as a valuable classroom resource. Everington's studies of teachers from Hindu, Muslim and Sikh backgrounds (Everington 2014; 2015) explored the ways in which, as student

and first year teachers, the participants used their knowledge and experiences of their own religions and of growing up in multi-faith communities to address pupils' misconceptions and to create bridges between the life-worlds of pupils from religious and non-religious backgrounds and the religious material presented in school syllabuses and textbooks. However, it was also found that this practice sometimes led to difficulties and dilemmas, and that the teachers had to become skilful at judging how to balance the use of their personal knowledge with a position of impartiality. For example, when teaching in Muslim majority schools, Muslim teachers encountered pupils whose interpretations of Islam and views of other religions were very different from their own. Faced with the dilemma of wishing to challenge pupils' views without imposing or seeming to impose their own interpretations of Islam, some of the teachers made use of what Ipgrave refers to as a weak form of critical openness. That is, by encouraging pupils to express and reflect on their beliefs, substantiate their arguments and, through the interpretation of texts, apply principles to a variety of situations, they were encouraged to adopt an attitude of appraisal towards their beliefs in ways which did not question their foundation (Ipgrave 1999, 150).

David Bennett's work illustrates the constructive use of the teacher's own religious commitment as a resource for religious education (Bennett 1998). Bennett explored the challenges that he faced as an experienced teacher wishing to reconcile his Evangelical Christian stance, as a member of a Pentecostal church, with his professional commitment as a teacher of inclusive religious education. Combining the principles of the interpretive approach (Jackson 1997) with ideas derived from the work of Trevor Cooling (1994), Bennett developed an approach to representing his personal Pentecostal belief and practice in the wider context of different studies of Christianity and of other religions, with an emphasis on those represented in the city where his school was situated. While retaining a professional commitment to impartiality, and recognising the diversity of positions held by pupils within his classes, he utilised his own ethnographic study of his church and its members, including himself as part of the religious way of life presented in the study. Materials developed for use in the classroom included information, extracts from interviews and photographs relating to his church community. These were used in conjunction with material representing the religious ways of life of other members of the school community, including pupils.

Conclusion

In this article, we have drawn on qualitative research undertaken in the context of inclusive religious education in England to argue that many teachers, including those with strong personal commitments, are capable, in principle, of adopting an impartial approach. We have recognised that becoming and being an impartial teacher presents many challenges. Active learning approaches, which include teacher-student and student-student dialogue, do not demand neutrality on the part of the teacher, but do require relevant knowledge (including knowledge of students' backgrounds), various skills, and the cultivation of appropriate attitudes, related to professional integrity. The application of these over time can build an atmosphere of trust between pupils and teacher. The acquisition of such knowledge, skills and attitudes takes time and effort, and can be facilitated by training. Although it is not possible to generalise from the findings of the qualitative studies cited in the article – and more research, especially involving partnership between researchers and practitioners, would be beneficial – there is significant overlap between the knowledge, skills and attitudes identified through this research and those identified by a group of European educational experts, in a recent Council of Europe discussion document, as necessary for building the competence of both teachers and pupils (Jackson 2014a).^v As the Council of Europe *Signposts* document states, the need for sufficient funding to support initial training and continuing professional development relating to the development of teacher knowledge, the cultivation of appropriate attitudes, and the development of relevant skills in the field of 'inclusive' religious education is very evident.

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ⁱⁱ Warwick qualitative research in schools, related to resources used in teaching about religious diversity, also gives examples of teachers' ignorance of the specific religious backgrounds of pupils, while teaching a monolithic view of the various religions (Jackson et al 2010). Daniel Moulin (eg Moulin 2015) also discusses the negative effects of religious education teachers' ignorance of pupils' religious backgrounds.

ⁱⁱⁱ See Jackson 2014a, 47-57 for an explanation of this term and a wider discussion of the classroom as 'safe space' for dialogue.

^{iv} Several research reports on classroom interaction from different European countries from the REDCo project reinforce the point from Everington's and Fancourt's research in England about the importance of establishing a trustful relationship between teacher and students. For example, Fedor Kozyrev, in analysing videotaped lessons in St Petersburg, highlights the importance of developing a relationship of mutual trust between teacher and pupils, established over time (Kozyrev 2009, 215). Similarly Olga Schihalejev's classroom interaction research in Estonia shows the liberating effects of building a trustful relationship between the impartial teacher and students: 'If the student recognises that security is available and trust has been built up, he or she will risk entering into conflict or vulnerable areas rather than avoiding them or utilizing uncontrolled ways to deal with them' (Schihalejev 2010, 177).

^v This discussion document relates to the 2008 Council of Europe Ministerial recommendation on the dimension of religions and non-religious convictions within intercultural education (Council of Europe 2008). These include: Knowledge and understanding of the key concepts associated with a particular religion/religious tradition; the perspectives, practices and beliefs of groups within a particular religion; diversity of belief and practice within religions; and awareness of one's own views, assumptions, prejudices and judgments. Skills such as: mediating exchanges concerning religions; empathy and multi-perspectivity; the capacity to interact with and listen to people from different religions; facilitation and discussion skills; evaluating different religious and non-religious

perspectives including one's own; and flexibility and adaptability in cultural and communicative behaviour. These skills would include what Iversen calls the constructive management of disagreement (Iversen 2012). Attitudes such as: respect for the right of a person to hold a particular religious or non-religious viewpoint; valuing religious and cultural diversity; openness to learning about different religions and to people from different cultures and religions/other religions/ other branches of one's own religion; willingness to suspend judgment and to tolerate ambiguity; openness to reflect upon one's own beliefs and claims; willingness to learn from others; and willingness to make a distanced and balanced critique of different religious and non-religious positions. (Jackson 2014a, 33-46).