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Religious Education and Pupils from ‘Mixed-Faith’ Families

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The world of religion ‘as it is lived’, so to speak, is much more complex than that presented often in text books and classrooms. As such, a recent major piece of research – into British ‘mixed faith’ families – has some important implications for those who want to provide a form of RE that is both accurate and sensitive to the needs of today’s children and the communities to which they belong.

Introduction

In the Autumn 2006 issue of *REsource* my colleague Dr Elisabeth Arweck announced the start of a three-year project, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, and entitled ‘Investigating the Religious Identity Formation of Young People in Mixed-Faith Families’. The project was based in the Warwick Religions and Education Research Unit (WRERU) in the Institute of Education at the University of Warwick and directed by Professor Eleanor Nesbitt. We have benefited from the wise advice of a steering committee which included Rabbi Dr Jonathan Romain, well-known for his expertise on inter-religious marriages, and *REsource*’s editor, Dr Bill Gent. Now that the three years are over, readers of *REsource* may be interested in hearing more about the project and how our findings relate to RE.

Researching mixed-faith families

Although no precise figures are available for inter-religious unions and the resultant children, there is no doubt that the number of children in the UK whose parents are from two different faith backgrounds is increasing. There is a substantial overlap with ethnically mixed families, which the 2001 Census showed to be the fastest growing ethnic category in the UK.

Our research concentrated on families in which parents represented combinations of Christian, Hindu, Muslim and Sikh, the four most numerous faith communities in the UK – for example, a father from an Indian Punjabi Sikh background or a mother from a mainland European Roman Catholic background. In response to our UK-wide appeals for volunteers to participate, twenty-seven families in England and one in Wales took part. Our study relied for its data principally on a series of semi-structured face to face (and telephone) interviews with each of the young people and with each parent. 185 individual interviews were recorded – most of them in families’ homes. We acknowledge that the families in our sample may well be disproportionately ‘happy’ families, as less happy families might well not have volunteered.

Although Christian-Muslim families took part, we were unable to find and involve Hindu-Muslim or Muslim-Sikh families. The probable reasons include a strong resistance among Hindu and Sikh families to sanctioning marriages with Muslims. The sensitivity of the issues could well have deterred such couples from exposing themselves to research. Also, it is customary for a Muslim’s partner from a non-Muslim background to espouse Islam – and our research did not extend to ‘single-faith’ families, even if they were ethnically or culturally diverse.

Among the project's objectives were: 'to assess the impact of formal and informal religious socialisation and religious education on young people's identity' and 'to inform theoretical debate in religious studies and religious education on the representation of "faith communities" and "religions" in syllabuses'. We are still reflecting on the implications of our data. They are interconnected, but we have grouped them under the headings: 'identity formation', 'representation of religions', 'positive and negative experience of RE' and 'complementarity between classroom and home'.

Identity formation

Identities are complex: an individual's self-identity and others' ascription may differ. In different contexts the same individuals may identify more strongly with one aspect of their identity than in another. For young people in religiously, and often ethnically and culturally, diverse families identity-formation involves a multitude of elements. Identities form through encounter and self-narration, and RE teachers' reactions to the young people contributed to their perception of how they related to their parents' faith traditions. One young person's teacher expected information from her about the religion of one of her parents, putting her on the spot by assuming a level of knowledge that she did not have. In another case, at a time when Jasmin identified herself as a Muslim, and had wanted to sit an examination paper on Islam, her teacher's response was that only 'the real Muslims' were to sit the Islam paper.

Representation of religions

The experience of young people in 'mixed-faith' families does not neatly fit the clearcut 'world religions' categories of our syllabuses. In this respect, it is possible that children in 'mixed-faith' families could feel marginalised by assumptions at the heart of RE – similarly to 'agnostics' (see Lat Blaylock's article in *REsource* 30:1), and members of religions that are not represented in RE syllabuses. This raises the question of how inclusive our curriculum materials should aim to be, and whether (and in what ways) religiously and culturally diverse families can be included in representations of society.

In this research project, moreover, the parents came from diverse strands of the four faiths concerned, and so the young people did not necessarily identify with the way in which that faith was presented in class: this was true of the Punjabi boy who was being brought up in his mother's Mormon church and of the boy whose father was a South Indian Hindu. On pragmatic grounds RE teachers can only focus on particular aspects and styles of any faith community, but we suggest that where possible they aim to find out about, and to include (however briefly) in their teaching, regional and denominational groupings and emphases that their pupils' families represent.

Positive and negative experience of RE

The young people's views on their RE classes merit attention. To summarise: those still in primary school talked of the lessons being 'boring', of being set drawing tasks, and of their lessons sometimes being replaced by priorities such as play rehearsals or preparation for SATs. Those at secondary school appreciated the opportunities for discussion of ethical issues and so hearing their peers' various views. Whether or not observation of the lessons concerned would have provided support for the young people's perceptions of their religious education, the young people's impressions provide food for thought.

The confusion between religions which some young people articulated gives cause for concern. Ten-year-old Rikki mentioned that his relatives were not ‘full Sikh’ ‘because they did not pray five times a day, wore [i.e. or wear] the holy Bible or a kirpan ...’ and that [in a synagogue] you take your shoes off and you always sit cross-legged with your toes pointing [to] the Buddha’. Rikki’s reference to a ‘full’ or ‘strict’ Sikh also suggests that the representation of faiths in RE may contribute to value judgements on relatives’ religiosity.

Complementarity between classroom and home

The young people whom we interviewed and their parents made it clear that they expected RE to provide information both on their own families’ faith traditions and on other faiths. In many cases, parents explained, neither of them was religiously observant and they were not actively passing on their tradition’s teachings and practices. At the same time they hoped that their children would learn enough to make informed decisions about their own worldviews and commitments.

Parents spoke affirmatively of the way in which their children’s experience in RE lessons and in the family was mutually supportive. Sometimes more observant relatives were called on to fill in gaps left by RE, sometimes topics from RE stimulated discussion at home. School supported values that were endorsed at home, and on occasion home provided resources (Vedic stories in one instance) for RE in school. One parent only realised from reading what her daughter had written on ‘ultimate questions’ in RE how deeply she was thinking.

Importantly, in the context of teachers’ concern to increase community cohesion, the families whom we interviewed model a matter of fact acceptance of diversity, respect and flexibility. Parents voiced these as values which (rather than the tenets of a particular religion) they wish their children to develop, and they spoke of their concerns about ‘fanaticism’, and the children themselves exemplified these qualities. Perhaps classroom materials could draw explicitly on the strengths of religiously (and culturally and ethnically) diverse families, as exemplars of negotiation and mutual understanding.

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