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Promoting Good Community Relations: What can RE Learn from Social Psychology?

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RE, Community Relations and Social Psychology

While it is widely claimed that learning in RE can contribute to warmer social relations, this assertion has not yet been demonstrated in practice. Mark Chater has argued that although a 'causal link' between 'multi-faith RE' and 'better community relations' is widely assumed, whether or not in practice there is a link remains untested (Chater 2013: 37). As Philip Barnes concludes:

'[f]orty years after its introduction in Britain we do not know if there is a positive correlation between multi-faith religious education and respect for others' (Barnes, 2014: 19).

Between December 2013 and March 2014, an All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) for RE sat for three sessions to hear how RE contributes to community cohesion, at which advisers, teachers, academics and faith representatives asserted the connection. Valuable personal experience and impressions were shared, yet still no compelling systematic evidence in support of the claim was offered (APPG 2014).

With this conundrum in mind, researchers in the field of Social Psychology from the University of Bristol and NATRE have formed a partnership to explore how relevant insights from a field related to but outside religious education might suggest a potential link between RE and community relations; and practical ways forward for interested teachers based on their findings.

Within the field of social psychology there is a rich history of research examining what happens when individuals from different groups interact with each other. At the beginning of this research tradition – in the early 1950s – such intergroup interactions were atypical and characterized by anxiety and discrimination (Allport, 1954). And, although with growing diversity intergroup interactions are much more frequent, we still see evidence of anxious behaviour and subtle discrimination when individuals interact with diverse others (e.g., Paolini, Hewstone, Cairns, & Voci, 2004; Toosi, Babbitt, Ambady, & Sommers, 2012). In these diverse interactions, social psychological research indicates that all parties bring subtle and overt anxiety, stereotypes, and prejudicial views that influence the success of the interaction. In order to prepare future generations to successfully navigate their social world, we need to teach children how to have positive interactions with their diverse peers.

There is a wealth of research in social psychology and other fields which could be of relevance and benefit to teachers of RE interested in this area (e.g. approach training, Kawakami, Phills, Steele, & Dovidio, 2007; altering the ideology of the classroom, McKeown, Williams, & Pauker, 2017, Rosenthal & Levy, 2010; etc.). However, one strategy that can be administered easily in a classroom context is *contact theory* (Allport, 1954). According to this theory, bringing individuals from conflicted groups together under favourable conditions can reduce prejudice and improve intergroup relations. Indeed, in over 500 experiments these effects have been consistently replicated, providing conclusive evidence that contact theory is a valid method for improving intergroup relations across a variety of contexts (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). The favourable conditions for contact include: equal status among those involved (within the contact situation), cooperation between groups, working towards a common goal, in conditions where the contact is socially and institutionally supported.

Such conditions have been shown to promote the meaningful discussion of difference (McKeown, Cairns, Stringer, & Rae, 2012) and serve to reduce anxiety and perceived threat, and increase empathy when interacting with diverse others (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008). Because of the conceptual overlap between learning about others in multi-faith RE, positive community relations, and contact theory, we believe contact theory can provide practical results for the RE classroom*.

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We have undertaken this project mindful that promoting better community relations should not be seen as the sole mission or responsibility of RE teaching. Tensions in social relations cannot be 'reduced to religious causes' (Orchard 2015:43) as 'the term 'community' has socio-political as well as religious and/ or cultural meaning' (Orchard 2015:6). RE as a subject would be severely diminished if it were to be reduced to this aim (Orchard, 2015: 43). Finally, responsibility for such matters is surely not solely born by schools, let alone hard-pressed RE departments, so that religious educators should not seek to overstate their case (Orchard 2015:44). Promoting community relations is a matter for other curriculum subjects, whole school processes, parents, carers and the wider community.

The idea that people will get along better when they understand others' religious beliefs and practices is intuitive both in education and in general public opinion, particularly when issues seemingly caused by religious diversity make headline news. This project is a step on the path to systematically examining this widespread intuition. Contact theory offers insight into the types of interaction that enable a reduction in tension, prejudice or anxiety between members of different groups. A good example can be found in the work of the Linking Network (http://thelinkingnetwork.org.uk/), a Bradford-based charity which directly links schools from different communities, as well as trains teachers in contact principles in order to inform their planning and future work in the classroom. The work of this charity shows that when teachers are more aware of power relationships in the classroom, they are better able to understand some of the root causes of poor social relations.

Another example, presented in more detail in a Teachers' Toolkit developed through the project (see details below), is of the Corrymeela community, established in Belfast in 1965 to address rising alienation and violence between Catholic and Protestant groups. Today Corrymeela provides a space for dialogue, questioning and mutual learning. It has been found over the years that that difficult topics must not be avoided when members of different groups come together in an attempt to bridge divisions. Insights from organisations like the Linking Network or Corrymeela give the teacher confidence when developing teaching materials to meet contact conditions in the classroom. Furthermore, it is plausible that greater levels of religious literacy promoted through RE lessons might contribute positively to community relations in enabling a more knowledgeable starting point for contact between members of different groups. Again, this project begins to examine how subject knowledge in RE might contribute to warmer social relations.

Shared Space Initiative

The Shared Space project examines the contribution contact theory can make to RE. As well as being a project of value in itself, it is hoped that it will open the door for future testing of claims made about RE and community relations. In introducing the Shared Space initiative several important points have been raised. Firstly, setting out to test a widely-made assumption regarding RE's connection to improved community relations is an important step that we hope will be replicated in successive projects. This in itself raises the question as to what sort of evidence would offer insights into the success of schooling to achieve social justice aims; how is such an outcome to be defined and measured?

Secondly, the project raises questions about education, diversity and interaction that bear systematic examination. RE is a subject of the curriculum which deals in knowledge and intellectual skills as much as social and moral development. As Orchard (2015) queries, does RE have a particular responsibility above any other subject and the whole school to improve social relations? Moreover, what type of learning in RE might enable steps forward in pupils' understanding of the world that reduces prejudice or intergroup tension; factual, interpersonal or dialogical? How might teachers' best create an educational space where potentially painful topics can be explored? Finally, what other fields might widen understanding of any connection between RE and community relations, such as critical multiculturalism and antiracism in education?

As noted above, contact theory explores how interaction between members of groups seemingly at odds can reduce prejudice. Gordon Allport's (1954) influential publication suggests 4 conditions that, if met, have the potential to reduce prejudice:

1) Members of different groups should have equal status
2) Groups should work towards common goals
3) Shared tasks should involve cooperation
4) There should be wider social, institutional and/or support for the venture (Allport 1954)

Methodology

The project employed a 'mixed methods' approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative forms of data collection. Researchers attended a series of RE teacher meetings and conferences during 2016-17 to introduce and discuss contact theory and to recruit participants to an on-line survey of teachers of RE in England. This survey was also publicised via the NATRE website. The survey was designed, administered, and the findings analysed by teachers and researchers together, with teachers leading on the production of a toolkit to disseminate the findings through the NATRE website (Beth please insert link here when it is up on the NATRE website).

Findings

Based on the survey responses we identified various examples of RE teacher practice that fell into three broad categories: Encounter, Conversation and Interaction (see diagram below).
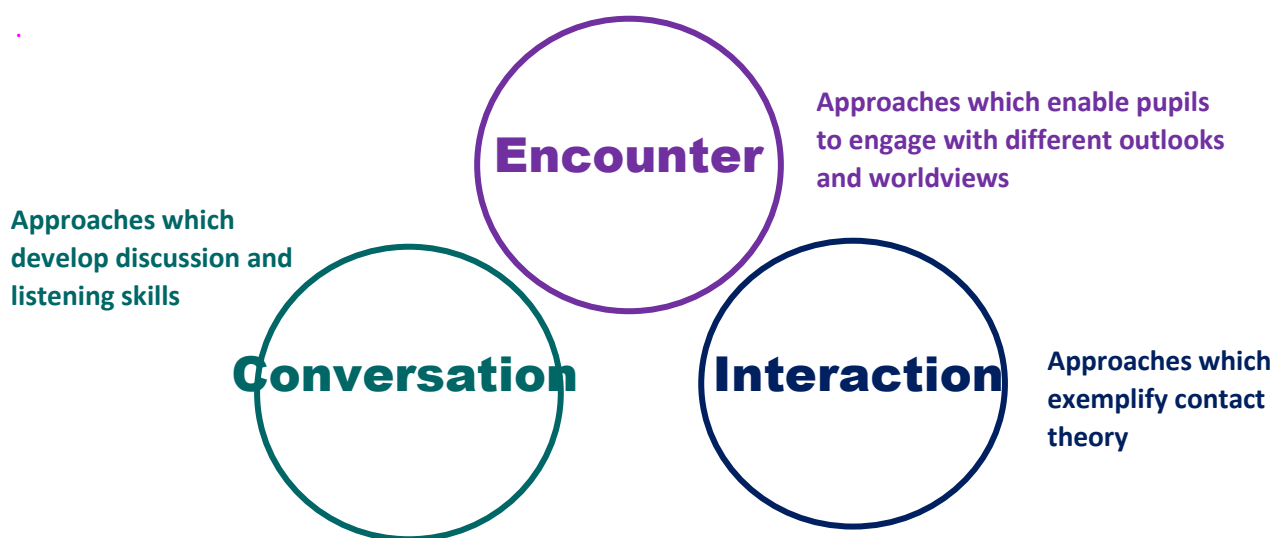
The findings suggest that RE teachers embed **conversation** into their practice. However, structured **interaction** along contact theory lines is less common. More worryingly, some teachers seem only to bring **encounter** to the classroom, without going further into an exploration of multiple views or areas of disagreement. The Shared Space project suggests that encounter on its own will not promote better community relations, although encounter and conversation can be seen as springboards to allow positive contact to take place in the RE classroom. In short, we learned that many activities RE teachers plan to have a positive impact on social relations in their lessons may not go far enough. For example, many described activities enabling discussion or providing different outlooks, but in the absence of interaction with diverse others. We also found evidence of activities in RE which offered pupils a chance to talk to each other but which were not planned with contact conditions in mind. Such activities might precede deliberate contact, but do not exemplify contact theory (Williams, McKeown, Orchard, & Wright, under review).

Analysis of the teacher survey found that the majority of respondents (89%) felt they applied contact principles in the classroom. However, when asked to give examples, 69% did so, and of these only 23% were found to meet the criteria of contact theory. Changing seating plans and setting group work were the most cited examples of contact theory in practice, however unless the outcome of contact is planned for, monitored and the 4 conditions deliberately pursued, such examples do not meet contact theory criteria. Thus there is a distinction between activities which specifically meet the conditions of contact theory (which we call 'interaction') and other types of practice that might support but does not meet contact theory's criteria. We have described these last two categories as 'encounter', where pupils are exposed to different outlooks or people, and 'conversation' which allow exploration of difference or demand empathy but in absence of diverse others (Williams, McKeown, Orchard, & Wright, under review).

Teachers of RE could be well-placed to promote contact theory in the classroom, where conversation and encounter can develop into deliberate, positive contact. Developing the capacity to talk about religious, ideological and cultural differences in ways which go beyond the superficial, and possibly into painful and difficult territory, would be an important aspect of this work, requiring time, and institutional support for RE that is free to be collaborative, respectful of the equal status of all pupils and skilled teaching. It is important to recognise that cross curricular initiative like Generation Global (https://generation.global/) also promote 'Difficult Dialogues' of this kind. Crucially, positive contact needs wider institutional support; contact theory supports the claim that RE lessons alone can't promote community relations.

Achieving positive contact in RE

Framed by the three terms (encounter, conversation and interaction), we have created a toolkit for teachers, available on the NATRE website, outlining practical and age-appropriate teaching ideas to offer teachers a sense of how far their current work promotes contact and how they can strengthen it. The toolkit also sets out the work of organisations such as the Linking Network and Corrymeela which are dedicated to the very practical task of bringing people together to understand and overcome prejudice and which can be learned 'about' as well as 'from' in RE. A further question for us and others is what distinctive contribution does encounter, conversation and interaction focussed explicitly on religious, philosophical and ethical concerns make to furthering community relations. But positive contact is unlikely to happen by accident and teachers need both training and whole-school support to promote it in classrooms. With these resources in place, RE is well-situated to undertake this task alongside other curriculum subjects, offering much food for thought for teachers and school leaders. We hope future joint research will help us to develop our testing of these important matters further.

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