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Bridging Separate Communities: the aspirations and experiences of minority ethnic RE teachers in England

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Abstract

This article takes as its starting point concerns about community separation that arose in 2001, following outbreaks of violence in English urban centres, and again in 2014, following the so-called 'Trojan Horse' case. Despite a series of reports which have highlighted the need to address 'separation', promote 'meaningful contact' between those who differ in terms of ethnicity and worldview and identify teachers of religious education (RE) as key players, researchers have paid no attention to teachers of RE from minority ethnic and religious backgrounds. The article draws on a qualitative study of teachers from Hindu, Muslim and Sikh backgrounds to explore their concerns about pupils' perceptions of separation and the ways in which they attempted to address these in white majority and Muslim majority schools. Communication research and studies based on social capital theory are used to suggest that the teachers used 'bonding' and 'bridging' strategies as means of encouraging pupils to explore their perceptions of separation, engage in a mediated form of meaningful contact with 'the Other' and expand their thinking. The conclusion calls for further research in to the strategies reported and for policy makers to support the recruitment, training and career development of minority ethnic teachers of RE.

Key Words: Minority ethnic teachers; social capital; community cohesion; religious education.

Introduction

In 2001, street violence in English urban centres fuelled concerns about community fragmentation and set in motion a series of government enquiries and education-related initiatives. Recommendations of the first report were based on the view that 'separation'- geographic, educational, cultural, social and religious - was a key issue, and promoted 'meaningful contact' between people from different communities as one solution (Cantle 2001, 10). The report also identified a need to increase the number of black and minority ethnic (BME) teachers, making reference to their value as 'role models' (36). As the government's 'community cohesion' programmes developed, religious education (RE) was identified as a key player (DfCSF 2007). RE inspection reports applauded some teachers for 'forging links' with people from diverse religious communities and providing pupils with opportunities for 'first hand engagement', but highlighted this as an area for national development (Ofsted 2010, 48).

In 2014, the attention of the national and international media was drawn to the issue of community separation and to the city of Birmingham, the most ethnically diverse English city outside London (ONS 2011) and the location of the research reported here. The situation that became known as the 'Trojan Horse' case centred on the accusation that schools in Muslim majority areas were being infiltrated by 'Islamic extremists' intent on ensuring that schools would promote conservative Islamic beliefs and practices (Insted 2014). Although the first government report on the case did not support the initial accusation and highlighted the complexities of the situation (Clark 2014), politicians and commentators continued to make reference to community separation and the need to address this[i]. The first recommendation of the Clark report focused on the need to strengthen teacher training (2014, 98), an issue that was also highlighted in a paper produced by the RE Council for England and Wales (Miller 2014). This paper provided details of the research undertaken to produce a report of the All

Party Parliamentary Group on RE which focused on the crucial role of teachers of RE in promoting 'good community relations' and re-visited the need to involve teachers in providing pupils with opportunities for 'personal encounters' in local faith and belief communities (APPG 2014).

The brief review above highlights a small proportion of the many reports produced since 2001 which identify a need to create 'meaningful contact' between 'separated' communities and the role of teachers and of RE in this endeavour. Against the background of these reports and in the context of ongoing responses to the issues raised by the 'Trojan Horse' case, this article seeks to highlight a gap in research and policy.

In the past thirteen years no research attention has been paid to the role of teachers of RE from minority ethnic and religious backgrounds in addressing issues related to 'separation' and 'meaningful contact' or to their 'role modelling'. This lack of attention leaves a gap in our understanding of how these concepts have been interpreted at classroom level, the contribution that minority ethnic/religious RE teachers can make in this area and of how these interpretations and contributions might shed light on theoretical discussions of the concepts and of strategies based upon these. The article seeks to address these matters, drawing on a qualitative study of minority/ethnic RE teachers' use of their personal life knowledge, during their training and first year(s) of employment.

The Study

The study began in 2009 and the following account covers findings from 2009-12. Five teachers who attended a one year Secondary RE teacher training course participated; one Hindu (Rani), three Muslims (Aisha, Amir and Lima) and one Sikh (Simran). All are of South Asian origin and grew up and taught in the city of Birmingham, where there are ethnically mixed areas and predominantly Muslim and predominantly white areas adjacent to

each other. During the research period, all taught in white majority schools and all Muslim participants also worked in Muslim majority schools. All were state schools following a multi-faith RE syllabus and most were in areas of socio-economic deprivation.

Method

Data was obtained during two phases: the participants' training year and their first year(s) as qualified teachers. During the training year, data was acquired from participants' autobiographies, observation of their lessons and semi-structured 60 minute interviews which explored the kinds of knowledge that participants were using in their teaching and how and why they used this. Documentary evidence included participants' lesson plans and reflective writing on teaching experiences throughout the year. During the year(s) following training, each of the participants was re-interviewed. These 60-90 minutes semi-structured interviews explored how participants had been using their personal life knowledge since training and their reasons for and feelings about this.

The first stage of data analysis involved creating 'disciplined but imaginative constructions and portrayals of experiences' (Bullough 2008, 9), based primarily on participants' own words but drawing on other data. An 'account' was created for each participant, selecting material from the data that appeared significant in the development of their thinking and practice. These were shown to, adjusted by and finally agreed upon with participants (Cohen and Crabtree 2006). In the second stage each account was analysed to identify themes that recurred at different times during the research period and all five were analysed to identify common themes (Bryman 2008).

Findings

During the research period, all participants expressed concerns about pupils' perceptions of their separateness from people living in communities adjacent to their own. However, there were significant differences between how the teachers responded to these perceptions in white majority and Muslim majority schools.

Teaching in White Majority Schools

Teaching in schools with few Asian pupils, Simran, Rani and Aisha were concerned by pupils' perceptions of the separateness of Asian people (viewed as religious) and white people (viewed as non-religious). For example, Aisha was astounded at pupils' ignorance of the large, predominantly Muslim community adjacent to their white majority school and community. She believed that it was this lack of contact with Muslims, and Asians generally, that led pupils to view such people as 'completely other'. Teaching in a white majority area with a sizeable Sikh community, Simran commented, **'(**pupils**)** think that Asian people are strictly religious, have conservative views on all issues and live completely different lives to white people'.

In response, the teachers aimed to dispel stereotypes and encourage pupils to respect differences but also recognise similarities between people who are apparently different. A strategy shared by all teachers was to avoid relying on text book information and judiciously introduce their own knowledge, life experiences and views - for example, teenage struggles with religion, personal views on marriage and family/community dilemmas. This was seen as important for two reasons. First, it was believed that the teacher's sharing of personal experiences and views would encourage pupils to do likewise and this would create an atmosphere of trust and openness in which pupils could feel free to express their thoughts and feelings. Within such a 'safe space', misconceptions and negative attitudes could be brought in to the open and discussed by the whole group, enabling a wide range of views and

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experiences (including the teacher's) to be heard, and unfounded views to be revealed as such. In this way, the group (including the teacher) could view themselves as engaged in a shared exploration of difficult issues, with a sense that 'we're all in this together'. Second, it was believed that the teacher's personal accounts would enable pupils to 'see religion as something real that affects real people's lives' and appreciate that people who have grown up in a religious community and/or have a religious commitment, are individuals who make their own interpretations and decisions and often disagree with each other, just as non-religious people do.

It appears that in their strategy to address pupils' stereotypes and perceptions of separateness, the teachers were attempting to create a bond between members of their groups and between themselves and group members. In doing so, they focused their efforts *inwards*, on the needs of pupils who could be helped to develop their understanding and thinking by drawing on the resources within the group. However, when speaking about making religion 'real', the teachers indicated that they viewed themselves as focusing *outwards* and acting as or creating a bridge to worlds beyond those inhabited by their pupils. Some statements suggested that the teachers saw themselves as acting as a bridge between the pupils' secular, white worlds and the worlds of religious/Asian people. For example, Simran illustrated her teaching with reference to the views and experiences of friends and neighbours from Sikh, Hindu and Muslim backgrounds and responded openly to questions about her own beliefs, life-style and social life, in an effort to help pupils view such people as 'doing the normal things that people do'. Other statements indicated that the teachers saw themselves not just bridging a separation between pupils and their near neighbours, but also as acting as bridges to a wider world of ideas and new ways of looking at life and themselves. For example, Aisha was deeply concerned by pupils' inability to think beyond the limitations that their home lives imposed:

'It makes my heart bleed to see the gaps in their lives, but I see how we can try to fill them at school...They think RE is just about religions but it's much more about helping them see and think in different ways, so they can find their own way'.

Themes of separateness, bonding and bridging were also apparent in the accounts of teachers who worked in Muslim majority schools but there were significant differences in how they viewed and addressed these matters.

Teaching in Muslim Majority Schools

All three Muslim teachers worked in Muslim majority schools and had concerns about pupils' perceptions of their separateness, as Muslims living in a multi ethnic/religious city and society.

Aisha spoke of pupils' reluctance to learn about religions other than Islam and how she had found herself teaching about these by making constant comparisons to Islam in order to engage pupils' interest. However, she felt that this approach was very limiting for pupils' education and social development. Whilst wishing to affirm pupils' faith, she had been trying to offer them opportunities to 'think outside the box' and believed that this was what pupils needed in order to engage with a wider world of ideas and people and move beyond the limited perspectives provided by family and community.

Lima reflected on teaching in a school where behaviour was poor, there was little interest in studying religions other than Islam and she had found herself using her own and pupils' Muslim identity as a behaviour management strategy:

'Pupils responded well to frequent references to me and the pupils as 'Muslims' and what 'we' believe. They had an acute sense of who they are and what they believe and are very protective about their beliefs. I was very familiar with the area and using my life experiences

worked well. This approach couldn't be any further from my own …I fear it may be perpetuating the Islamic 'bubble' that pupils and the community seem to be living in'.

Lima believed that the development of pupils and the community as a whole would be best supported by encouraging informed, independent thinking. She saw her role as introducing pupils to beliefs and perspectives which differed from their own and enabling them to make a response based on an appreciation of diversity and an ability to respond to the challenges posed by differing claims to truth. To achieve this, she saw a need to promote the kind of knowledge, skills and attitudes that were not provided by pupils' upbringing and education within the community.

Amir's pupils were eager to relate to him as a Muslim but he endeavoured to distance himself from their classroom culture and understanding of 'being a Muslim'. Many pupils were reluctant to learn about faiths other than Islam and made derogatory remarks about these that were familiar to Amir from his own school-days. Having moved away from such thinking, he was 'passionate' about the need for pupils to gain a more 'informed' view of Islam and Muslims in the context of a secular society, learn about the wider world of religions and cultures and develop the skills to justify their views with reference to Islamic and other worldviews.

'I believe that Islam is a peaceful faith and me following such a life proves that Islam is a faith that can integrate well within secular society...my point (to pupils) is to understand Islam so they reflect on their views and think positively about how they could help the situation'.

In summary, it appears that in this context the Muslim teachers viewed in-group bonding as a problem and experienced a pressure to reinforce this that they wished to resist. All believed that pupils needed to be encouraged to think outside the 'bubble' and that looking outwards

was crucial for the development of their thinking and ability to be the kind of Muslims who could effectively engage with and interact within a wider world

Discussion

All of the participants had concerns about the separation of communities which reflect those in the reports considered above. However, their strategies were not confined to those recommended in guidance to RE teachers. Was their belief in their own strategies justified?

Teaching in White Majority Schools

As RE teachers trained to work in English state schools, participants were aware of their responsibility to address pupils' perceptions of separateness but it is interesting that they chose to do so by disclosing personal information about themselves. An obvious danger was that this might have drawn attention to their difference from pupils and placed them in the category of 'the Other'. Communication research can offer some insight in to and support for their approach.

Richmond and McCroskey review studies which suggest that pupils are more motivated and their learning is significantly enhanced when they have an affinity with the teacher (1992, 168-70). Strategies that teachers can use to promote affinity include the 'techniques' of 'Homophily', in which the teacher creates a sense of 'similarity' between pupils and teacher, and **'**Openness', which involves teachers disclosing information about their backgrounds, interests and views. It is possible that the teachers in this study had an intuitive understanding of the effectiveness of these techniques and, through their efforts to promote the 'normality' of Asian/religious people by sharing aspects of their personal lives, they were able to create an affinity or bond between themselves and their pupils which served to diminish the potential for pupils to view them as 'other'.

Another perspective on the teachers' strategies can be gained by following the connection made between Homophily and social capital theory. In Yuan and Gay's study, the concepts of bonding and bridging capital were used to investigate how within-group and across-group ties influence knowledge creation. It was found that in order to create a comfortable environment for knowledge creation it is important to build strong bonding ties within a group: these foster cohesion and trust among group members and when individuals do not feel threatened or fear embarassment they are more comfortable expressing and exchanging ideas and new knowledge is more likely to be created (2006, 1068).

These findings support the teachers' belief that pupils needed a safe space and a sense of being 'all in this together' to be open about their stereotypes and negative attitudes and that discussion of a range of views – pupils' and teacher's – would be effective in enabling pupils to move on in their thinking. In other terms, the pupils' and teachers' views and accounts might be viewed as in-group resources and bonding capital which, through bonding ties, could be employed in knowledge creation.

However, Yuan and Gay also found that the existence of bonding ties and capital does not automatically result in knowledge creation. If a group does not have a dynamic that supports the free exchange of ideas, expressing different opinions becomes difficult and can cause conflicts. Equally, the avoidance of such conflicts, when no individual advances different proposals, is a problem since knowledge creation is difficult to achieve when everyone chooses to think in the same way. So in addition to bonding social capital, bridging social capital is vital for knowledge creation.

'A key pre-condition for success in knowledge creation is having access to external resources and diverse sources of opinion as this enables a group to expand its scope of knowledge, ideas and expertise and the necessary stimulus to create new knowledge' (1069).

The teachers in my study were concerned to create bridges to the ethnic/religious communities that their pupils had perceived as 'separate' by providing accounts of their own lives and experiences and those of their families, friends and neighbours. Here, the teachers might be viewed as giving pupils access to the kind of bridging social capital that would expand their knowledge and thinking and enable the group to create new knowledge. That is, in relation to the teachers' attempts to address pupils' stereotypes and misconceptions, pupils would not simply be given facts about religious communities and a teacher presentation of right and wrong views, but would create their own new knowledge of these matters through group discussion of the lives and views of 'real' religious people (as mediated by and including the teacher's) and their own views and experiences.

Teaching in Muslim Majority Schools

In contrast to the situation described above, the teachers' experience of working in Muslim majority schools led to concerns about existing in-group bonding and attempts to draw them in to this. It appears that these teachers perceived the situation to be what Watters et al refer to as 'the spectre of migrant communities turning in on themselves and developing identities and affiliations antagonistic to those predominant in host societies' (2009, 198). In their examination of this view Watters et al draw on social capital theory but they recognise that its founder, Putnam, saw the existence of ethnic diversity as having a negative impact on social capital since it results in people limiting social contact and associating solely with people from the same ethnic group (205). Challenging these views through their research on British Asian children, the team draw attention to the finding that children can be adept at crossing social boundaries and that their ability to do so is greatly facilitated by significant adults (extended family members or neighbours perceived as 'like family') who build or act as bridges between the children's immediate family world and the wider social world. This kind of bridging was found to foster children's emotional resilience, sense of self and integration

in to the wider society (206).

In addition to bridging between family and wider social world, the researchers suggest that significant adults can enable children to move between social spaces constructed around the notion of difference (for example Indian/English) and they describe this as enabling children to open and close doors. The team conclude that the positive function of social capital processes in ethnically diverse settings is both to build bridges and create doors (211).

It is possible to see the strategies of the Muslim teachers in my study as focused on performing a similar role to Watter et al's 'significant adults'. That is, the teachers wished to adopt the role of bridge builders to a world beyond 'the bubble' and give pupils access to the kind of social capital that would enable them to expand their thinking. 'Expanding' did not imply rejection of their Muslim identity or faith but it was the teachers' hope that bridging to external sources of knowledge and ideas would enable the pupils to create 'a new knowledge' of their Muslim identity in a multi-ethnic/religious society, of how to navigate through the challenges of living as a Muslim in such a society and find ways of articulating and defending their beliefs in response to challenges.

These teachers were clearly not acting as family members. However, their membership of the wider Muslim community, and especially their upbringing in Muslim communities in the same city as their pupils, gave them the knowledge and understanding to attempt to act in the role of people who could be perceived as 'like family' and who could provide the kinds of bridges and doors which could contribute to the pupils' ability to move outwards in their thinking and beyond the horizons set by family and local community life.

<u>Conclusion</u>

Although it is not possible to generalise from the qualitative study reported here, it indicates

the value of further research and for policy makers within and outside the religious education community to pay more attention to teachers of RE from minority ethnic and religious backgrounds.

Further research on the strategies employed by teachers from such backgrounds could shed light on some of the key concepts in government and professional discourse and contribute to the examination and evaluation of these. This study found that the teachers did not rely on 'forging links' with people from 'other' communities but drew on their personal lives and knowledge to address perceptions of separateness and engage pupils in a mediated form of 'meaningful contact' with those perceived to be 'other'. 'Mediated contact' appears to be a matter worthy of further exploration.

In majority white schools, the teachers' bonding strategies seem to have off-set the danger of being subjected to the kind of racism reported in studies of beginning BME teachers (Cunningham and Hargreaves 2007) and further research might look more deeply in to such strategies and the processes involved.

In Muslim majority schools, the teachers did not view themselves as role models, a finding in line with Carrington and Skelton's research (2003) which concluded that minority ethnic beginning teachers did not wish to be considered as role models and/or had negative experiences of being viewed as such. The researchers also found the concept to have insufficient empirical support and to be over-used in government discourse. Nevertheless, the teachers in my study did draw on their personal knowledge and understanding of the upbringing and culture of their pupils in order to create 'bridges' and 'doors' and further research might explore this approach as an alternative to role modelling.

From a professional perspective, further research in to the resources that minority ethnic RE teachers can draw upon and the contributions they can make could be important for several

reasons. First, it could lend support to a long standing national and international campaign to increase the number of BME teachers and to those in England/Wales who have highlighted the dangers of the government's withdrawal of targets aimed at boosting recruitment (Hick et al 2011). A recent investigation has drawn attention to the fact that 93.3% of the English/Welsh teaching force is white and quotes the view of one of the two largest teacher unions that black and minority ethnic backgrounds are 'critically underrepresented' among teachers. It also reported concern that the government's flag-ship 'School Direct' programme, aimed at locating a majority of teacher training in schools, is not recruiting sufficient numbers of minority ethnic trainees (TES 2014).

Second, if the government's commitment to a school-based teacher training continues, there will be increasing pressure on schools to identify teacher trainers within their own work-force. It is a recommendation of the APPG on RE report that RE teachers should 'lead in-school professional development on understanding local communities' (2014) and it can be argued that teachers of RE from minority ethnic/religious backgrounds could be particularly well equipped to become in-school teacher educators, within but also beyond the area of 'community relations'. I have called attention elsewhere to research which highlights a commitment to social justice amongst BME teachers as a key reason to strengthen support for their entry to and progression within the teaching profession (Everington 2013). This study suggests that teachers from such backgrounds may have a broader understanding of 'separation' than 'community separation', including an understanding of the separation that can exist between the small worlds of pupils' upbringing and a bigger world of beliefs, ideas and ways of thinking.

Finally, and in the wake of the 'Trojan Horse' case, this article began by recognising recent recommendations for strengthening teacher education. The recommendations were made in the context of concern about those who are learning to teach in areas where there is

community separation, and in relation to teachers of RE who have a particular responsibility for addressing perceptions of separation. As efforts are made to address these recommendations, thought should be given to the value of 'case studies' which can provide teachers with examples of potentially valuable strategies but also of the dilemmas and difficulties that can be encountered. The study reported here might be viewed as an example of the kind of research that could provide such case studies and generate related teacher development material, training programmes and action research.

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[i] For example in 2014, a speech given by the politician Theresa May includes the warning, 'We must not sleepwalk into separation, segregation and sectarianism' (http://www.birminghammail.co.uk/news/conservative-party-conference-theresa-announces-7857893) and a commentary written by Dr Sarah Beresford claims, 'Significant problems are posed by existing and future mono-cultural schools, which can add significantly to the separation of communities' (http://lancslaw.wordpress.com/2014/06/11/trojan-horses-in-birmingham/).