Religious Education and Community Cohesion

The Religious Education Council of England and Wales (REC) is committed to supporting schools and educational institutions in their promotion of community cohesion which it recognises as a positive development from multi-cultural education. Whilst multi-culturalism has been much (and often unfairly) maligned recently, it is useful to remember that RE was one of the subjects that made a significant contribution to multicultural education through the teaching of world religions. This movement can be traced back to the 1960s before being enshrined in law in 1988. We have therefore a strong basis on which to build, having recognised long ago that a mono-cultural curriculum is unacceptably narrow and limiting in RE. Now, the duty on schools to promote community cohesion extends previous work, not just into other curriculum developments but into active participation in and knowledge of communities, particularly but not exclusively the school's local community. There is also a broadening away from a focus on religious and non-religious beliefs and ethnicity to other categories in which equality should be promoted such as social class, age, gender, disability and sexual orientation. In all of this, it is hoped that young people come to recognise that what binds us together as human beings is far greater than what divides us.

The duty to promote community cohesion stands alongside the Race Relations Amendment Act, the Human Rights Act and the Equality Act and the importance of schools having equality policies and action plans in order to promote fair treatment and to counteract negative stereotyping of all sorts. This continues to be a significant area of school life and activity.

It is important to note that community cohesion is only one of the aims of religious education (RE) itself – there are others of equal importance and it is important that this breadth and depth should be sustained. At the same time RE, in terms of its content, and the attitudes and skills it seeks to foster and develop, can have a significant impact on pupils' perceptions of communities and therefore on cohesion, intentionally or otherwise. It is assumed by some that RE's contribution is necessarily positive but this is not so. Badly

taught RE, that focuses on the exotic or that tries bluntly to force the notion of tolerance on pupils, is likely to have serious negative consequences.

The REC believes that RE can play a key role in enabling a school not only to meet its statutory duty to promote community cohesion but to promote the well-being of its pupils, their families and the communities from which they come. Community cohesion is of importance to all schools and all communities and should be interpreted in its broadest sense. It is not just focused on improving social bridging, that is linking different sorts of communities, though that is important. It's also about social bonding within communities and helping them to be strong and to thrive. Such community pride can be a source of confidence to support people when they reach out to different communities.

The promotion of community cohesion should not be predicated on a deficit model of particular communities nor should it focus on one group within the local, national or international community above others. It is based on the need for respect for difference and the recognition of commonalities. When the widely accepted definition of a cohesive community (LGA 2002) says that 'the diversity of people's backgrounds is appreciated and valued', the comment should be understood as applying not only to minority ethnic communities but also to the majority population where there is also considerable diversity, including but not solely social class.

The word 'community' is generally better understood in the plural for we all belong to a series of interlocking communities that cover family, school, interests, our age group, sexual orientation, disability, employment, sport, religion, virtual and many others. Communities, in this sense, are not hermetically sealed units nor are they locked in time. Similarly, there is a need to understand identity as a plural term since there are many aspects to our identities. Some writers refer to 'multiple identities' and others to the notion of 'hybrid identity' when strands that are disparate combine in a new form. There is no necessary tension, for example, between being Asian and British and 'transnationalism' is likely to be an increasing feature of our globalised world. Both identity and community are changing and organic; some would suggest that 'community' as a social concept is in decline while

'networks' are increasing, but networks are simply communities of a new type and part of the world in which we all live.

DCSF guidance identifies four different communities to which the school belongs: the school itself is a community, and it is also part of the local, national and global communities. The local community can be further broken down into a range of groups, with which the school can work. The rest of this guidance takes each of these communities, following the Ofsted Self Evaluation Form for schools, and explores what each might mean in relation to RE.

The school as a community

Ethos and conduct

This is a whole school matter but one of the consequences of this is that ethos and conduct have to permeate every aspect of school life, or they are simply words on policy documents, and so RE must make its contribution too. Most RE teachers would argue that RE can make a major contribution to the school's promotion of cohesion within itself as a community, but it is necessary to articulate what this means in practice. Is the subject content the most important contribution that is made to community cohesion? Is it the skills that are developed and, if so, in what way are they different from skills in other curriculum areas? Is it about the values and attitudes RE teachers encourage – respect for difference, positive attitudes to plurality, listening to others and developing coherent arguments? If RE is to be effective in promoting community cohesion it has to have a respected place within the life of the school and enjoy the confidence and support of the senior management team and the governors. This is not always the case. Recent evidence from Ofsted says that, of the three main strands of community cohesion, understanding of faith groups is the weakest.

Given the personal, complex and controversial nature of much of what happens in RE, teaching and support staff have to give careful consideration, preferably in consultation with pupils, on what cohesion means in the classroom community and how it can best be developed.

The RE department can agree with students a key set of principles that are revisited regularly to ensure that the community can thrive. This relates to whole school approaches to:

- Vision and values and the need to articulate what this means in practice;
- What it means to have mutual respect in terms of speech and conduct – and this applies to all members of the classroom community, not just pupil-pupil exchanges;
- How pupils (and teachers) can express disagreement respectfully, using appropriate language;
- Discipline and codes of conduct and what is agreed as appropriate behaviour by all;
- Difference and how pupils can develop a respect that also employs discernment because not all religions and beliefs are worthy of respect;
- Attitudes and values have to be articulated and open to challenge;
- Listening to others' voices – in person or virtually – to deepen understanding of their meaning;
- The curriculum, what is taught and how it's taught and listening to young people's views on this.

The first of the LGA's characteristics of a cohesive community is that 'there is a common vision and sense of belonging' and RE teachers can play a significant role in enabling schools to develop this with their pupils.

Vision and values

It is common to find references to 'shared values' as a means of uniting different individuals and groups in society and identifying commonalities between their diverse worldviews. There are some who prefer the phrase 'overlapping values' and others who prefer a focus on 'shared vision'. In our attempts to generate an awareness of our shared humanity we must both identify our commonalities and accept our differences. It is also important, especially in RE, that we don't fall into the trap of assuming that there are, for example 'Christian values' or 'Muslim values' when we know that there are huge differences within groups and traditions and between individuals within groups. RE teachers have the difficult

task of negotiating their way between diversity and division but they can also be reassured that it is not their task to act as apologists for religion. The teacher's task is to educate and explore not to expunge the difficult or controversial; indeed, this is the very stuff that makes relevant and challenging RE, in both primary and secondary schools.

Freedom of expression is an essential element of democracy and the right of every individual, including children. They have the right to have views and to express views about their own and others' beliefs and values. As public bodies, schools are bound by the Human Rights Act to guarantee freedom of thought, conscience and religion or belief. Most teachers are comfortable with this and welcome the opportunity for challenging engagement with and between pupils. It is also important to remember that for some young people and their parents, particularly those with a strong religious faith or from a strong religious background, this might feel alien, even dangerous, and finding ways to explore deep religious convictions can be a difficult task for teachers. This is one of the reasons why it is necessary to keep returning to agreed codes of speech and conduct within classrooms and why dialogue has to be at the heart of good RE, particularly in classrooms where there are young people with a wide variety of beliefs and values – and which classroom is different from that?

The articulation of a school's values and its relationships with and attitudes to its local community, as well as the national and global communities, is a task to which both RE and collective worship can make a significant contribution. In collective worship there is time for a shared engagement with ultimate questions in ways that can both promote coherence within the school community and involvement with the wider communities. Collective worship can be, among other things, the 'glue' that can help 'fix' the school community and in order to that it will need to be broad, educational and inclusive.

Curriculum

There is a long history of teaching world religions and beliefs in RE – it has already been required in law for more than 20 years and significant developments towards doing this go back a further 20 years. This means that there are excellent opportunities for teachers and pupils to learn together about a wide range of religions and non-religious beliefs, to explore

their meaning and significance and to reflect on how and if they might impact on the thinking, values and opinions of everyone in the RE classroom. There is huge potential here to develop young people's thinking within a supportive, warm and intellectually stimulating environment.

Of course, RE isn't the only area where this can happen and there are opportunities of linking with other subject areas, particularly citizenship, and with national initiatives such as *Who Do We Think We Are? Week*. But it is also true that many young people feel isolated from formal religion and in listening to student opinions it may be necessary to think again about both content and method in RE to find those questions and issues that are, not just of ultimate significance, but of significance and relevance to young people as they are growing up. Some of these questions will be about the place of religions and non-religious beliefs in our society and the sometimes unacceptable ways in which belief is manifested. Some of the questions will be about the similarities and differences between religions and beliefs and about their internal diversity. Learning about religions and non-religious beliefs themselves – although vital for increasing the mutual understanding that is a prerequisite of cohesion – may contribute less to community cohesion than opening up the RE classroom to those questions and issues that young people actually have.

Recent research has shown that young people across Europe have a strong commitment to freedom of thought, conscience, religion and belief. This is congruent with the stance of the *Toledo Guiding Principles*. Exploration of freedom of belief in the context of human rights can form a significant aspect of teaching and learning in RE. This includes, of course, the freedom to believe or not to believe in a religion and this raises issues about teaching RE in the majority of schools where pupils are not practising members of any religious community and have little personal experience of religion. Affirming pupils in their non-religious beliefs whilst creating challenge and engagement with religious concepts, practices and teachings requires immense skill, but it is essential if pupils are not to feel alienated from what happens in the RE classroom. As professionals, we need to explore this further, including the concept of 'inter'-religious education. What does this mean in the context of no faith? To suggest that 'faith' covers religious **and** non-religious beliefs is not acceptable to many non-religious people. It is also important that respect for children and their rights, as well as for

human rights more generally, should permeate both the school as a whole and RE in particular. There is opportunity to explore the twin concepts of rights and their concomitant responsibilities in promoting pupils' moral and social development, as well as viewing the concepts from the perspective of religions and non-religious belief systems.

Equality of treatment is at the heart of community cohesion and it is important that there is transparent and fair conduct and codes of conduct in all schools. This can promote trust and a sense of belonging to the school community as a whole. It is extremely important that the most damaged and vulnerable of young people, who can be very challenging in a school context, receive the support and guidance that they need. Valuing every child is not easy but it is important to recognise that all children and young people bring something unique to the RE classroom and that all contributions can be of equal value.

Equality of outcome is also important. Test and examination results should be analysed carefully to ensure that underachieving groups are identified and remedial action taken. Support must be offered, where necessary, to individuals and groups of students if schools are to meet the third of the LGA's characteristics of a cohesive community – 'Similar life opportunities are available to all'. Success in RE is good for everyone involved. When taught well, RE can raise pupils' self-esteem and their understanding of their own (hybrid or multiple) identity as well as developing a deeper understanding of a range of communities, beliefs and practices.

The local community

RE teachers are well placed to develop strong relationships with the local community – through visits and visitors, there are many opportunities to strengthen relationships and improve the quality of pupils' learning.

Families and local groups

It is important to develop a nuanced and informed understanding of local communities and groups within communities. In secondary schools particularly, pupils will be able to help inform teachers and other staff about local groups with which they could make contact; in

primary schools this can happen through parents and carers. Visiting religious and community groups, including madrassahs and supplementary schools, with which pupils and their families have links is informative and beneficial in enhancing relationships. Although this may be of particular interest and relevance to RE staff, it is also relevant for all staff, not least because promoting community cohesion is a whole school responsibility and while RE's contribution is significant it would be inappropriate to arrogate it solely to one department.

The responsibility of finding out about local communities and diversity within them should not be restricted to black and minority ethnic communities: promoting community cohesion within all-white or majority white communities is equally important. Sometimes, there are particular issues related to areas of serious socio-economic disadvantage and one of the ways in which schools can address this is by organising community events which help raise a sense of local history or solidarity. Schools and their communities can explore ways in which they can collaborate more fully, for example, through practical action for the benefit of the local community or through joint fund raising.

Cohesion, race equality and diversity

Schools are in a strong position to have a positive impact on issues relating to cohesion and ethnicity through the stance they take on race equality in their race equality action plan and policy. They can help foster tolerance and respect within the local community as well as within the school. They can also help in the celebrating diversity and difference, not least by inviting parents and others to participate in school events, including collective worship and major curriculum projects. The displays that are seen when visitors enter a school can have strong impact. It is also important for schools to be aware of issues and tensions within the community and where these affect the pupils or their families, to find ways of enabling dialogue and exploration within a safe and respectful context. Dismissing anxieties about ethnicity, religion or migration will not be helpful.

One of the tasks that can be undertaken by schools generally and by RE teachers in particular is to consider what barriers there are to community cohesion in the local area and what can be done, through the curriculum and by the school, to help overcome these barriers. They may relate to local circumstances, to local demographics, to current political

issues, to matters of historical mistrust between communities, as well as others. Local knowledge of these and other matters is important if the school is to serve its community effectively.

The local SACRE

The local SACRE can play a significant role in promoting community cohesion and can model good practice in inter-community and inter-faith dialogue. Raising the profile of SACRE locally and ensuring that it addresses community cohesion in its agendas can lead to increased support for and confidence in schools. The constitution of SACREs and the faith and belief community groups that are represented there needs to be monitored as demographic change takes place. SACREs need to be able to ensure that they, and the Agreed Syllabus Conference, have sufficient breadth within their committees to be able to fulfil their duties effectively and if this means, for example, finding a Jewish representative from outside a community where there are no Jews, then that is important. Judaism must be taught and a lack of Jewish representation makes the SACRE and ASC's work unnecessarily difficult.

There is a major challenge for the developers of agreed syllabuses to ensure that the syllabus they produce relates to all pupils' lives and not just to those from a religious background. Many local authorities have now taken up the idea of creating youth SACREs or similar groups which have huge potential from promoting both community cohesion and for enabling young people to make their views on RE and collective worship known to a wide audience. Finding ways of enabling young people to relate positively and responsibly to their local community is an urgent task to which schools, and others, need to respond.

The national community

Nationally, schools and RE need to be outward facing and to ensure that they are preparing young people for active and responsible citizenship in a country where there is a multiplicity of religions, non-religious beliefs, ethnicities and cultures. Exploring issues of identity and community at both local and national level is essential in an atmosphere of mutual enquiry

and open discussion, conducted respectfully. There needs to be honest encounter with some of the difficult issues/questions/changes that have occurred both locally and nationally. This requires considerable confidence and expertise on the part of teachers but it can be done and the RE curriculum is one of the situations in which it can best take place. Reflection on aspirations, not just personal, but for communities and society as a whole, links to key questions about social and moral issues and relates to religious teachings and visions of what can be achieved. The study of inspirational figures throughout history can contribute to this. The question of 'shared values' is again pertinent here and exploration of what young people hold dear and the principles in which they believe can provide the basis for responsible engagement and dialogue. There are issues related to believing and belonging as well as their negative counterparts of cynicism and alienation.

In their 2006 report, *Making Sense of Religion*, Ofsted argued that the social and political dimensions of religion have been neglected. It is time for curriculum developers to seize this challenge and open up new realms of learning in RE to pupils, and in both primary and secondary schools. This can link with the rights and responsibilities that citizens have as members of a liberal democracy and what that means for them and their lives.

By supporting national as well as local initiatives in RE, teachers can support their pupils further. The forthcoming national RE celebration planned for 2011 is one such example, as is participation in events such as 'Spirited Arts'. Opportunities for pupils to extend their experience through learning outside the classroom, and visits to sacred space, can provide inspiration and motivation for young people. Giving pupils the opportunity to make meaningful relationships with those whom they wouldn't normally meet, either in person or virtually, is another way in which pupils can begin to extend their horizons and engage in dialogue with other young people who may, at first, appear very different from themselves. Commonalities will quickly emerge if the right conditions are set.

The global community

Globalisation is a fact of modern life and presents both challenges and opportunities for teachers and their students. Enabling responsible global citizenship is a key task for schools

at this stage of human history and there are opportunities within the curriculum to explore matters of ecological, social, economic, cultural and religious or philosophical significance. Complex and controversial issues relating to refugees, asylum seekers, migration, terrorism and human rights, including the role of the media in their handling of these matters, should form part of the RE curriculum at appropriate levels in schools. One of the aims of the national curriculum is to create responsible citizens, and that is a global and international citizenship, not just a national citizenship. For some students and their families there will be strong links with international communities and some will have a transnationalist perspective, bridging their commitment to the nation where they live and the one from which their tradition and culture have developed. Such commitments can provide the basis for responsible global citizenship, as can bi- and multi-lingualism.

The study of religions and non-religious beliefs not just in their local and national contexts, but as global phenomena, can help challenge stereotypical views of religion, xenophobia and narrow, post-modern secularism as well as narrow religious fundamentalism.

Issues

A number of issues emerge from the role of RE in promoting community cohesion.
Of significant importance is the role of individual teachers and their need for support in maintaining and achieving high levels of skill in dealing with sensitive and controversial issues. We need teachers who are 'skilled cultural navigators' which doesn't mean that they know everything about religions, beliefs and cultures but that they have the confidence and competence to approach people and places that are different with open-mindedness and a willingness to seek out that which is of value. Only when teachers and other adults based in schools can model these skills and attitudes will schools be able to promote community cohesion effectively and enable young people to develop understanding and empathy. There are groups that do not wish to cohere with others and, in the spirit of freedom of belief, that is a right that must be respected by schools and others. Some communities have different values and attitudes from the norm but when those children are part of a school community their parents' wishes should be respected and facilitated.

There is also a need to recognise that there are communities and aspects of identity – such a violent, racist or exclusive gang culture – that are profoundly dangerous and damaging for those who belong to them. The phrase 'respect for all' is itself misleading because it implies an undiscerning toleration of everything. We have to enable young people to challenge and criticise and assess for themselves what is acceptable and responsible and what is dangerous for them and for others. Critical engagement with beliefs sits comfortably with western, secular world views but less so with others and therefore this too becomes an area for further exploration, and brings teachers back to their local community (ies) and engagement with community leaders to find ways of addressing the difficult issues that communities face and of finding ways of celebrating and sharing all the many positive aspects of communities at school, local, national and global levels.

Relevant web sites:

http://www.community-cohesion.org.uk/content/introduction

http://www.communities.gov.uk/communities/racecohesionfaith/research/

http://www.cohesioninstitute.org.uk/home

http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/violentextremism/downloads/DCSFlearning%20Together_bkmk.pdf

http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/Ofsted-home/About-us/Our-structure-and-leadership/The-non-Executive-Board/Non-Executive-Board-meetings/29-September-2009/(language)/eng-GB

http://www.dius.gov.uk/~/media/publications/F/FE_violent_extremism_consultation_response

http://www.subjectassociation.org.uk/index.php?page=88