Blog post

Part of special issue: The ECR journey: From inspiration to impact

Tolerance and mutual respect: What do they mean and why does it matter?

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Inspiration for the research

A large body of research has been inspired by a line on page 14 of the Teachers' Standards in England, which requires teachers not to 'undermin[e] fundamental British values, including democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect, and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs'. The statement was later reformulated as a request to 'promote' fundamental British values in the Department for Education's 2014 guidance to schools. The political and securitising implications of this requirement, which originate in the UK government's counter-terrorism policy Prevent, have been widely examined, including in this BERA Blog post (see also Busher et al., 2017; Vincent, 2019).

My PhD research built on this literature through a close examination of two concepts: tolerance and mutual respect. I have a religious education (RE) teaching background, and in all my years promoting mutual respect and tolerance I have never had a discussion with a colleague about what these terms mean. However, my experiences suggest tolerance and mutual respect are not clear-cut and uncertainty exists about what should be tolerated and what should be condemned.

In my research study, I used a multiple case study approach to examine how seven in-service RE teachers in three schools across England constructed and promoted mutual respect and tolerance. The data, which comprised semi-structured interviews and document analysis of schemes of work, were collected in 2020–2021 and analysed using critical discursive psychology (Wiggins, 2017), a form of discourse analysis. This facilitated a close analysis of teachers' constructions of the concepts.

What is tolerance?

The Department for Education (2011; 2014) guidance does not say how tolerance should be interpreted. More problematically, existing research finds that this openness does not foster diverse interpretations but leads to uncritical constructions (Busher et al., 2017). While narrow constructions of tolerance might see this concept as permissively allowing something which is disliked or disapproved, other broader conceptions propose that tolerance entails finding merit in the other's position, but not so much as to adopt this position oneself.

What is mutual respect?

Mutual respect is no more straightforward. Darwall (1977) distinguishes between respect based on recognition of a feature such as personhood and appraisal respect which involves the evaluation of, for example, a viewpoint or someone's beliefs. Personhood as the definitive category for showing respect has been extremely influential, thanks to the work of the philosopher Kant. Specifically on mutual respect, Rawls (1971) identifies how it can be shown by being willing to see something from someone else's viewpoint, supporting actions with reasons and doing small favours.

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Why does it matter?

All teachers in my study constructed tolerance as accepting, but not embracing, the other. Acceptance is minimalistic rather than fulsome. Teachers positioned themselves, as RE practitioners, as champions of mutual respect, locating tolerance as unsatisfactory: 'I think you can settle with tolerance … but generally you should be aiming for mutual respect' (Emily*). Personhood was prioritised as the defining reason for showing mutual respect. Alongside this, mutual respect was constructed as requiring engagement with the person, highlighting the relational nature of the concept, as Amara notes: 'Mutual respect is like more personal so me and you having a discussion, agreeing to disagree.' Some, but not all, teachers were

critical of whether all opinions voiced by pupils should be shown mutual respect, with Anna commenting, 'All opinions are not equal.' This raises the question of whether the potential of tolerance might be overlooked when encountering disagreements and the matter of whether RE teachers should distinguish between respect for opinions and respect for persons.

The findings from this research demonstrate the importance of encouraging practitioners and policymakers to engage critically with what is meant by the values they are asked to promote. This matters because teachers and young people live in a society that is super diverse, but where 'post-truth' results in a form of relativism that privileges personal belief over objective evidence and suggests that views with less credibility should be given equal recognition or even respect. Interrogating the meaning of the concepts themselves is the crucial first step in enabling teachers and policymakers to move towards a more critical promotion of the concepts in the classroom.

*All names are pseudonyms to protect the anonymity of participants.

References

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Themes: Policy • Teacher education and development   **Events:** The ECR Journey: From inspiration to impact   **Communities:** Early Career Researcher Network • Educational Research and Educational Policy-making • Teacher Education and Development

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Rebekah Ackroyd is the Early Career Researcher Network Regional Rep for the North of England. Rebekah is a lecturer in education at the University of Cumbria working on postgraduate provision. Her PhD research examined how teachers of Religious Education (RE) construct and promote mutual respect and tolerance. More widely, her research interests include values education, fundamental British values, democracy in education and conflict resolution. Her current research project examines children and their families ideas on land use. Before starting her PhD, Rebekah worked as a teacher of RE in the UK and as a learning assistant in a democratic German free school (Freischule). She is currently a primary school governor. As a result, Rebekah is interested in how educational experiences vary between different contexts and enjoys learning about different approaches to

education and home education. As an ECR, Rebekah is keen to encourage greater collaboration and support between ECRs.