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Religious Education, Racism and Citizenship: developing children's religious, political and media literacy

Lynn Revell and Sally Elton-Chalcraft explore how RE can contribute to anti-racism in the Citizenship classroom



This summer the newspapers were full of pictures of armed French police forcing Muslim women to remove articles of clothing on a beach in Nice. The pictures showing four policemen standing over the woman while she removed enough clothes to make sure her outfit was one that was 'respecting good morals and secularism'. Some accounts reported that as police roamed the beaches of Nice making women undress, onlookers applauded and shouted 'go home' (<http://bit.ly/2c2cwvb>).

How can teachers support children making sense of such media stories?

Teachers of religious education are often asked to justify the existence of their subject when the number of people who claim to be religious in the UK declines year on year. Yet, the incident described above is an illustration of how religion is rarely out of the news. Very often the presence of religion in the media also signifies questions of racism and discrimination and raises issues and questions related to freedom of expression, immigration and human rights that could be addressed in the Citizenship classroom. It makes sense then that some of these issues could be addressed with more thoroughness, nuance and depth if teachers were able to consider not just the civic, moral and political context and content of many of those issues but the religious as well. Later in this article we critique classroom approaches.

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Citizenship teachers are used to dealing with topical controversial issues. Not only is the content of the subject often controversial but one of the key aims of all Citizenship education is the cultivation of skills that will enable pupils to negotiate complex issues and make difficult moral and political decisions. The approach to racism and anti-racism in Citizenship education is informed by the recognition that children and young people must learn how to engage with controversial issues and the approach to racism is a natural part of this agenda. Despite the accusation that Citizenship education offers only a placebo to oppose racism (Gillborn, 2006), it is one of the few spaces on the curriculum where issues of racism can be addressed explicitly. The approach to racism is very different in RE.

Racism and anti-racism are not dominant themes in RE. The Non-statutory framework for RE (guidelines which partially act in place of a national curriculum) does not mention anti-racism in its list of aims and there is no mention of it in the wider text. In popular textbooks aimed at trainee RE teachers racism is rarely considered as a significant issue and in textbooks designed for use in the classroom issues of racism and anti-racism are noticeably absent. In addition, Ofsted reports have commented that in many instances RE has a focus on learning about religions rather than on encouraging pupils to reflect on values and their own development.

Despite the absence of direct references to racism

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there is a tradition in RE of addressing difference and toleration of the cultures and beliefs of others. That RE is a mechanism by which racism can be avoided is an implicit message of many RE lessons and resources. Indeed Robert Jackson, a key writer in RE, has argued that in some ways the whole history of RE is about how we negotiate and teach about difference in the classroom. So how can RE contribute to anti-racism in the citizenship classroom?

The contribution of religious education to anti-racism

“The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all of fiction... a petty, unjust, unforgiving control freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic racist...” (Dawkins, 2007:51)

According to many of the new atheists like Richard Dawkins, religious identities and traditions are implicitly or explicitly racist. Religion is commonly associated with conflict (Catholic republicans and Protestant Loyalists in Ireland, Isis, Jews and Muslim Palestinians in Israel to mention just a few) and the idea that religion or RE can positively contribute to education about racism would be preposterous to many. Individual teachers will take different approaches to dealing with racism but there are three main approaches to racism in RE. These approaches underpin strategies for classroom practice, which we critique below:

1. Tolerance and accentuating the positive: a starting point for classroom practice

Many RE teachers approach the teaching of religion from the standpoint that religious tolerance is central to a functioning democratic society. The aims of RE are often focused on encouraging pupils to develop tolerance of beliefs and cultures that are different from their own and this means that the focus of lessons is about encouraging pupils to appreciate the positive. Time is given to evaluating the contribution that religions make: to a shared global culture, in the power of shared human experiences (birth, coming of age, families, wonder at the universe and creativity) There is a great emphasis at both secondary and primary level on stressing the similarities between religious teachings as a way of

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emphasising a common humanity.

Considering the accusation that religions often foster racism and bigotry, it seems counter intuitive to suggest that knowledge of religions could support a greater understanding of racism. While it is true that history is full of examples where religious leaders and communities have a shameful record of failing to speak out or act against racism there are also myriad examples where religious people have acted with integrity. The cultivation of tolerance of the actions and beliefs of others means that pupils will be less likely to fear and regard others with suspicion.

Questions of racism and anti-racism are more likely to be addressed at secondary level especially as some GCSE syllabi have units on discrimination and racism. In some units the approach to teaching about racism is similar to that found in Citizenship education. Students are asked to consider the origins of prejudice, the consequences of stereotyping and the impact of racism on society. Once again the onus is on encouraging a worldview that accepts plurality and diversity as a given and stressing the advantages of mutual acceptance.

Is your classroom practice ‘stuck’ at the tolerance and accentuating the positive position?

2. Dialogue, communication, respect: deeper, more reflective approaches

There are several initiatives in RE that take a more positive and critical approach to diversity and difference. These approaches are founded on the recognition that conflict and the most profound disagreement may exist between religious communities (and those who have no faith) but that plural societies must find strategies for meaningful cooperation between groups to be possible.

The REDCo project looked at diversity and religion in eight different European countries. They looked at RE and the way religion was treated in educational settings with a focus on the way young people responded to teaching about religious diversity (<http://bit.ly/2e6MPJ7>). The starting point of the REDCo project is that it is not enough merely to tolerate the presence of others in your community but that there is a need to actively respect your neighbour. The research encouraged and

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supported dialogue between groups of young people in different settings and using different forms of communication. This approach combines the acknowledgement that there are groups that are different from you, with different traditions, different values and beliefs but that communication can facilitate respect.

The REDCo research found that while some young people were hostile to those different from themselves most found that learning about the beliefs of others facilitated dialogue:

- Students who learn about religious diversity in schools are more willing to have conversations about religions/beliefs with students of other backgrounds than those who do not
- For students, peaceful coexistence depends on knowledge about each other's religious worldviews and sharing common interests as well as doing things together
- Students want learning to take place in a safe classroom environment where there are agreed procedures for expression and discussion
- Students wish to avoid conflict: some of the religiously committed students feel vulnerable.

The links between the work of the REDCo project and developing pedagogies to counter racism are clear. An example of this is the work developed by Julia Iprgrave at Warwick University. She developed insights she made working as a primary school teacher in Leicester in a school with where over 85% of the pupils were Muslim and formulated an approach based on three dimensions of dialogue:

- Children are introduced to a variety of voices expressing different views on moral issues and beliefs. At this stage children accept that there is diversity in their community
- Children are encouraged to understand that engaging with difference can have positive outcomes
- Tertiary dialogue is the activity of dialogue itself.

Her research showed that children whose interest was stimulated by dialogue were more likely to show an interest in the beliefs of others and want to continue the process of dialogue. Children were taught the skills of listening and engaging positively, not so that they could agree with the views of others but so they could learn that difference itself could be positive.

Do your classroom discussions encourage or inhibit deep-level dialogue where young people can explore controversial issues?

3. Politicising the religious and bringing the religious to the political

Although an approach that explicitly politicises the religious could be interpreted as provocative, the fact remains that many issues are simultaneously religious and political and that this is definitely the case with some forms of racism.

Islamophobia is usually understood as a form of anti-Muslim racism. Since 9/11 and the July bombings in London, physical attacks on Muslims have increased across Europe. The Tell Mama helpline which records attacks on Muslims and mosques in the UK reported that attacks had increased by 300% since the bombings in Paris in 2015 and that the most likely victims were Muslim girls and women aged between 15 and 45 and wearing Muslim dress. Few people would dispute that smashing the windows of Muslim owned shops, ripping off a woman's hijab, pushing and shoving Muslim children as they go into school and calling out abuse (all of which have happened) are wrong and should be addressed in the same way as other forms of racism.

However recent events in France suggest there are more complex issues raised by anti-Muslim beliefs and actions. Some would argue that passionate criticism of Muslim customs (like wearing modest clothing) are legitimate, we should be able to exercise freedom of speech and that the ensuing dialogue is part of what it means to live in a free society. The actions of French police described at the start of this article were justified by French authorities on the basis that the wearing of modest clothing on a beach undermined the secular French republic (although their attitudes to Orthodox Jewish women on similar beaches and wearing equally modest clothing were not noted). In the aftermath of the Charlie Hebdo massacre where twelve members of the magazine's staff were murdered by Jihadists the question of when legitimate criticisms of Islam becomes Islamophobic was highlighted.

Do you feel prepared to support the development of young people's religious, political and media literacy by engaging in well informed, open discussions?

Challenges for teachers in developing children's religious, political and media literacy

Some classroom debates and discussion are hindered by poor subject knowledge and

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stereotypes. We know that teachers who are not specialists are also worried that they will cause offence by 'saying the wrong thing' or by failing to show respect and that this fear is exacerbated where there are pupils who are part of a religious community in the school.

Greater knowledge of Islam would enable teachers to navigate many of the misconceptions that inform prejudicial and racist views about Islam and Muslims. However subject knowledge alone is not enough because the issue is whether some criticism of Islam is legitimate and is therefore not Islamophobic.

In RE criticism and disagreement with religious truths and traditions is legitimate, after all while some religious traditions believe that there are many truths and many equally valid forms of the sacred, others believe that their's is the only truth. For many teachers the issue is not whether it is acceptable for pupils to criticise a religion but the way this is done. More pertinently, judging which critiques of Islam are Islamophobic is dependent on the cultural and political context in which the comments are made. Providing pupils with the political context and wider social and cultural factors in which these debates take place will help them understand how these issues have evolved and the different standpoints of the participants. This level of subject knowledge is challenging for subject specialists and non-specialist alike but it can be counterproductive for teachers to engage with these sensitive and complex issues with gaps about the key facts. In relation to the teaching of controversial issues around extremism and Islam, the RE Council has created a web bank of material that teachers can draw on to enhance their own subject knowledge:
<http://resilience-england.recouncil.org.uk/>.

RE, Fundamental British Values and racism

A further challenge for teachers is the requirement for all teachers to promote fundamental British values (FBVs) and this raises questions about the relationship between national identity, religious identities and racism. The 2015 Counter Terrorism Act and the Teachers Standards of 2012 make the promotion of British values not only statutory but link them to teacher appraisals. But some teachers are unsure about the political motivation behind these measures and what FBVs actually mean in the context of

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the classroom. Research carried out between four universities with student teachers found that many primary and secondary students have only a simplistic notion of Britishness and that some held views which were racist (Elton-Chalcraft et al, 2016).

Fundamental British Values in schools are too new for us to have gained a real sense of how teachers are promoting them across the curriculum. The DfE document 'Promoting Fundamental British Values in Social, Moral, Spiritual and Cultural Education' (2014, see <http://bit.ly/1HNBpUU>), requires teachers to promote British values and help children distinguish 'right' from 'wrong' while acknowledging that 'different people may hold different views about what is 'right' and 'wrong'. Government have defined British values as 'democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and individual respect and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs'. Findings from our research show that there seems to be some confusion about whether it is possible to isolate distinctively British values (<http://bit.ly/2dk6Ez7>). Participants in our research cited politeness, support for the Royal family, reminiscing about 'our great country' as a dominant empire and a stiff upper lip as distinctive British values. Should such tokenistic, colonial and patriotic values be promoted with our young people? A sizable number of student teachers, teachers and head teachers in our sample said it was impossible to agree on a set of values because Britain is so diverse. Such initiatives may prove counterproductive because some young people, particularly Muslims, feel marginalised by an emphasis on so called British values of which they have little ownership. In this article we encourage teachers to feel empowered and confident to engage in open, yet possibly provocative discussions about controversial issues.

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