

Place makes a big difference to young people's attitudes to religious diversity in the UK

Since the Second World War the UK has become a more diverse country, in terms of race, ethnicity, language and religion. Various governments have instituted policies to 'manage' this increasing diversity and promote cohesion. Religious Education (RE) is mandatory in state-funded schools and has been seen as a tool for promoting tolerance and understanding. New research has investigated young people's attitudes towards religious diversity across the UK and the impact that RE has upon these attitudes. It highlights the significance of the wider, especially local, context with which RE in a school interacts.

The research was conducted between 2009 and 2012 by a multidisciplinary team at Warwick Religions and Education Research Unit led by Professor Robert Jackson. It was funded by the [Religion and Society Programme](#). As part of the project a national survey was completed by nearly 12,000 students aged between 13 and 15 in schools across the UK. As another part of the project team members visited a sample of secondary schools in rural, urban and suburban areas of England, Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales - and London as an exceptional case - to hold discussion groups with young people. Through these discussions, the young people involved had input into the focus of the survey. Analysis of the large amount of data generated is ongoing, but findings are emerging.

Much depends on whether religions form minorities or majorities in the school and wider community. In some schools, students who belonged to a religious minority felt that teaching about minority faiths provided fuel for teasing and bullying in their school. In other areas, such as inner-city Birmingham, religion was seen as a normal part of everyday life even if students were not themselves religious. This can be compared with rural Sussex, where religion was seen as something strange by pupils who normally had very little direct experience of active faith. In contexts like this, religious students said they avoided discussing their faith in order to fit in. In contrast, in Protestant schools in Northern Ireland and on a Scottish island being seen to be actively Christian brought respect. In some Northern Irish and Scottish schools researchers also found strong awareness of the areas' histories of sectarianism.

In one school the researchers encountered ethnic, linguistic and religious self-segregation, along with divisions of space at school, e.g. in the playground. Such divisions reflect residential divisions in the local area. In another school much more antipathy was reported by white, British young people towards recently arrived Polish pupils because of the linguistic divide, rather than with schoolmates from the long-standing local Pakistani-origin Muslim community. Thus local patterns of residency, migration and religious practice have an impact upon young people's attitudes to others.

According to the survey young Hindus and Muslims generally feel accepted in the UK. Being religious is positively related to wellbeing for young people, though religious students can be at risk of bullying due to their religious identity, and religious dress remains a contentious issue. Interacting directly with other young people from



Project leader Professor Robert Jackson speaking at the 22 Feb 2012 Faith Debate on faith in schools

different backgrounds affects students' attitudes and understanding. The media also influence perceptions about religion and religious people, as does RE. Generally, those who do not belong to a religious group are less interested in learning about religions, but RE does help students to understand people from different religions.

Thus the research findings so far suggest that for religious and non-religious pupils to understand each other better, more should be invested in delivering good quality multifaith RE which takes full account of the local context. However, RE alone cannot resolve divisions given that religion is one, interconnected, factor amongst many shaping students' experience and attitudes.

Find out more...

- Visit the project's web pages:
<http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/wie/research/wreru/research/current/ahrc/>
- Listen to project Senior Research Fellow Elisabeth Arweck and Co-Investigator Leslie Francis presenting the research at the Religion and Society findings conference 'New Forms of Public Religion':
http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/publications/podcasts/show/nfpr_conference_presentation_jackson_arweck_and_francis
- Listen to project researcher Julia Ipgrave presenting the project:
http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/events/programme_events/show/religion_in_education_julia_ipgrave
- Look up the special issue (December 2012, vol. 33, no 3) of the *Journal of Beliefs and Values* co-edited by Elisabeth Arweck and Principal Investigator Robert Jackson featuring articles on the project:
<http://www.tandfonline.com/toc/cjbv20/current>. This will also be published as a book by Routledge in 2013.

You might also be interested in...

- Watching and listening to the Faith in Schools Westminster Faith Debate **when** Professor Jackson presented project findings (22 February 2012 with James Conroy, the Bishop of Oxford and Richard Dawkins): http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/faith_debates/faith_in_schools
- Reading about and listen to podcasts from the July 2011 conference at Warwick University **on** 'Religion in Education' funded by Religion and Society, organized by project researcher Elisabeth Arweck and introduced by Robert Jackson:
http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/events/programme_events/show/religion_in_education_findings_from_the_religion_and_society_programme
- Findings from Alison Mawhinney's project about opting out of RE in Northern Ireland supported by the Programme:
http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/research_findings/featured_findings/opting_out_of_re_could_and_should_be_easier

- The report from Mark Pike's Religion and Society-funded project about schools in England with a religious ethos:
http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/uploads/docs/2010_01/1262795461_ESRCAHRCPIkeReport.pdf
- A UK government report about the materials used to teach about world religions in schools in England co-authored by project team members:
http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/uploads/docs/2010_02/1265114944_DCSF-RR197.pdf
- The intercultural education resource centre The European Wergeland Centre for which Robert Jackson is a special adviser: <http://www.theewc.org/>

Project Details

Award Title

Young People's Attitudes towards Religious Diversity

Team

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Research Partners

local education advisers, education inspectors and colleagues in teacher education from across the UK, school managers and RE teachers, WRERU Associates

Award Type

Phase 2 Large Grant



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