

## GATEWAY DOCUMENT 3.3

# Ensuring that RE provision is effective in promoting equality and social integration

(see also Gateway 4.7 on issues of identity, religious/cultural traditions and belonging)

## WHY IS THIS RELEVANT TO *REsilience*?

Schools will naturally want the school community, made up of students, staff, governors and parents, to have a strong sense of common purpose in working together to provide the very best education for the students whatever the social, cultural or religious differences within the school community. They will want the best possible relations with the wider community that they serve and of which they are a part, and will seek to pursue that aim. They will also want to contribute to social integration not only within their local community, but also within the nation as a whole. The goals of social integration are central to *REsilience*.

At the heart of the concept of social integration are:

- a common vision of Britain as a tolerant, pluralist democracy, and the shared values that support this vision;
- a sense of belonging to the wider national community of Britain as well as to the local communities within which individuals live;
- acceptance of diversity of lifestyle and beliefs amongst fellow citizens;
- the availability of similar life opportunities for all citizens;
- positive relationships amongst the communities that make up the wider British community.

But *REsilience* also recognises that alongside these positive aspirations there are sometimes more negative factors. It aims to develop teachers' ability to address contentious issues where religion and belief often play a part. Teachers routinely need, in RE, to deal with:

- conflicting visions;
- a sense of alienation;

- distrust and dislike of those whom students perceive to be different from themselves;
- the absence of opportunities to thrive and grow;
- antagonistic inter-community relationships.

In addition, and arising from these, there is sometimes a sympathy – and even support for or involvement in – destructive and extreme movements that advocate violent means to achieve their ends.

## KEY QUESTIONS

### How can this help teachers and students to increase their understanding of contentious issues?

By developing students' awareness and understanding of:

- their own culture and heritage, as well as an understanding and appreciation of the diversity of religious and cultural backgrounds that come together in making up wider English society, culture and sense of nationhood;
- the reasons why tolerance, understanding, and respect for others are important;
- the multiple loyalties of some people within Britain that may lead communities or individuals to seek to preserve and develop aspects of their distinctive cultural or religious identity;
- the religious beliefs and moral commitments, often related to food, the consumption of alcohol, or relations between the sexes, that lead some people to avoid certain sorts of social interaction;
- the way that different interpretations of religious texts and teachings may lead to a wide range of responses, including some that are positive about direct action, even violent action, to attain aims which are seen as just and desirable;
- the reasons why some people are prepared to use violent means to achieve aims they believe either to be God's will, or the legitimate demands of justice, and to assert a single 'correct' view which denies the rights of others to hold contrary religious or moral views;
- the barriers to good inter-community relations that exist at local as well as national and international levels.

## What classroom challenges might arise in RE?

- The aim of developing understanding of differences within a plural society could elicit resistance, perhaps particularly in areas which are predominantly mono-cultural.
- There may be a lack of knowledge about religion and belief traditions on the part of teachers.
- Teachers will need to deal with challenging issues and assumptions around stereotyping, prejudices and misinterpretations.
- Teachers will have to acknowledge the fact that some people from different faith and belief communities may hold opinions that challenge socially prevailing concepts of equality in relation to, for example, gender and sexual identity.
- Tensions and problems stemming from factors outside the school's control may arise, which it may not be able to solve (e.g. a large and vocal extremist presence in the school's local area).
- Some parents or members of the community may have strong hostility towards certain religious/cultural groups.

## How can teachers address such challenges?

- By considering important aspects of students' RE learning which have a bearing upon understanding inter-community relations and equality, such as developing an understanding of their own, and others' identities;
- By promoting amongst students respect for different viewpoints and appreciation of a range of cultures;
- By encouraging the espousal of fundamental equality principles and democratic decision making (see *Signposts* below);
- By keeping well informed about legislation and the stated positions of major faith and belief groups relating to these issues (see also Gateways 4.6 and 4.9 for examples of latter);
- By ensuring that the principles behind good interfaith and intercommunity relations are observed in the classroom;
- By creating an open climate in which to address sensitive, controversial and contentious issues.

## NEXT STEPS

### Signposts for further reading

Richardson, R (2009) *Holding together: equalities, difference and cohesion*, Trentham Books, sets out the different strands of equalities legislation and some ways school policies and action can take account of them.

### Signposts for further resources

<http://schoolsonline.britishcouncil.org/> International dimensions to education.

[www.schoolslinkingnetwork.org.uk](http://www.schoolslinkingnetwork.org.uk) The Schools Linking Network aims to ‘facilitate links between schools in England to help children and young people explore their identity, celebrate diversity and develop dialogue’.

<http://www.cohesioninstitute.org.uk/home> The Institute of Community Cohesion was established in 2005 to provide a new approach to race, diversity and multiculturalism. Work focuses on building positive and harmonious community relations, using applied research constantly to develop practice and to build capacity of all the agencies and individuals involved.

<http://www.interfaith.org.uk> The Inter Faith Network for the UK works with its member bodies to help make the UK a place marked by mutual understanding and respect between religions, where all can practise their faith with integrity. Its way of working is firmly based on the principle that dialogue and cooperation can only prosper if they are rooted in respectful relationships that do not blur or undermine the distinctiveness of different religious traditions.

See also Gateway document 4:7 *Issues of identity, religious/cultural traditions and belonging*.

### Signposts for further action

The school could consider how the RE curriculum can help it to achieve its aims of communal harmony in terms of:

- ethos and engagement: schools should promote a sense of a united but diverse school community and this needs support from the school’s leadership and management, including that of the governing body. The whole school ethos must promote equality and respect for all students and this must be clear in its policies.
- teaching, learning and the curriculum: identification of activities in school which contribute to the different dimensions of a social integration that respects diversity, e.g. School Council; PSHE; Citizenship curriculum; engagement with local community through places of worship, parental involvement, national and international links etc.
- equality and excellence: by promoting equality of opportunity and inclusion for all students. This includes monitoring the achievement of all groups of students, making use

of inclusion indicators such as exclusions and ethnic groups; monitoring of racist or homophobic incidents, and any examples of bullying on the basis of religion or belief.

- engagement with extended services: working in partnerships to provide reasonable means for interaction with people from different backgrounds and to build positive relations.
- awareness of relevant legislation, e.g. Single Equality Bill, School Admissions Code, The Children Act.

## **APPENDIX**

### **Approaches, activities and further resources**

- Within RE and other areas of the curriculum students' understanding of community and diversity can be enriched through fieldwork, visits (e.g. places of worship, Holocaust Centre) and through meetings with members of faith communities.
- Inter-faith week in November provides another opportunity for interaction with local religious communities <http://www.interfaithweek.org/index.php/for-schools>
- Ideas for content of lessons can include resources freely available through subject associations – see <http://www.subjectassociations.org.uk/index.php?page=88>