

Study reveals teens' views on faith and Religious Education

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New research findings from the Youth On Religion (YOR) study, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council and the Economic and Social Research Council's Religion and Society programme, are based on a survey of more than 10,000 13 to 17-year-olds and interviews with around 160 17 to 18-year-olds.

The research was carried out in three multi-faith locations – the London boroughs of Hillingdon and Newham, and Bradford in Yorkshire. Participants came from a range of faith backgrounds and included Christians, Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus and those with no specific faith.

A central message from the research is that 6th-formers have a high level of respect and tolerance for peers from different backgrounds.

Most stress how multi-faith schooling, providing opportunities to get to know other pupils with a range of faith values, is good preparation for later life, including going to university. Mixing at school or college also encourages an interest in diversity and helps to reduce prejudice.

Multi-faith schools do not, however, provide any guarantee of integration. Reports of religious and cultural groups clustering together, and clear indications that pupils are particularly likely to choose best friends from similar faith and cultural backgrounds, emerged from the study.

Nonetheless serious clashes between faith groups at school or college seemed rare. Arguments and name-calling were reported but did not appear to be predominantly about religious values, even if religious labels were used as forms of abuse.

A female pupil without a specific faith label provided an example: "I've not received it myself, but I've seen a few other people just walking down the school, through the corridor, and someone's being nasty to some person. They'd shout out, 'oh shut up you Muslim' or 'shut up you Jew' and obviously that person may not be a Jew or a Muslim – but it's just like call them that because they think it's offensive."

Some pupils at single-faith schools pointed to the advantages they could bring. An ability to learn about a particular faith in depth was most commonly mentioned.

All the same, this brought its own disadvantages, as relayed by a young Sikh: "I think a mixture of religions is good because I think we're a bit, especially in this school, we're a bit too comfortable with one another. Because we've all got the same moral and religious views, well most of us, and because we're all Indian, there's no difference in our views and we need that contrast."

Although the majority of young people taking part in the research attended multi-faith schools, they were not especially confident in their knowledge and understanding of different faith groups.

Only 17% of survey participants overall claimed to have "very good" knowledge in this area. Those from specific faith backgrounds were more knowledgeable than others, although Christians did not differ markedly from the "no faith" group. Nonetheless most pupils said their knowledge was good or at least good for some religions.

Interestingly, there did not seem to be any difference in young people's reported knowledge and understanding of different religions according to the range of ethnic backgrounds of pupils in a particular school or college.

Asked where they gained knowledge of different religions and beliefs, 76% of the young people taking part in the survey put religious education lessons top of the list.

More than three-quarters said that RE lessons were a key source of information on different religions and their traditions. Around 46% said assemblies at school or college were also important, and some 35% said that festivals were also significant.

These figures can be compared with the 64% who said families were an important source of information, 56% who mentioned friends, 48% who pointed to religious leaders, and 40% who cited the internet.

While schools were seen as important in providing information, they were at the same time criticised for the quality of some teaching.

There was a call from pupils in interviews to ensure that religious education is delivered in an informed, balanced and experiential manner.

First, and in relation to the information they received, pupils were critical of religious education teaching "from the book" that was not accompanied by personal knowledge and understanding on the part of the teacher. Instances of teachers disagreeing with one another, or being corrected by pupils, were provided as illustrations.

The focus of religious education has shifted in recent years from scriptures and religious beliefs to different religions and religious traditions. While pupils did not dispute the current agenda, several suggested a further shift towards a greater focus on morals and laws as well as the reasons behind religious traditions such as dress, fasting and giving presents at Christmas.

Second, pupils taking part in study interviews pointed to imbalances in teaching. They did not like it if teachers seemed biased or focused too much on their own faith values, and they called for the similarities between religions to be taught alongside the differences.

They also expected religions to be fairly represented, as illustrated by a young male Catholic: "When you go to a Catholic school it's hard because when they teach you about God, it's all the really good things he does. And I mean as you get older, I suppose you become aware of all the bad things that happen. And so it doesn't really tally with what you have been taught and it just kind of confuses you."

There were also complaints about the marginalisation or omission of certain religions, and the restricted options that could be studied at examination level. Agnosticism and atheism were mentioned in this context.

These were important topics, sometimes successfully discussed in philosophy classes, which could be overlooked. One pupil said it could be awkward for anyone without a specific faith when asked to "talk about what you do in your religion".

Third, pupils emphasised how effective religious education is enhanced by relevant experience. Greater active involvement from pupils with first-hand knowledge of particular faith groups, and more opportunities to visit places of worship and participate in multicultural events and religious festivals, was suggested.

Teaching everybody together, and providing a prayer room where everybody felt welcome, were also advocated to enhance shared experiences.

Promoting understanding and tolerance seemed high on the agenda for most young people in the YOR study. An emphasis on religious education that is informative and balanced, and supplemented by relevant experiences, is what pupils want.

A school ethos that provides both formal and informal learning about a range of faiths and their values, and a supportive environment to foster safe and open discussion of different beliefs and behaviours, appear paramount.

Nicola Madge is professor of child psychology in the Centre for Child and Youth Research at Brunel University and led the Youth on Religion study and is reproduced with permission from [Sec-Ed magazine](#).

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