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A practitioner action research approach to learning outside the classroom in religious education: developing a dialogical model through reflection by teachers and faith field visitors

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports the co-creation of knowledge through a Practitioner Action Research Community of Practice of teachers and mid-level policy enactors which sought to engage the question of how to enhance Religious Education in primary schools serving socially disadvantaged children. Co-authors' professional values and assumptions are explored, and questions developed to carry out a needs assessment of primary teachers in contexts of social disadvantage; highlighting the advantages of effective school-community partnership, leading to a recognition of the importance of learning outside the classroom for enhancing children's experience of Religious Education. A model of successful learning outside the classroom was developed, centring on the importance of spaces for encountering the lived experience of religion, asking challenging questions, and sharing learning objectives. The benefits of this approach for children from disadvantaged backgrounds are explored. Feedback from teachers, children, places of worship and SACREs was fed into the reflective process to arrive at a series of opportunities, weaknesses and training needs for effective field visits and visiting speakers. The paper concludes by setting out a model for an online portal to enable schools and education officers from places of worship to connect effectively with one another to enhance primary Religious Education.

KEYWORDS

Practitioner action research; learning outside the classroom; mid-level policy enactors; dialogical pedagogy

Introduction

Religious Education in the UK makes claims to contribute to the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of young people, helping to equip them with certain dispositions of tolerance and mutual respect to prepare them for life in a pluralistic society. Learning outside the classroom, such as through field trips to places of worship or visiting speakers from faith communities, contributes to this through providing young people with an authentic point of encounter with lived religion (Wright 2008). This paper reports the process and outcomes of a series of discussions undertaken as part of a practitioner action research project involving teachers and interfaith leaders, resulting in some guidelines for effective learning outside the

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classroom. As well as reporting the research on preparedness and understanding between teachers, primary pupils and faith group education officers, it makes recommendations relating to co-created research with a range of practitioners.

Field experiences have the potential to enable imaginative engagement with difference, but if they are poorly managed, passive or detached from lived experience, can serve instead to reinforce stereotypes (Kunzman 2006). Field trips alone may be less effective than co-operative learning strategies in improving attitudes towards religious diversity (Olukayode 2013). The learning potential of field trips is particularly pronounced for children who do not have religious experiences in the family (Riegel and Kindermann 2016). Effective field trips require prior learning to establish an explanatory framework within which the particular place embodies a concept from the religion (Teece 2010) and for pupils to relate affective experience to their learning about the religious concept (Kindermann and Riegel 2010). Field trips allow an embodied encounter with identity and difference, inviting pupils to become comfortable in a space that is managed but not fully controlled by the usual pedagogical norms of the classroom (Lundie and Conroy 2015).

The community of practice reported in this paper did not begin with the purpose of studying field trips. Comprising teachers and educational consultants working in areas experiencing socio-economic disadvantage, the CoP aimed to bridge the gap between research and practice, deepen engagement between schools and interfaith networks in their local communities, identify and enhance leading practice in engaging hard-to-reach pupils and communities. Although there has been extensive research into the impact of poverty on 'failures' of multiculturalism (West 2016) (Thomas et al. 2018) and into the contribution of Religious Education to multicultural aims in the UK (Jackson 2004) (Conroy, et al., 2013), until now there has been no direct research into the impact of social disadvantage on the intercultural competences of young people experiencing poverty and disadvantage. There is a long-standing literature on pupils rejecting the value of Religious Education altogether (Fancourt 2010), sometimes stemming from the subject's failure to cohere with their lived experiences (Conroy, Lundie, and Baumfield 2012) or with perceived existential commitments (Chater and Erricker 2013). Through dialogical research, we sought to understand the needs, concerns and reasons for disengagement of disadvantaged communities.

In recognising that the composition of the co-researcher community for practitioner action research is a key factor, because it sets the scope for whose voices can be heard, the assumptions that are surfaced and challenged in relation to one another (Noffke 2009), we were keen to reflect the increasing importance of a complex assemblage of mid-level policy enactors (Singh, Thomas, and Harris, 2013) in UK schooling to offer insight into the attitudes, experiences and values of the co-authors and how these changed and were challenged across the research process. These policy enactors can include private consultants, 3rd sector and charitable organisations, employing individuals who have often returned to education from complex career trajectories in other sector (Lundie 2019); they serve as interpreters, enhancers, advisers and critical friends to an increasingly atomised school system attempting to make sense of shifting policies and practices without many of the traditional local levels of public support that were provided prior to structural changes in the preceding decade.

Practitioner action research

The community of practice model

Drawing on the reflective cycle model proposed by McTaggart (1997) and refined by Norton (2014), our community of practice completed 3 cycles of practitioner action research. Each cycle began by identifying the problem and envisioning success criteria, developing an action plan with clear milestones to be met before the next meeting. Data was collected, and analysed to form conclusions,

so that each subsequent cycle could begin by reporting the results and spending time adjusting the theory, questioning our assumptions and beginning again to identify problems and success criteria. The data collected to support our cycles included:

> First-Second Cycle: An online training needs analysis of 26 teachers, recruited through the Learn Teach Lead RE hubs.
>
> Second-Third Cycle: Interviews with six lower-primary pupils, in which they discussed their experiences on field trips; Surveys of 96 upper-primary pupils; Surveys of six places of worship contacted through participating mid-level policy enactors; Discussions with the National Association of SACREs.

This provided a responsive, accessible problem-solving approach for a diverse group of professionals each working on the challenges of religious literacy and intercultural communication for young people experiencing social disadvantage.

Practitioner action research recognises the individual co-researchers as part of the reality that is studied, 'an enquiry by the self into the self' (McNiff 2002, 15). To this end, much of the initial meeting of the community of practice was given over to the surfacing of assumptions the co-researchers brought about their own practice, about the research process, about one another, and about the subject matter. The composition of the community of practice was designed to reflect the increasingly complex reality of the education policy quasi-market (Ball et al. 2011) in which a range of mid-level policy enactors (Singh, et al., 2013) now fill a space vacated by Local Authority subject advisers due to cuts and restructuring of school governance in England. To this end, as well as teachers and academics, the group included consultants from three organisations working with schools on faith or interfaith education and educational disadvantage. The self-reflective nature of action research is undertaken in order to improve the justice as well as the knowledge base of the co-researchers, and to this end the value commitments of the participants were key to the research process.

All of us were drawing on our experience of working with pupils in communities with high levels of deprivation; a motivating commitment to improving Religious Education in disadvantaged context was shared by all. Participating schools and teachers were recruited through the networks of our mid-level policy enactors, so the definition of deprivation was one of mutual recognition – the enactor identifying a school which offered positive Religious Education experiences to deprived pupils, and the teacher resonating with that description. While more precise definitions such as Free School Meal entitlement could have been used to recruit participants, these can fail to identify children living on the threshold of entitlement (Perry 2010), or experiencing domestic challenges not correlated to income (Jaffee et al. 2012).

During participants' teaching work and discussions with children and adults from disadvantaged backgrounds, it became apparent that some of them do not see Religious Education as being relevant to them as they are 'not religious'. One co-researcher reflected on feeling saddened by this, as children were closing the door of opportunity before they had given the subject a chance. Reigniting curiosity was seen as key to improving Religious Education as experienced by these young people. Co-researchers' teaching experiences included pupils in 'white working class' areas, and those living in what might be termed more multicultural communities; our initial discussions focused on surfacing assumptions, and some of these included the assumption that these two constituencies would have very different levels of exposure or connection to religion and inter-religious dialogue, assumptions which stemmed from a deficit-oriented approach to white working class culture (Beider 2015). The ongoing dialogue, however, exposed that at a more prosaic level, all of our pupils and their parents lived in contexts where intercultural interface happened on a much more frequent basis than more insulated middle-class communities.

Personal faith journeys, including more than one team member who had experience of religious conversion, played a role in informing our values and attitudes towards effective interfaith encounter. The group provided us with opportunities to learn from one another and in the process become more conscious of our own knowledge. This included knowledge of multi-cultural communities and

more mono-cultural white working class communities vulnerable to influences which are hostile to diverse faiths. It also included knowledge and understanding of places of worship, including those which are poorly resourced.

Through structured dialogue activities, co-researchers were involved in all aspects of the research process, including the formulation of the research question, the development of research design, the selection of appropriate methods for data generation and analysis, the interpretation of the results and the dissemination of findings. By exploring through discussion the implicit values in one another's proposed goals and solutions, and their applicability to our different contexts, we were able to engage in reciprocal perspective taking, delving beneath the 'common sense' understandings we each brought from our professional contexts into a deeper knowing (Cook 2009). Co-researchers were also keen to include the voices of those with lived experience in relation to RE and social disadvantage, particularly our pupils and their parents. This was key to addressing the authenticity gap theorised in the first cycle – if authentic voice is not afforded to the currently marginalised, issues relating to their lives are over-shadowed by the voices and interests of those who currently hold influence over the RE curriculum. Authenticity in this sense is related to *auctor*, authorship or authority, the ability of young people and faith communities alike to 'write' their own personal narratives. While an experience of place during a field trip is always embedded in the broader constitutive commitments of the faith community (van der Kooij, De Ruyter, and Miedema 2013) so that the pupil does not have complete autonomy in interpreting this experience, an authentic encounter is one in which the experience does not come so comprehensively pre-defined in terms outside the experience of the pupil as to preclude this 'writing' of experienced encounter, leaving both parties unchallenged and unchanged.

Sociomaterial dimensions

Relationship building is an essential element for critical enquiry, creating an environment in which each person's contribution to the co-creation of knowledge is valued and articulated as such. To this end, the value of hospitality was key to our work, representing both a commitment we sought to instil as educators, and a disposition of enquiry we chose to adopt towards one another in this work. After the first meeting of the group took place at Liverpool Hope University, Liverpool Community Spirit extended an invitation to us to host the second and subsequent meeting at their *Home of Hospitality* in the grounds of Liverpool Anglican Cathedral. Among other programmes, Liverpool Community Spirit offers 'faith encounters' workshops for schools, where they can meet with a member of a faith community in a living room, rather than place of worship, setting. It was during this second meeting that the focus on learning outside the classroom was agreed.

Drawing on sociomaterial approaches which insist on the materiality of learning, interrupting an understanding of knowledge and learning as solely a social or personal process, directing our attention to the enmeshing of social, technical, human and environmental actors (Fenwick, Edwards, and Sawchuk 2011), we wish to theorise the room as an actor in our action research. The morning's discussions took place in the 'at home with Judaism' living room, which included religious artefacts as well as images of Liverpool's local Jewish community, while the afternoon's discussions were held in a living room decorated with Ethiopian Christian imagery and artefacts.

As the group began to form a clear identity around this context, transforming internal thought processes through activity systems (Engeström 1999), the *Home* offered a validation system, mediating artefacts provided a visual reminder of a resource and place of encounter, within which a sense of community could develop. The sharing of a meal offered patterns of interaction, and helped to develop a division of labour which valorised the work of hospitality (cooking, sharing, socialising),

decentring more traditionally 'academic' practices (recording, writing). Through these cultural-historical influences, we arrived at a more expansive reflective cycle (Engeström 1994), and each of the subsequent meetings was also held at the *Home of Hospitality*.

Developing the dialogical model

The first cycle

In our initial discussions, we focused on clarifying iterative and projective elements of our professionalism (Priestley et al. 2015) – the histories, trajectories and values of our careers, our expectations from the research, and the structures and resources we each have access to, the cumulative networked capital of the community of practice (Castells 2011). Participants' shared narratives of deep engagement with interfaith work emerged early in discussions; for many of us, this included a strong faith-informed upbringing. The particular representations of multi-faith encounter which participants shared, both from their own childhoods and their experience working with young people in disadvantaged schools, decentre some of the academic debates on multi-faith education, highlighting lived experience. These experiences included two co-researchers who had undergone religious conversions in their own lives, experiences of complex and challenging encounters with parents, and the ways the physical geography of their communities necessitated intercultural encounter. These identities informed our deeper research aims. Already at this early stage, participants made links between practical solutions, such as the portal we propose in this paper, and understanding the root causes of social immobility, identity crisis, and white working-class disengagement (Choma et al. 2016) in RE. In addition to adding our own voices to the community of practice the voices of children and young people, links to professional networks such as Learn Teach Lead RE and the RE Quality Mark, and networks of faith leaders were drawn upon to inform our discussions throughout the project.

Having identified a shared core of underpinning professional values emerging from these personal journeys, aiming at opening hearts to an awareness and understanding of others, and surfaced shared concerns about the lack of priority given to religion, religious education and diversity in some settings, and influenced by the home and community context such as home pressures, community hostilities, lack of role models and people living in parallel communities (Cantle 2001), the first cycle developed the goal of a baseline assessment. This baseline sought to understand the training and support needs of primary teachers with regard to RE, the challenges they face, and their sources of knowledge and support.

The second cycle

An initial needs assessment survey of 23 teachers identified three recurring themes of lack of time, training and resources. As each of these themes was reducible to resources, and we were keen to produce practical solutions, we set aside this particular issue, instead focusing on a particular challenge of authenticity in the curriculum. Figure 1 represents the way our initial discussions on authenticity were further informed by evidence from the teacher training needs assessment. Training, support and resource needs of teachers were addressed in relation to the interests of school leaders, who were not always supportive, or of distant 'stakeholder' groups, some of whom had their own agendas which were remote from the lived experience of pupils.

From this needs assessment, we identified two guiding principles: training that empowers teachers, and linking training and research to resources and lived experience.

Looking at RE through the lens of an authenticity gap led to a discussion of the importance of field visits and external speakers, which became the focus of the community of practice. Authenticity in this sense is reciprocal – there is a need for authentic encounter between the voices of marginalised young people and authentic representation of lived faith; attempting to elide either, by turning field

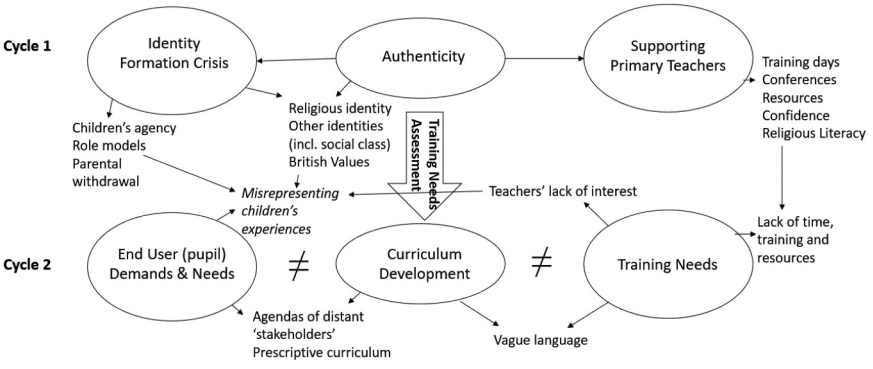

Figure 1. Mapping the authenticity gap in curriculum development and support.

sites into museums or instantiations of textbook accounts of faith, or by silencing 'difficult' questions from pupils, risk undermining the opportunity for transformative learning. These experiences help meet the needs of young people, particularly in contexts of secularity or parallel lives, by providing experiences of the lived realities of faith. Drawing on established quality criteria for RE and learning outside the classroom, we mapped the RE Quality Mark against the Learning Outside the Classroom Quality Badge (see Figure 2). In both cases, cost was seen as a prohibitive barrier for most places of worship to engage in accreditation, though the process highlighted commonalities.

The first of these was the importance of sharing learning outcomes, helping schools and field sites to understand one another's purpose in engaging. The second key point was providing a respectful and safe atmosphere for encounter, understanding the lived experience of faith; this included an openness to questions, as well as opportunities for wonder and reflection, resisting the tendency to treat places of worship as either a museum of artefacts or an extension of the classroom. Knowing the strengths, needs and limitations of the field site was also highlighted as important. While we were unable to provide training or resources to education officers in places of worship, the community of practice did seek to generate guidelines for good practice, and we proposed cascading existing good practice between religious organisations through a twinning or mentorship model.

Recognising a gap in our understanding of the needs of religious organisations in supporting learning outside the classroom, the next cycle of research involved seeking out multi-stakeholder purposive samples. Making use of purposive samples in Liverpool and Birmingham, further surveys of pupils, parents, teachers and education officers at places of worship sought to understand the needs and expectations of each. From this, we developed a conception of cultural intelligence (distinct from religious literacy) which we believe learning outside the classroom is particularly suited to develop. Whereas religious literacy is often related to essential knowledge that enables easy communication of core concepts (Hirsch 1987)to enable them to navigate the religious world (Hannam et al. 2020), the concept of cultural intelligence was oriented to situating this religious knowledge within the wider competences for intercultural encounter in lived experience.

Survey tools were developed for different stakeholder communities in relation to the following questions:

1) What are the aims of the field trip? Do pupils/teachers understand what the visitors/field site hope to get from welcoming them to their place of worship? Does the place of worship understand the teacher's aims?

2) Are there opportunities for pupils to experience and encounter the lived experience of the faith community during their visit?

3) Are there opportunities for pupils to question, challenge and have their own views heard during their visit?

Learning Outside the Classroom Quality Badge	RE Quality Mark
Has a process in place to assist users to plan the learning experience effectively	3.3 The curriculum includes space for responses to national and global issues connected with religious and non-religious worldviews and this supports pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development
Provides accurate information about its offer	3.2 The curriculum is understood and appreciated across the school and within the wider school community
Activities or experiences which meet learner needs	3.1 The curriculum is innovative and creative leading to full engagement of all groups of learners
Reviews the experience and acts upon feedback	2.5 Teachers use agreed criteria in planning and assessment data is well managed to track progress
Meets the needs of users	3.7 The curriculum is innovative in its approaches to inclusivity and diversity and is effective in its impact
Has safety management processes in place to manage risk effectively	2.6 Teachers and learners create appropriate respectful environments where a range of controversial issues and topics are discussed and critiqued

Figure 2. RE Quality Mark Gold Criteria mapped against the criteria for the Learning Outside the Classroom Quality Badge.

4) How is the space used during the field visit, how is this different from the school classroom? How is it different from the use of the space during worship?

5) What prior learning have pupils had? How have they been prepared to encounter new learning during the visit, incorporating this lived experience into a framework of understanding, rather than just seeing the field site as an 'example' of existing knowledge.

The final cycle

Multi-stakeholder analysis of field trips confirmed our earlier discussions about the relationship between authentic encounter and cultural intelligence. 96 pupils aged between eight and eleven took part in a survey regarding school visits to places of worship. Pupils were asked to think about an experience of a visit, what they hoped to learn, what they hoped to be able to do, and why the visit had been successful or unsuccessful. A survey was distributed to Liverpool Community Spirit's contacts in places of worship across a range of faiths; six responses were received. Places of worship were asked to identify their goals and practices for welcoming school visits, and asked to identify the support they would like from schools when planning a visit. The 23 teachers who completed the earlier training needs assessment were also contacted with follow-up questions about their aims, experiences and practices when planning school visits.

When the children were asked what they hoped to learn from a visit or welcoming a visitor to the school, they emphasised the importance of hearing the visitor speak about their beliefs in their own words, how they live and worship, beliefs about God or gods, services they attend, how their religion is different to others, traditional stories, charity work and the relevance of religious buildings they are visiting. While children were interested in trying different foods, clothes, seeing different methods of worship, their enthusiasm related back to the living out of belief in the wider life of the believer. A majority of the children said they would welcome the opportunity to ask questions about another person's religion and how they lived, and that they would feel comfortable expressing their own views, though they did not feel that it would be appropriate to challenge a person's religious beliefs. 79% agreed that visiting places of worship and welcoming religious visitors was useful in helping them understand a particular faith.

Among the places of worship, some responded that they provided spaces for young people to ask questions and find out about the lived experiences of people of faith, while for others the focus of the visit was on liturgical practices and the meaning and significance of the religious building or corporate worship for the believer. While some places of worship provided their own teaching materials to support visits from schools, many said they welcomed when teachers shared their learning aims ahead of a visit to enable them to understand pupils' levels of prior learning. There was considerable discussion of the way these approaches present a particular challenge for places of worship representing marginalised or ageing faith communities, with pupils seeking an authentic and relatable encounter with lived religion, and some communities offering materials with more of a heritage orientation.

Returning to the authenticity gap highlighted by the first cycle, our experiences and data highlighted a paradox of representation for some religious communities. Smaller communities often found themselves in greater demand, with fewer resources to manage that demand. Similarly, field sites which were distinctive, such as cathedrals and purpose-built mosques, were more in demand, with schools travelling large distances to visit, than parish churches or mosques in converted buildings, which might more accurately reflect the lived experiences of Christians and Muslims in the local area.

Discussion and conclusions

Learning outside the classroom, whether through field trips or visiting speakers has the potential to bridge an authenticity gap by encountering lived religion, challenging preconceptions and providing an imaginative point of contact to overcome apathy. Religious communities' hospitality to such visits is a vast resource, overcoming increasing constraints and complexities in sourcing subject support in RE in primary schools. Notwithstanding these advantages, making the most of these opportunities requires careful partnerships, effective preparation, the sharing of learning objectives and a willingness from pupils and field visitors alike to encounter challenging perspectives.

We all agreed that when good learning outside the classroom occurs, pupils want to find out more about the motives for faith, ask questions, express views, challenge beliefs and find out about the lived experience of faith. Our research with pupils, teachers and places of worship showed variability in experience of field trips and training of guides, one of a number of challenges for teachers in identifying relevant sites for learning outside the classroom. In addition to this, an authenticity gap existed which created barriers for some students from monocultural or secular backgrounds in feeling comfortable engaging in learning outside the classroom. Places of worship sometimes feel unsupported in sharing their aims and objectives with teachers prior to visits, and this could be further impeded by vagueness and inconsistency in the way teachers and visitors understood pedagogic and religious language.

To address these challenges, we propose developing an online portal which would allow teachers and places of worship to link to one another, access self-evaluations based on our reflective questions, exemplification materials, and share aims and lesson plans. The portal would have two simple questionnaires for participants to complete, either 'I am a teacher planning a visit', or 'I would like to host a school visit'. Both would ask questions to help match schools to sites of learning outside the classroom, such as appropriate age group, focus of the visit, location, accessibility information. Both would also link to exemplification materials to help teachers to make the most of the experience, and to help upskill guides who may be leading field visits, and provide space for teachers and guides to upload their own resources.

Practitioner action research is intended to change practice through changing practitioners, as much as to create more widely disseminatable change. Since becoming involved in the project, one co-researcher has raised the profile of RE in her own school through staff meetings and pupil interviews, renaming the subject Citizenship and Religious Education (CARE) to emphasise how interconnected issues of identity and belonging are to becoming educated about different religions, and how this can help pupils to become better citizens of a diverse society. Another co-researcher has begun a partnership with a historic mosque and Islamic education centre to develop an interactive, pupil inquiry led guided tour for Key Stage 2 (age 7–11) pupils. Another co-researcher has gone on to carry out research with schools in the Liverpool area about the wider values aspects of their curriculum, such as relationships education, assemblies, school pastoral policies, ethos and values, and how these are influenced by links to local community organisations.

These discussions add to a growing literature which illustrates the ways Religious Education teachers can become producers not only of their classroom pedagogy but of the professional identity of Religious Education teachers into the future (Orchard et al. 2021: Salter and Tett 2021). Teacher agency is not something which can be 'given' to teachers, but something which is 'acted out' in its process of realisation (Biesta & Tedder, 2007, cited Salter and Tett 2021); given how central personal worldview is to emerging models of Religious Education (van der Kooij, De Ruyter, and Miedema 2013), working out this sense of agency in dialogue with authentic experience of religious field visitors and sites is not an optional extra, a 'nice day out', but a necessity. Such an understanding moves us beyond a 'knowledge-rich' concern with religious literacy (Kueh 2018), not by undermining knowledge, which is indeed a necessary background to enable authentic encounter, but rather by bringing this knowledge into the service of a wider intercultural competence (Loobuyck 2016) for navigating the very present realities of lived experience.

Action research is not a single research approach, but a broad range of research paradigms and processes, linked by the focus on linking research with practice, as contrasted to doing research on practice. The particular approach we adopted draws attention to multi-professional practice, to hospitality as a virtue, and to socio-material settings in establishing the community of practice. We hope to have demonstrated the potential of such an approach to develop both an incisive critique of many existing processes of curriculum and professional development and to propose a clear, concise and achievable enhancement to primary RE practice.

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