



GATEWAY DOCUMENT 4.7

Identity, tradition and belonging

WHY IS THIS RELEVANT TO *REsilience*?

An individual's identity, the traditions that mean a lot to him or her, and the communities or other groupings to which a person feels a sense of belonging, are likely to affect their behaviour profoundly. Each person's identity is unique and is made up of a number of different aspects, each of which may be more or less salient in particular situations. We live in a mobile society and the local aspects of identity are not always as strong as they once were. In a world where information and images can be beamed across the planet in microseconds, there is a greater sense of global human identity than would have been the case even as recently as the last century. For many people, especially those whose families have links to other countries, there are additional aspects of identity – traditions, languages and cultural practices – to be maintained. On the other hand they are living in Britain here and now. This is relevant to *REsilience* because the project aims to help teachers to enable young people to explore issues related to their own identities but also to feel an appropriate sense of identification with the country they are living in.

KEY QUESTIONS

Why is this a contentious topic?

Identity is an emotional issue. It is about our feelings and sense of belonging, not just about definitions and categories. Identity is also closely related to history, justice and relationships. So it carries many agenda and assumptions. For example, awareness of the history of the Crusades, centuries ago and links to modern conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan all colour many Muslim perceptions of the West today.

We all have complex identities. One category is not enough. We may be British, but also English; or we may be partly French, Irish or Welsh. We may be black, Asian or white. We may have a shared heritage from different parts of the UK or elsewhere. We may have a religious faith. Or we may share a religious heritage rather than being an observant believer. We may be deeply conscious of our identity in historical roots such as the slave trade or the coal mining industry. Other personal factors may also define us in terms of gender, age, sexual orientation, family ties, profession or trade. Identity is complex.

Religious and cultural traditions are an expression of identity and belonging as well. They may be distinctive or unseen. They may involve food, dress, festivals, worship or celebration. They may be secular, such as New Year's Eve, or overtly religious, like Passover/Pesach or Eid ul Adha. Or indeed they may be a bit of both, like Guy Fawkes' Night.

Why is RE relevant to this topic?

Identity and belonging raise many important issues in relation to RE. These questions link directly to the agenda around being positive about pluralism and diversity within a wider context of social integration and national solidarity.

- Should people expect conformity? How far does living peacefully and cooperatively with others require one to try to be, in some sense, the same as everyone else? Is diversity something positive or is it divisive?
- Is integration important? For example, if we say integration is desirable, does that apply to some things (like sharing a common language for example) and not others (like shaking hands)?
- What does it mean to be British? Is this a legal status? A birthright? An inherited trait? What are the essential qualities or values linked to being British? Or does this not make any sense in today's world?
- Should we accept all traditions and beliefs? Should we put tolerance first even if there seems to be an issue of justice? What might we say about some religious attitudes to marriage, gender and sexual orientation, for example? In any case, who decides what is unjust? (see also Gateway 4.9 'Violence against women, especially when given a religious justification')
- Who belongs? When can we say someone does or doesn't belong to a community or nation? Who has that right? Is it how long your family has been here? If so, how long do you have to live in a country before you do belong? And, come to that, in England, what about the Anglo-Saxons, Danes and Vikings whose descendants live in Britain today. Do they belong? This question is at the heart of what migration, ethnicity and identity mean in the lives of individuals.
- What does it mean to have plural identities? Which identity is most salient when a young person is at home? At school? In a place of worship? A community centre? In a youth parliament?
- What different kinds of identities can be brought to the fore through social networking media? (e.g. joining a Facebook group for young Humanists)
- People sometimes fear difference. How can we deal with this?

What classroom challenges might arise in RE?

- Some students or teachers may feel others stereotype them because of their name, dress, gender or an aspect of appearance.
- Students or teachers may feel some aspects of their identities are more acceptable than others, leading to concealment or denial.
- Students might experience conflict or peer pressure in relation to one or more aspects of their identity.
- Students may lack knowledge about some aspects of their identity and may fear questions they would regard as intrusive – or they may welcome them (e.g. when students are invited to talk about aspects of their family’s religious belief or practice)

How can teachers address such challenges?

- By exploring issues around identities in a way that brings out their plural nature
- By aiming to create an ethos in RE where students feel comfortable to express their own beliefs and perspectives, knowing that all members of the class are valued as people.
- By avoiding the expectation that students will ‘represent’ their faith perspective unless this has been agreed.

NEXT STEPS

Signposts for further reading

Miller, Joyce (2006) Report on Bradford project www.cohesioninstitute.org.uk/

Who cares about the white working class? (2009) Runnymede Trust. Indirectly relevant to this Gateway as it highlights a strand of identity for some young people which is often neglected. Downloadable from www.runnymedetrust.org

Huddleston, T. (2007) *Identity, diversity and citizenship. A critical review of educational resources*, Association for Citizenship Teaching.

Inter Faith Network for the UK (2010) *Faith, citizenship and shared life in Britain today. A discussion document* www.interfaith.org.uk/publications/faithcitizenship2.pdf. This interesting document explores many issues related to identity, tradition and belonging such as freedom of religious practice, meanings of ‘Britishness’ and plural identities.

Lewis, P (2007) *Young, British and Muslim*, Continuum. A readable overview of some positive and negative aspects of the lives of the 85% of British Muslims who were born in the UK.

Signposts for further resources

Marshall, J (2009) *Building bridges. The importance of belief, faith and culture* (a booklet available from www.pcfcd.co.uk)

Beatbullying (2008) *Interfaith Report*. This report suggested that large numbers of young people have been bullied, sometimes violently, because of their faith. The report gives recommendations to reduce the risk to students. It is available to download at <http://www.ekklesia.co.uk/node/7991>. <http://www.beatbullying.org> is the Beatbullying website and includes information about its work more widely as well as a 'Beat faith bullying' lesson plan.

www.wdwtwa.org.uk 'Who do we think we are?' project¹. Wide range of materials on the project website.

Signposts for further action

Review the school's procedures for ensuring that all staff have a good level of awareness about the religious, ethnic, socio-economic and health backgrounds of pupils.

Explore the possibility of 'identity' as a focus for work across RE, citizenship, geography, history and science.

See Gateway 2.2 'Displaying sensitivity to the home backgrounds and the beliefs of pupils' to consider whether the RE department can contribute further to whole school understanding of diversity in the context of pastoral care.

¹. The website www.wdwtwa.org is now defunct but many of the materials that were on that site can now be found on the sites of the Association for Citizenship Teaching, the Citizenship Foundation, the Historical Association, the Royal Geographical Association and the Schools Linking Network. Other related resources can be found at the website of the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympics Games, <http://www.london2012.com/get-involved/education/index.php>