



CULHAM ST GABRIEL'S

# Building community relations through research informed educational practice in schools



*Professor Shelley McKeown Jones, University of Bristol*

*Dr. Janet Orchard, University of Bristol*

*Dr. Amanda Williams, Data Analyst (Equality Diversity and Inclusion), Waterloo Regional Police Services, Waterloo, Ontario, Canada*

*Victoria Bowen, Doctoral candidate, University of Bristol*

*Dr. Kate Christopher, Plashet School and Culham St Gabriel's Trust*

## About the research

Schools shape who we are, the values we hold, and how we believe we should behave.

Being at school can either unsettle or reinforce values formed through belonging to other social institutions. This leaves teachers and schools uniquely placed to support the development of how future generations engage positively with wider society. With continued social tensions dominating the headlines in the UK and beyond, it is more important than ever that teachers and schools support young people, realising their potential to impact on young people's development beyond learning in academic subjects. Being at school can equip them with the skills to work and study constructively alongside people who are different, through whole school activities and learning in classrooms. Given time, and access to specialist facilitators, they can learn to talk through difficult or controversial issues concerning race or religious identity.

Through a series of interconnected projects, we are exploring a role for research that can inform how schools and teachers promote positive community relations. Shared Space tackles two core questions: (1) How do teachers, within and outside of specific curriculum subjects, understand their role to prepare children and young people in an increasingly diverse world? (2) How might teachers and researchers together develop research-informed practices that encourage interaction and address likely tensions between different cultural groups within and/or outside school classrooms?

In our projects we centre teachers and young people's voices to ensure a contextually informed understanding of how best to promote social cohesion through education.

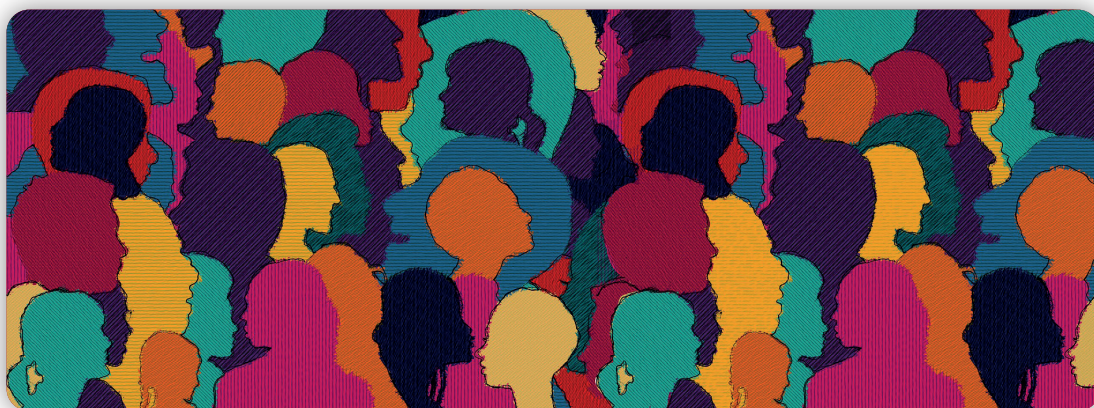


## Building community relations through research informed educational practice in schools

### Policy implications

- There is an urgent need to recognise the potential of teachers across all academic subjects and school leaders in promoting warmer community relations amongst future generations of citizens, particularly (but not limited to) teachers of religion and worldviews.
- Children and young people are agents for social change; this needs to be recognised within the policy context; young people's voices need to be heard and amplified.
- It is vital to invest in teachers' initial and continuing professional development (CPD) to ensure that they are better able to facilitate difficult conversations on topics where reasonable disagreement is possible; teachers of religion/worldviews have a unique role to play regarding 'othering' and religious difference, a perception understood widely by members of the public and other stakeholders
- The Shared Space project has already demonstrated ways in which teachers of RE and researchers can work together to co-create research findings that, when applied, reduce the likelihood of conflict in schools; and where necessary how to respond ethically to controversial comments and other challenging behaviour in classrooms.
- Approaches which co-produce intervention materials and place teachers' and young people's voices centre-stage are most likely to engage other schools' and policy makers' attention.

We need to develop a research-informed understanding of the complementary roles that both whole school approaches and targeted teaching in curriculum subjects like RE can play in promoting warmer community relations, supported by a new approach to teacher education. We must re-assert the complementary role of formal and informal education in preparing the next generation of children and young people as global citizens.







## Building community relations through research informed educational practice in schools

### Key findings

- Teachers and schools can promote constructive societal engagement. Research has linked students feeling that they are supported by teachers with increased support for actions to improve refugee rights in Belfast through building collective efficacy (McKeown & Taylor, 2022); a second study found that perceiving a school climate to be supportive of ethnic diversity promotes perspective taking and in turn support for refugee rights in England (McKeown *et al.*, 2022 under review).
- Knowledge exchange and meaningful collaborative partnerships between researchers and RE teachers can support teachers' professional development to promote better community relations in school classrooms (Orchard *et al.*, 2021) as well as co-producing effective and ecologically valid intervention designs (McKeown *et al.*, 2022).
- That said, the view that certain curriculum subjects are more tailored toward building community relations than others is contested. More research needs to be funded to support the popular perception that RE has a valuable in promoting better community relations (Orchard, 2015).
- Moreover, RE teachers may not recognise promoting community relations as part of their role; even those predisposed to agree may be unaware of relevant research in applied psychology and philosophy to support them in this challenging work. Suitable professional development and appropriate research-informed resources are needed for specialist RE teachers to effectively engage with that theory (Williams *et al.* 2019).
- When it comes to applying theory in practice to promote community relations, there may be considerable gaps in teachers' professional knowledge because ethical issues are marginalised in conventional CPD (Orchard 2020).

### Further information

Re-humanising Teacher Education: <https://www.rehumanisingteaching.org>

Shared Spaces RE Teacher Toolkit:

<https://www.natre.org.uk/uploads/Additional%20Documents/Teachers%20toolkit%20FINAL.pdf>



## CULHAM ST GABRIEL'S

Thank you to our funders, the University of Bristol, the Westhill Trust, the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC; ES/N016203/1) and the British Academy/Leverhulme Trust (SG 150807) for supporting this research.

Lead researchers:

Shelley McKeown Jones, [s.mckeownjones@bristol.ac.uk](mailto:s.mckeownjones@bristol.ac.uk)

Janet Orchard, [janet.orchard@bristol.ac.uk](mailto:janet.orchard@bristol.ac.uk)

Working in partnership with

