



CULHAM ST GABRIEL'S
CHAMPIONING RELIGION AND WORLDVIEWS EDUCATION

Freedom of Religion or Belief Education in UK Schools: Towards Community Cohesion

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Introducing Freedom of Religion or Belief

Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) – Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights – is the freedom to have, choose, change, or leave a religion or belief, and the freedom to practice or manifest a religion or belief, including non-religious beliefs like Humanism and Atheism.

FoRB protects individuals from coercion and discrimination in religious matters; it includes the right for parents to raise children in line with their beliefs.

Importantly, FoRB does not protect religions or beliefs from criticism, such as in cases of alleged blasphemy. Since there is no hierarchy of Human Rights, FoRB must be protected and balanced alongside other Rights, which can sometimes lead to tensions.

FoRB, Education and Community Cohesion

FoRB entered education policy discourses with the publication of the Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching about Religions and Beliefs in Public Schoolsⁱ which made the link between teaching which emphasises respect for everyone's right to FoRB and the reduction of harmful misunderstandings and stereotypesⁱⁱ.

The 2022 FoRB International Ministerial Conference noted in its concluding statement on Education (UKHMG was a signatory) that learning about different religious and belief systems can “positively reinforce the intrinsic human dignity of all persons, help combat extremism and negative stereotyping, and decrease

the likelihood of violence towards ‘the other’” and that, in order to promote ideas of “inclusive societies and human rights”, that classroom-based resources are needed to “guide appropriately discussions that promote understanding, dialogue, tolerance, non-violence, and human rights”.ⁱⁱⁱ

A contested and for some a problematic term, community cohesion is understood to involve “addressing fractures, removing barriers and encouraging positive interaction between groups” and that to do so can require the delivery of interventions which promote those outcomes.^{iv}

A report by Culham St Gabriel’s (CStG) noted that FoRB Education should provide learners with opportunities to reflect on their own religion or belief identities; to think about how they might differ from those that other people may hold; to provide approaches for them to feel comfortable with those differences, and to be able to talk about them with respect and sensitivity; and, to be aware of FoRB as a Human Right as articulated in Human Rights frameworks, documents and agreements^v.

Although few examples of systematic classroom-based FoRB education exist, CStG found a larger group of FoRB-adjacent education focusing on Citizenship Education, dialogue, interfaith, anti-religious hate (Anti-Semitism and Islamophobia) and anti-racism education.^{vi}

FoRB Education: pathways towards community cohesion

CStG convened a group of FoRB and FoRB-adjacent education providers who are working to “promote understanding, dialogue, tolerance, non-violence, and human rights”^{vii} in UK schools ^{viii}. That group has now met twice: the first time

several months after 7th October, 2023, the second time following the murders in Southport and the subsequent civil unrest.

The group noted the extreme difficulty of delivering their work at this time due to scope and scale of global events impacting on communities in the UK and, by extension, schools. Group members recounted extensive anecdotal instances of teachers and students struggling with issues of pupil safety and the impact that avoiding controversial issues and the silencing of pupil voices was having on community cohesion. Furthermore, they all recounted how they had experienced an unprecedented surge in enquiries in and take up of their interventions.

The group is clear: FoRB and FoRB-adjacent education – including RE, Citizenship and PSHE – contributes to building more cohesive communities. The spaces in schools which these interventions create, provides opportunities for pupils, teachers and parents to renew relationships and communities, giving opportunities for all those participating to reflect on themselves and their futures.

The group identified the following key themes of FoRB and FoRB-adjacent education and training which could be harnessed to promote community cohesion in schools:

Safeguarding: support learners to promote online safety, develop their own abilities to respond to online misinformation, promote media literacy, and push back against anti-religious hate.

Leadership: support senior school leaders to develop approaches for proactively and confidently engaging with potentially controversial and sensitive issues, including being able to deal with misinformation and conspiracy theories. Promote inclusive practices which meet children and families where they are, while avoiding the sense of alienation felt as a result of closing down conversations and silencing pupil voices.

To enhance the effectiveness of FoRB and FoRB-adjacent education and training, the group identified the following as being existing barriers:

Communication: reviewing and improving impartiality guidelines for teachers is advisable to clarify concerns, including as it relates to the roll out of the Prevent Duty. Group members identified the opportunity to develop guidance which highlighted best practice approaches, including the use of case-studies, for teachers engaging with controversial issues in the classroom. Group members stressed the need for approaches which promote inclusive practices and avoid exacerbating the sense of alienation felt as a result of closing down conversations and silencing pupil voices.

Coordination: in addition to the need for closer engagement with key government departments (MHCLG, DfE, Home Office), specific challenges were identified for getting well-established providers of FoRB and FoRB-adjacent education into schools particularly as they relate to Multi-Academy Trusts. Closer coordination with PGCE providers as a means for enhancing FoRB and FoRB-adjacent education in schools and connection with providers.

Suggested Further Reading

After the Riots: Building the foundations of social cohesion; British Future, Belong, Together, 2024

Supporting Schools and Colleges after the Southport attack and widespread violent disorder; Educate Against Hate

The UK Race Riots, Summer 2024 – The Aftermath; Diverse Educators

Intergroup Contact Theory: Past, Present, and Future; Jim Everett, 2013, The Inquisitive Mind

ⁱ <https://osce.org/files/f/documents/c/e/29154.pdf>

ⁱⁱ See also and more recently the Council of Europe's 2014 Signposts – Policy and practice for teaching about religions and non-religious world views in intercultural education

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/freedom-of-religion-or-belief-and-education-statement-at-the-international-ministerial-conference-2022/statement-on-freedom-of-religion-or-belief-and-education>

^{iv} <https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/communitycohesionactionguide.pdf>

^v <https://www.cstg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2024/06/Reviewing-the-FoRB-Education-Landscape-0424.pdf>

^{vi} Ibid

^{vii} <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/freedom-of-religion-or-belief-and-education-statement-at-the-international-ministerial-conference-2022/statement-on-freedom-of-religion-or-belief-and-education>

^{viii} Full list includes: Association for Citizenship Teaching, Culham St Gabriels, Facing History and Ourselves UK, Faith & Belief Forum, HFL Education, Humanists UK, Islamic Society of Britain, Dr John Maiden, Solutions Not Sides, StandUp Education, The Linking Network.