

Living out Shared Space

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At the NASACRE AGM in May I was struck by the huge range of experience and expertise in the room. NASACRE is probably unique in bringing people together from such diverse backgrounds and communities with a shared purpose of improving religious education in our schools. Having shared purpose or common goals is one of the conditions that Allport (1954) claims can lead to successful intergroup contact. I was privileged to be able to share something of the Contact Theory hypothesis and Religious Education at the AGM. The project I talked about was a joint collaboration between NATRE and the University of Bristol. Put simply, as well as common goals, there are three other conditions which Allport claims are required for successful intergroup contact to take place. These are:

- members of the group having equal status
- undertaking tasks through genuine cooperation
- the importance of social or institutional support from a figure with authority or the wider community.

The Shared Space project begins with a hypothesis that the kinds of contacts needed when people are brought together across cultural divides in order to bring about improved community relations need to be better understood; it isn't enough simply to occupy the same public spaces. The aim of the project is to transform the classroom experience of pupils within Religious Education by improving teachers' capacity to promote good community relations through lessons in RE. The result of project was a teachers' toolkit which is available on the NATRE website. It promotes three distinct pedagogical elements: encounter, conversation and interaction. In the last year teachers in both the UK and Hong Kong have used the toolkit and reflected on its impact in the classroom.

The questions I posed at the AGM were:

Are SACREs models of successful intergroup contact?

If not, how can we work towards modelling Contact Theory Hypothesis through SACREs?

How can SACREs support teachers of RE in creating shared space?

SACREs might for example think about how they interact in meetings with one another. Is there a sense of shared goals and equal status amongst members? How might SACRE meetings enable effective interaction between people? Have we thought about where people sit and who talks to whom? SACREs could reflect on how they set up space so that it is clear everyone's presence matters.

SACREs could consider how they can encourage children and young people to encounter first hand a range of religions and worldviews. One SACRE I worked with held 'in conversation' events which enabled teachers to engage with members of faith and belief communities in a 'Desert Island Disks' style conversation. As well as asking questions about beliefs, practices and values, guests were invited to consider what they might do if they were Prime Minister for the day, or which book they would take with them to a desert island.

SACREs could consider a project which brings them together around a shared goal or purpose. It was great to hear about the Westhill Awards at the AGM and how these are impacting on local areas.

Finally, there seem to me to be two particular characteristics underpinning effective creation of shared space. The first is recognising one's own positioning, and the other is entering into

conversations and dialogue with a spirit of humility. Perhaps SACREs can model these two characteristics, alongside promoting them through their work with schools.

References:

Allport, G. W. (1954). *The nature of prejudice*. Oxford, England: Addison-Wesley.

<https://www.natre.org.uk/about-natre/projects/the-shared-space-project/>