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## **Exploring religions today: A quest for international knowledge transfer within the field of education for religious diversity**

**Abstract:** The *Exploring Religions Today* collection of curriculum resources, developed to support the statutory requirements in Wales for religious education in primary schools, was influenced by the findings from a major research project that explored the attitudes of young people toward religion and toward life within religiously diverse societies. The aim of this paper is to explore the key findings that emerged from that research, to analyse the underlying pedagogical principles and to assess the transferability of these resources within the 2016 curriculum for Protestant religious education in Baden-Württemberg.

**Zusammenfassung:** *Exploring Religions Today* für den Religionsunterricht in der Primarstufe ist eine Materialsammlung entwickelt entlang des Bildungsplans und dessen rechtlichen Vorgaben für Wales. Das Material basiert auf den Ergebnissen eines Forschungsprojekts, das die Einstellungen Jugendlicher gegenüber Religion und dem Leben in religiös diversen Gesellschaften erforschte. Der Artikel untersucht die zentralen Ergebnisse des Projekts, analysiert die zugrunde liegenden pädagogischen Prinzipien und beurteilt die Übertragbarkeit auf den Baden-Württembergischen Bildungsplan für evangelische Religionslehre.

**Keywords:** knowledge transfer, religious education, United Kingdom, Germany, religious diversity, contact hypothesis

**Schlagworte:** Wissenstransfer, Religionsunterricht, Vereinigtes Königreich, Deutschland, religiöse Diversität, Kontakthypothese

### **1. Introduction**

This paper explores the potential for knowledge transfer from the *Exploring Religions Today* collection of resources developed in Wales for Baden-Württemberg. Attention is given first to the development of the resources in Wales and then to the difference in approaches to religious education in Wales (the world religions approach) and in Baden-Württemberg (the confessional approach).

### **2. Rooted in educational research**

The *Exploring Religions Today* collection of educational resources for early learners had its roots in the three-year Young People's Attitude to Religious Diversity Project conducted within the Warwick Religions and Education Research Unit. This was a large-scale mixed methods (qualitative and quantitative) research project investigating the attitudes of students drawn from across the United Kingdom toward religion and toward life in religiously diverse societies.<sup>1</sup> While the *Exploring Religions Today* collection of educational resources was influenced by both strands of the Young People's Attitudes to Religious Diversity Project, the quantitative strand was particularly influential.

The quantitative strand was established within the individual differences tradition in the psychology of religion and designed both to include established relevant psychometric instruments and to trial a range of well-conceived items from which other instruments could be constructed and tested, relevant both to mapping attitudes toward different aspects of religious diversity and to identifying factors that predict how these attitudes may differ from one person to another person. Among the new psychometrically-tested instruments that evolved from this project are the following: the eleven-item Attitude toward Religious Diversity Index (ARDI); the seven-item Experience of Victimization Index (EVI); the seven-item Scale of Anti-Muslim Attitude (SAMA); the five-item Scale of Anti-Jewish Attitude (SAJA); and the five-item Scale of Anti-Sikh Attitude (SASA). Further information about these instruments is provided by Francis.<sup>2</sup>

### 3. The contact hypothesis

A number of these new instruments were constructed in light of the classic 'contact hypothesis' with the aim of testing the extent to which individual differences in prejudice against and hostility toward religious groups could be explained by that hypothesis. The contact hypothesis (or intergroup contact theory) proposes that changes in belief about or attitude toward particular groups may be stimulated by direct contact with members of those groups. By bringing people from different backgrounds together and encouraging collaboration, prejudice may be reduced and more positive attitudes toward the other result. The contact hypothesis is rooted in the work of Gordon Allport. Allport<sup>3</sup> asserted that prejudice arose because of negative assumptions made about entire groups of people. He suggested that interpersonal contact between members of different groups, if undertaken in appropriate situations, could help to reduce prejudice and improve relations among groups that are experiencing conflict. To be beneficial in reducing prejudice and hostility it has been proposed that the contact situation must be characterised by positive intergroup relations, what Allport<sup>4</sup> termed the 'optimal' conditions: equal status, intergroup cooperation, common goals, and support by social and institutional authorities. An extensive critique of contact theory has been provided by Vezzali and Stathi<sup>5</sup>, and an in-depth review of research in this field provided by Lytle.<sup>6</sup>

A number of writers have tried to clarify how contact in itself reduces prejudice. In particular, Everett<sup>7</sup> argues that effective contact works through three mechanisms: cognitive (learning about the out-group), behavioural (openness to positive contact experiences), and affective

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<sup>1</sup> Elisabeth Arweck (Hg.), *Young people's attitudes to religious diversity*. London (Routledge) 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Leslie J. Francis, *Psychological perspectives on religious education: An individual differences approach*. Leiden (Brill) 2019, 34-42.

<sup>3</sup> Gordon W. Allport, *The nature of prejudice*. Cambridge, MA (Perseus Books) 1954.

<sup>4</sup> Ebd., 489

<sup>5</sup> Loris Vezzali/Sofia Stathi (Hg), *Intergroup contact theory: Recent developments and future directions*. Abingdon (Routledge) 2017.

<sup>6</sup> Ashley Lytle, Intergroup contact theory: Recent developments and future directions. In: *Social Justice Research* 31 (2018), 374-385.

<sup>7</sup> Jim A. C. Everett, Intergroup contact theory: past, present and future. In: *The Inquisitive Mind Magazine* 2 (17)/2013 (online: [www.in-mind.org](http://www.in-mind.org), viewed March 8, 2020).

(generating friendships). A number of research studies provide evidence to affirm the success of the contact theory in reducing prejudice and bringing about more positive attitudes towards others. A wide-ranging and thorough review of empirical research exploring the contact hypothesis, including surveys, experiments, and longitudinal analyses was undertaken by Pettigrew and Tropp<sup>8</sup> in their examination of over 500 studies. Taking into account different methodologies and different types of contact, they reported that increased contact resulted in small but reliable reductions in prejudice. A number of more recent studies continue to affirm a beneficial relationship between intergroup contact and more positive attitudes and reduced prejudice toward others.<sup>9</sup>

#### **4. Exploring the evidence**

As the first step in exploring the relevance of the contact hypothesis for young people living in religiously diverse societies, Francis and McKenna<sup>10</sup> tested within their data the extent of the experience of victimisation among Muslim adolescents in the UK and the extent to which they attributed such victimisation to their religious identity, compared with other aspects of their cultural identity (including race/ethnicity, colour, and name). Francis and McKenna<sup>11</sup> analysed the response of 335 13- to 15-year-old Muslim students to the seven-item Experience of Victimisation Index, alongside a range of personal factors, psychological factors, and religious factors. Their data demonstrated that one in four Muslim students (25%) reported being bullied because of their religion. These students saw their religious identity as being a more important cause of their victimisation than their ethnicity, their colour, or their name. Male and female Muslim students were equally vulnerable to victimisation.

As the second step in exploring the contact hypothesis, Francis, McKenna, and Arweck<sup>12</sup> developed and tested an instrument to measure anti-Muslim attitude and proposed a measure of contact with Muslims in order to map the relation between these two measures. In light of the accumulated findings from the Young People's Attitude to Religious Diversity project, the pressing research question (concerning the connection between contact with Muslims and anti-Muslim attitude) was contextualised within recognising the potentially contaminating effects of school factors (schools with a religious character or schools without a religious foundation), geographical factors (England, Wales, and London), personal factors (sex and age), psychological factors (employing the Eysenckian three dimensional model of personality), and religious factors (differentiating among the three factors of self-assigned religious affiliation, religious belief, and religious practice). Francis, McKenna, and Arweck<sup>13</sup> conducted their analyses on the data provided by participants who identified their religious affiliation either as Christian or as no religion. After taking these control variables into account regression analyses supported the contact hypothesis. The young participants who counted Muslims among their friends scored significantly lower on the Scale of Anti-Muslim Attitude.

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<sup>8</sup> Thomas F. Pettigrew/ Linda R. Tropp, A meta-analytic test of intergroup contact theory. In: *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 90 (2006), 751-783.

<sup>9</sup> Ann E. Wilson-Daily/Markus Kimmelmeier/Joaquín Prats, Intergroup contact versus conflict in Catalan high schools: A multilevel analysis of adolescent attitudes toward immigration and diversity. In: *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 64 (2018), 12-28.

<sup>10</sup> Leslie J. Francis/Ursula McKenna, The experience of victimisation among Muslim adolescents in the UK: The effect of psychological and religious factors. In: *Religions* 9 (2018), 1-15, 243.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Leslie J. Francis/Ursula McKenna/Elisabeth Arweck, Countering anti-Muslim attitudes among Christian and religiously unaffiliated 13- to 15-year-old students in England and Wales: Testing the contact hypothesis. In: *Journal of Beliefs and Values* 41 (2020), 342-357.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

Having tested the effectiveness of the contact hypothesis in their first study among Muslims, Francis and McKenna replicated the statistical modelling in respect of two other religious groups, namely Jews<sup>14</sup> and Sikhs<sup>15</sup>. These two replication studies added further support for the contact hypothesis.

### **5. From educational research to curriculum development**

The key research finding from the three studies reported by Francis, McKenna, and Arweck<sup>16</sup> and by McKenna and Francis<sup>17</sup> is that young people who get to know Muslim peers as their friends are less likely to hold anti-Muslim attitudes, that young people who get to know Jewish peers as their friends are less likely to hold anti-Jewish attitudes, and that young people who get to know Sikh peers as their friends are less likely to hold anti-Sikh attitudes. Reflecting on these findings Francis and ap Siôn<sup>18</sup> recognised that not all young people had equal opportunities for meeting and engaging with peers from diverse religious backgrounds, but that such experience could be generated vicariously through well-conceived educational resources. They argued that the development of open and positive attitudes towards difference underpins respect for diversity. Foundations for open and positive attitudes need to be put in place during the early years. Open and positive attitudes grow from familiarity with and contact with diverse populations (the so-called contact hypothesis). From these principles ap Siôn and Francis developed with sponsorship from the Welsh Government two curriculum series published in 2016, *Exploring Why* and *Exploring our World* for young learners. In 2019 they added a third series *Exploring World Faiths Today* for slightly older learners and in 2020 revised a series focusing on diverse Christian traditions for young learners, *Exploring Christian Special Places*. Together these four series comprise the *Exploring Religions Today* collection of curriculum resources and are on open access at: [www.st-marys-centre.org.uk](http://www.st-marys-centre.org.uk). These four series are designed to bring young learners (between the ages of 3 and 7) and slightly older learners (between the ages of 8 and 11) into contact with young people from a variety of faith backgrounds and Christian denominations. By identifying with the central characters of these storybooks (Aled and Siân and Rees and Sara) young learners are brought into contact with Aled and Siân's friends and slightly older learners are brought into contact with Rees and Sara's friends. Neither Aled and Siân nor Rees and Sara themselves have an explicit religious identity. Yet through their friends they are welcomed into the world of young Muslims, into the world of young Christians, into the world of young, into the world of young Hindus, into the world of young Sikhs, into the world of young Buddhists, and into Anglican, Baptist, Orthodox and Catholic churches.

At the heart of each of these four series are full-colour storybooks for learners available on open access for download or projection on a whiteboard. Each of these storybooks is accompanied by teachers' handbooks, including resource activities for teachers and learners. All materials are available in both English and Welsh.

### **6. From Wales to Baden-Württemberg**

The programme of research testing and confirming the contact hypothesis was conducted throughout the UK, and the *Exploring Religions Today* collection of curriculum resources was developed and tested initially within Wales and then also in England and the Republic of Ireland. Our aim now is to explore the potential transferability of these curriculum resources

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<sup>14</sup> Ursula McKenna/Leslie J. Francis (under review a), Testing the contact hypothesis: The association between personal friendships and anti-Jewish attitudes among 13- to 15-year-old students in England and Wales.

<sup>15</sup> Ursula McKenna/Leslie J. Francis (under review b). Testing the contact hypothesis in a post-truth era: Personal friendships with Sikhs countering anti-Sikh attitudes?

<sup>16</sup> Arweck, *Young people's attitudes to religious diversity*.

<sup>17</sup> McKenna/Francis (under review a and b)

<sup>18</sup> Leslie J. Francis/Tania ap Siôn, (2019) The journey from educational research to classroom practice. (online: [www.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/ces/research/wreru/forschools/about/background](http://www.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/ces/research/wreru/forschools/about/background), viewed March 8, 2020).

to a different national and educational context, namely within Protestant religious education for primary schools in Baden-Württemberg. We will test such transferability by analysing the current Baden-Württemberg curriculum<sup>19</sup> and one of its most significant and latest underlying memoranda *Religiöse Orientierung gewinnen. Evangelischer Religionsunterricht als Beitrag zu einer pluralitätsfähigen Schule*<sup>20</sup> with regard to legal, theological and pedagogical requirements that would need to be met by the materials within this new context.

In terms of the legal framework, Protestant religious education is open for the participation of students from other Christian denominations, other world faiths, and secular backgrounds.

This condition of openness poses a challenge to religious education.<sup>21</sup> In this context religious education is no longer assuming that all participating students are fully part of Protestant church communities. The four series within the *Exploring Religions Today* collection of curriculum resources directly addresses this challenge to religious education in Baden-Württemberg. The two core characters in the three series for young learners, Aled and Sian do not have an explicit religious identity, such as being Protestant Christian, for example. The same is true for the two core characters in the series for slightly older learners (*Exploring World Faiths Today*), Rees and Sara. Through these characters the required respect and sensitivity can be developed for teaching students from diverse backgrounds.<sup>22</sup>

In terms of the theological framework, the memorandum *Religiöse Orientierung gewinnen*<sup>23</sup> develops a theological rationale for equipping students to live with religious diversity as a major aim for Protestant religious education. In this context a range of theological arguments are rehearsed to underpin the role of Protestant religious education for equipping students to live with religious diversity. For example, the memorandum draws on Wolfgang Huber<sup>24</sup> to reflect on religious pluralism as a positive context in which to display Christian commitment and Christian openness. The *Exploring Religions Today* collection of curriculum resources is in line with these theological arguments.

In terms of the pedagogical framework<sup>25</sup>, the memorandum debates the advantages and disadvantages of teaching about religious diversity. Some argue that religious education may cause social difficulties by focusing on the differences between faiths. By focusing on differences religious education may make social integration more difficult. The *Exploring Religions Today* collection of curriculum resources addresses this objection by recognising differences as an opportunity for conversation, dialogue, and developing mutual respect. For example, in the *Exploring Why* series we find a student-centred approach to recognising the curiosity generated by visible differences, and to addressing that curiosity through openness, contact, and friendship. In this series each of the storybooks begins with the *I spy* game that Aled and Sian play to explore a specific religious symbol that they encounter in everyday life. Some of these symbols have explicit religious significance (Veil, Menorah, Cross), while others have implicit religious significance (Light, Water, Bread). Aled and Sian want to learn more about these topics. So they explore their surroundings and their social spaces, and also meet with their friends and discover how these symbols come alive in their homes and religious communities.

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<sup>19</sup> Ministerium für Kultus, Jugend und Sport Baden-Württemberg. Bildungsplan der Grundschule. Evangelische Religion 2016 (online: [www.bildungsplaene-bw.de](http://www.bildungsplaene-bw.de), viewed March 8, 2020).

<sup>20</sup> Evangelische Kirche Deutschland. *Religiöse Orientierung gewinnen. Evangelischer Religionsunterricht als Beitrag zu einer pluralitätsfähigen Schule*. Eine Denkschrift des Rates der Evangelischen Kirche in Deutschland 2014 (online: [www.ekd.de](http://www.ekd.de), viewed March 8, 2020).

<sup>21</sup> Ebd.

<sup>22</sup> KM, Bildungsplan.

<sup>23</sup> EKD, *Religiöse Orientierung gewinnen*, 55ff.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 58

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 61ff.

Within the *Exploring Why* series this social dimension opens up a fresh way of teaching, as encounters with plurality are contextualised within the characters' everyday life. Students in Baden-Württemberg can identify with the core characters in the book and reflect on plurality through the *I spy* game. This approach matches the pedagogical principle expressed in the memorandum<sup>26</sup> that students' experiences should be taken into account. Nowadays students are encountering plurality as early as in day-care centres. This pedagogical approach focusing on the distinctiveness of religious traditions fosters acceptance and inclusivity rather than the polarisation of differences.

After addressing the legal, theological, and pedagogical points in the memorandum, the next step is to explore how the *Exploring Religions Today* collection of curriculum resources and the underpinning research may be compatible with the Baden-Württemberg curriculum. For this analysis four aspects of the curriculum will be examined: aims, overall guiding perspectives, process-oriented competencies, and content-oriented competencies.

In terms of aims, the following are included:

- Open the religious dimension of life to understand social, political and cultural life
- Bring into dialogue Christian faith and traditions
- Explore faith as a way to interpret reality
- Support students with their search for identity and meaning
- Offer age appropriate approaches to understanding biblical texts
- Promote tolerance and dialogue, contribute to a plural society
- Contribute to school community by organising religious services
- Etc.

The majority of these aims are compatible with the *Exploring Religions Today* collection of curriculum resources. The two points not covered by these resources concern the focus on biblical texts and the contribution to the school community by organising religious services. These two points could be addressed by additional material added to the teachers' handbooks. Such material could link the themes explored in the individual books with relevant biblical passages and demonstrate how these themes can be celebrated within the context of religious services. However, Protestant religious education also embraces plurality and opportunities for interreligious learning, areas in which the *Exploring Religions Today* collection of curriculum resources is rich.

In terms of the overall guiding perspectives of the curriculum, the Baden-Württemberg curriculum for Protestant religious education takes into account the following themes: sustainable development, education for tolerance and acceptance of difference, vocational orientation, media education, and consumer education. Of these overall guiding perspectives, all are already accommodated within the *Exploring Religions Today* materials, or easily introduced through expanding the teachers' handbooks.

In terms of process-oriented competencies, the curriculum specifies: 1) observe and describe, 2) interpret, 3) reason, 4) communicate and dialogue, 5) translate into practice. The first competency is reflected in the *Exploring Religions Today* collection of resources: learners notice and describe religious expressions in their everyday life. The second competency is reflected in these resources in the sense that learners understand and interpret religious expressions, symbols, and texts. The third competency is reflected in these resources in the sense that learners can recognise religious and ethical problems in concrete situations and compare different perspectives. The difference in respect of these three competencies is that, in the *Exploring Religions Today* materials, the focus is not on biblical texts. This difference could be addressed by modifications made to the teachers' handbook. The *Exploring*

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 23

*Religions Today* materials can be fully applied to the fourth competency, concerning communication and dialogue with other learners, including in this case interreligious dialogue. The fifth competency refers to contributing to the community life of the school. This competency is not covered by the *Exploring Religions Today* materials but could be added as follow-up activities within the teachers' handbook.

In terms of content-oriented competencies, the curriculum specifies the following: 1) human experience, 2) world and responsibility, 3) Bible, 4) God, 5) Jesus Christ, 6) church and churches, and 7) religions. The *Exploring Religions Today* collection of resources is strong on exploring most of these. The themes of Bible, God, and Jesus Christ are also present, but less strongly so than envisaged within the curriculum. These three content competencies would need to be strengthened in revisions made to the teachers' handbooks for a transfer.

## **7. Conclusion**

The foregoing analysis has identified ways in which curriculum resources shaped for use in Wales in light of the contact hypothesis hold relevance for the situation in Baden-Württemberg. It has been argued that there is good potential for the transferability of the *Exploring Religions Today* collection of curriculum resources from Wales into Protestant religious education within Baden-Württemberg. In particular these curriculum materials are relevant to the EKD memorandum's recognition regarding the need for a new approach to religious education for a plural society. It has also been noted that the transferability of these materials into a new environment requires some careful modifications to the teachers' handbooks in order to accommodate the specifications of the Baden-Württemberg curriculum. To promote this knowledge transfer, workshops for educators and teachers are being set up by our stakeholder, the Religious Pedagogy Centre in Karlsruhe (RPI), Germany. One way of approaching the disparities between the Welsh curriculum resources and the requirement of the Baden-Württemberg curriculum could be to reflect on the way in which the teachers' handbooks have been crafted to reflect the requirements of the Welsh Government curriculum authority. Part of the hermeneutical process is the way in which curriculum resources can be nuanced in different ways. While the basic learners' storybooks are worth translating, the teacher resource material would need to be more clearly modified to meet the new situation.