Hindu, Muslim and Sikh religious education teachers’ use of personal life knowledge: the relationship between biographies, professional beliefs and practice

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The article reports the findings of a qualitative study of Hindu, Muslim and Sikh teachers of religious education and the relationship between their biographies, professional beliefs and use of personal life knowledge in English, secondary school classrooms. This relationship was explored through a study of five beginning teachers and provided evidence of the role that their personal knowledge played in enabling them to support the learning of pupils in white majority and Muslim majority state schools. It also indicated the need for teacher education courses to provide opportunities for teachers to explore the relationship between their personal and professional lives and the potential dilemmas and dangers of sharing their personal knowledge and experiences with pupils. In the context of international concern to identify criteria for selecting beginning teachers, the article highlights the importance of initiatives aimed at increasing the ethnic/religious diversity of the teaching force.

Keywords: teachers’ knowledge; religious/ethnic diversity; teacher education; religious education

Introduction

This article reports a study of Hindu, Muslim and Sikh teachers of religious education and the relationship between their biographies, professional beliefs and use of personal life knowledge. The overarching aim of the research was to address the neglect of religious education teachers in the qualitative study of teachers’ lives. In the UK (Baumfield 2012) and internationally (Van der Zee 2012), the study of religious education teachers’ lives is still in its infancy, and research has focused primarily on teachers from Christian backgrounds (Mead 2006; Revell and Walters 2010; Van der Want et al. 2009). A particular concern, therefore, was to give a voice to teachers from other religious backgrounds and to broaden the existing body of research on the relationship between teachers’ personal and professional lives. This relationship was explored through an investigation of teachers’ classroom use of

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personal life knowledge which appeared to be worthy of study for two reasons.

First, although there is a very little research-based knowledge of this practice in religious education, research undertaken in other contexts has recognised that it raises issues about teacher–pupil relationships, teacher self-disclosure and professional boundaries which should be addressed (Aldenmyer 2010; Ejsing 2007). These concerns are reflected in Europe-wide recommendations for the teaching of religions and beliefs (OSCE 2007) and in England, in brief professional guidance to RE teachers (REC 2009) and recent revisions to the national standards for teachers’ personal and professional conduct. The latter now requires teachers of all subjects to observe ‘proper boundaries appropriate to a teacher’s professional position’ and ensure that ‘personal beliefs are not expressed in ways which exploit pupils’ vulnerability’ (DfE 2012, 10).

Second, there appeared to be particular value in investigating the practice of teachers from minority ethnic (ME) and religious backgrounds, given evidence of the crucial role that ME teachers’ life experiences and knowledge can play in supporting education for and about diversity (Nieto 2006; Osler 1997, 2001). This evidence has been accompanied by a recognition of the difficulties of attracting and retaining ME teachers and of the need for research on teachers’ lives and commitments that can inform and support their initial and continuing professional development (Cunningham and Hargreaves 2007; McNamara et al. 2009).

Research background

In 2009, an international resurgence of interest in ‘teacher knowledge’ (Ben-Peretz 2010; DfE 2010), prompted a two-year study of the kinds of knowledge used by trainee religious education teachers attending the one-year, secondary post-graduate certificate in education course which I led. The study found that, in each year, the trainees were making more frequent use of knowledge derived from their personal lives than previous cohorts and suggested a significant connection between trainees’ reasons for using their personal knowledge in the classroom and their biographies (Everington 2012). In order to investigate this, a further study was undertaken, focusing on participants from ME/religious backgrounds, revisiting data acquired during their training and exploring their views and practices during their first year(s) in post.

The research

The research focused on five teachers: one Hindu, three Muslims and one Sikh, all from ME backgrounds. The aim was to investigate the relationship between their use of personal life knowledge, their understanding of and
beliefs about this practice and their biographies, during their training and first year(s) in post.

The study was based on a view of qualitative research as a search for the meanings that participants attach to their behaviour, how they interpret situations and their perspectives on particular issues (Woods 2006). It drew on the theoretical and methodological traditions of teacher-focused, biographical research and in particular, on Bullough, Knowles and Crow’s (1992) classic study of beginning teachers and Bullough’s work on the relationship between biographies, social issues and history (2008).

Following Knowles (1992), the term biography is used to refer to:

… those formative experiences of pre-service and beginning teachers which have influenced the ways in which they think about teaching and, subsequently, their actions in the classroom ... (especially) those experiences that become the basis for ... the image they have of themselves as self-as-teacher. (99)

In teacher-focused research, the term ‘personal knowledge’ is used in differing ways but usually refers to knowledge primarily acquired or developed in the course of teachers’ professional lives (Ben-Peretz 2010). During my initial study (Everington 2012), I developed the term ‘personal life knowledge’ to identify knowledge that teachers have acquired in their personal lives and draw on or present in their classroom teaching.

Data collection

Data on the participants’ training year were acquired from the following:

- Autobiographies and reflective writing on teaching experiences.
- Study of lesson plans produced throughout the year and notes taken during routine lesson observations and post-lesson discussions.
- Semi-structured, one-to-one, 60 min interviews which explored the kinds of knowledge that participants were using in their teaching and how and why they used this.

By the spring of 2012, all participants had been in post for at least six months and were re-interviewed. These semi-structured, 60–90-min interviews explored how participants had been using their personal life knowledge since training and their reasons for and feelings about this. All interviews were recorded on a digital MP3 player and transcribed.

In line with the theoretical underpinnings of the research, the data collection methods aimed to enable participants to create their own ‘stories’ of their personal and professional lives and to identify what they viewed as the personal life knowledge used in their teaching. Routine lesson plans and observations provided another perspective and a context for interpreting
participants’ statements. Conducting interviews during, and at least six months after, training provided an opportunity to investigate whether there were significant changes in participants’ views and practice when they were free from the pressures of tutor assessment. Thus, a means of methodological triangulation (Denzin 2006) was introduced. A reflexive journal (Lincoln and Guba 1985) was used to reflect on my dual role as tutor/researcher and on the danger of participants adopting a position of strategic compliance in their responses (Lacey 1977).

Data analysis and presentation

The first stage of data analysis involved creating ‘disciplined but imaginative constructions and portrayals of experiences’ (Bullough 2008, 9), based primarily on participants’ own words but drawing on other data. An ‘account’ was created for each participant, selecting material from the data that appeared significant in the development of their thinking and practice. Each account was analysed to identify themes that recurred at different times during the research period, and all five were analysed to identify common themes. In this article, I present shortened versions of the accounts to which I have added contextual information and interpretive comments. While the accounts are constructions that reflect my researcher intentions and professional/personal perspectives, they were shown to, adjusted by and finally agreed upon with participants (Cohen and Crabtree 2006).

The participants

There are no data on the religious backgrounds of religious education teachers in the UK and no attempt was made to create a representative sample. However, the inclusion of one Hindu (Rani), three Sunni Muslims (Aisha, Amir and Lima) and one Sikh (Simran), roughly represents the number of people from these backgrounds to have entered this particular religious education course in each of the past 10 years. Their course entry ages (four in their early 20s and one – Lima – in her late 30s) and the balance of four women to one man are typical. All described themselves as ‘Asian’ and are of South Asian origin: Rani and Simran from Panjab and Aisha, Amir and Lima from Pakistan, Kashmir and Bangladesh. All grew up in the West Midlands region of England, in cities that are amongst the most ethnically and religiously diverse in the country (Lewis 2007). The Muslim participants attended Muslim majority state schools and all others attended schools with a mixed ethnic/religious intake. All had degrees in the study of religions.

Participants use of personal life knowledge

I begin this section with summaries of the participants’ course entry reflections that provided the biographical starting point for the research. These are
followed by accounts of how and why each participant used their life knowledge in their teaching, during their training and first year(s) in post.

Course entry reflections
At the beginning of the course, participants were simply asked to write an account of the experiences that had led them to embark on a religious education teacher training course, concluding with a statement of what they wanted to achieve as a teacher of religious education.

Rani. Rani described growing up as the child of a mixed, Hindu/Sikh marriage, within the Krsna Consciousness movement. As the only Asian girl in her primary school with short hair, she was taunted by Sikh pupils and began concealing her background. She had ‘loved’ secondary school religious education and by learning about how others express their religious beliefs, she had hoped to gain confidence in expressing her own. However, she found herself ‘posing big questions’ and rebelling against the movement’s ‘core practices’. After ‘a long struggle’, she ‘formulated reasons that satisfied my questions and were unique to me. Parts of my beliefs changed due to my experiences and this influenced my outlook on how I could live a good life’.

Rani expressed an intention to make use of her life knowledge in her teaching:

I hope that by using my experience and knowledge pupils will be able to respect religion and use it as a tool to come to personal conclusions on their individual beliefs … I intend to deliver religious education that enables young people to discover ways in which they can confidently express themselves.

Aisha. Aisha recalled how restrictions imposed at puberty had led to a ‘feminist phase’ and to questioning her faith. However, a discussion about Islam at school was a turning point: she began wearing a headscarf, praying five times daily and reflecting on ‘how to be a better Muslim’. A growing interest in the ‘spirituality of Islam’ brought a realisation that her views on women’s rights, and human rights generally, could be pursued as a Muslim. The events of 11 September led her to talk to non-Muslims about the issues, to develop friendships with people of other faiths and to a commitment to inter-faith dialogue.

Aisha was clear about the importance of her personal life knowledge in her teaching:

I want to share what I have learned with pupils who may be looking for a way or answer at an age when I was frustrated with the world, wanted change but was so lost … I want to help them make sense of the world and teach things as they are, not the stereotypes. As someone who has met people from
other faiths and learned through interacting with them, I believe I can offer pupils a less textbook version of religion.

**Lima.** Lima began with a childhood memory of a long-stay visit to Bangladesh where she ‘found the courage’ to ask a teacher the question: ‘But who created ALLAH?’ She was told that this was not a question to ask. Lima reflected on how this memory ‘meant’ that studying philosophy had sometimes felt like ‘a guilty pleasure’, ‘the age old friction between science and religion plays out in my head, it hurts!’

Lima made implicit connections between her life experiences and aspirations as a teacher:

I want to help young people be unafraid to ask questions and realise that it is only through having your beliefs challenged that you learn how to defend them … That Faith or no Faith our lives are full of inconsistencies and contradictions. That there is meaning and meaninglessness at times. That for some there is peace and security in Faith, while for others, joy and liberation without Dogma … I would like to generate the idea that we are all ‘in it’ together, this existential predicament whereby we are all just trying to find our own way.

**Amir.** Amir recalled occasions during his adolescence when fights had broken out among friends and he had walked away. In retrospect, he felt that these incidents had been the beginning of his ‘thinking about the greater picture of life’ and ‘a feeling of always trying to understand and empathise with others’. At the age of 15, Amir’s father died suddenly leaving him feeling ‘lost’, with an ‘urge to understand myself and others’. He ‘became very spiritual’ and turned to his faith in search of comfort and guidance. Over time, he ‘began to see the world with a different set of eyes … I decided from then on that I would contribute somehow to this world’. Amir found his ‘path’ in a religious studies degree and his goal to be ‘a teacher who wishes to help others and in the process, help himself’.

Amir viewed his personal life knowledge as essential to his teaching role:

As a teacher of religious education I wish to contribute to the lives of young people. This will not just be through teaching about faiths … I hope to teach young people about life itself through the experiences of other people and my own … My passion for teaching is deeply rooted in my life experiences.

**Simran.** Simran focused on her ‘journey of exploration’. At 16, she ‘became very independent both in nature and thought. I wanted to explore why I was the way I was and what being a Sikh meant to me as an individual’. The birth of her sister’s first child was significant: ‘The innocence of a
child makes you realise the confusing world we live in today’. This prompted Simran to search for ways of ‘making sense of things’ by reading about ‘cultures around the world and the philosophy of religion’ and she realised that she would ‘love to open someone else’s eyes to a different outlook on this world, just as the books and people around me did’.

Simran saw herself drawing on her personal life in her teaching:

I do not just want to be a teacher but someone who puts a positive light on being an individual … I hope to quash any presumptions pupils may have, not only of Sikhs but those who are different, in a religious or lifestyle context … to have an open dialogue for students to express their views and learn about others. This is my challenge and ultimately the moral precepts I live by, to strive for equality.

The statements above suggest that all participants entered training with an intention to make a difference to the lives of young people and to draw on their personal life knowledge and experiences in their teaching.

Training and first year(s) of teaching

The following accounts provide a picture of how and why each participant made use of their life knowledge in their teaching. They indicate that an early commitment to this practice was maintained during training and into the first year(s) of teaching.

Simran. Throughout the research, Simran spoke enthusiastically about using her personal life knowledge, but it was in a working class, white majority school that she particularly enjoyed and developed this aspect of her teaching. As a trainee, she encountered a widespread assumption that Asian people are strictly religious, have conservative views on ethical issues and live different lives to ‘white people’. In response, she gave examples from her life that would challenge pupils’ stereotypes and encourage them to view people as individuals who make their own choices. For example, in an observed lesson she used her own family’s celebration of Christmas to illustrate the point that British traditions are observed by British people from different backgrounds, but they do so in their own ways and for their own reasons.

However, there was a deeper dimension to Simran’s belief in sharing her life knowledge:

I take my whole self into the classroom. If I didn’t, I’d be questioning what I’m doing, if I’m not wholeheartedly there.

As a turban wearing, Asian Sikh, Simran felt visibly and proudly different to most of her pupils. Nevertheless, she wanted them to know and accept
her as an individual, both ‘different’ and ‘the same’, who makes up her own mind about what she believes and does, whether following her own interpretation of ‘Sikhi’ or enjoying the same films as her pupils. In this way, Simran sought to challenge pupils’ assumptions, promote the importance of thinking for oneself and build relationships based on respect for individual differences.

Post-training, Simran was employed in the same school and talked of becoming ‘even more open’. For example, during lessons on ‘marriage’ she had discussed mixed marriages with reference to her family and indicated her personal views on pre-marital sex. She felt that this openness had been important in establishing trusting relationships with pupils and a supportive classroom atmosphere.

Simran appeared to have developed a view of the RE teacher as a modeler of individuality, independent thinking and being true to oneself. These were qualities that she pursued in her personal life and, in her course entry statements, had related to significant life experiences.

Aisha. Aisha’s first placement was in a Muslim majority school where she felt increasingly frustrated by pupils’ attitudes. In an observed lesson on Sikhism, she made constant reference to Islam and used pupils’ hostility to the MacDonalds fast-food chain to provoke discussion of the factors involved in judging ‘a livelihood’ to be good or bad. Afterwards, Aisha explained that she found it necessary to make constant comparisons to Islam to counter pupils’ reluctance to learn about other faiths but had been trying to ‘move beyond’ this strategy to challenge them. Her MacDonalds scenario had been one of many attempts to get pupils to discuss and justify their views, but she felt that the need to motivate was preventing her from developing a teaching style that would help them ‘think outside the box’.

In her next, white majority, school, Aisha was encouraged to use her insider knowledge and enjoyed teaching a topic on ‘Islamic spirituality’ that enabled her to share her views and experiences. On several occasions, she was observed giving inspirational and apparently unscripted talks about human rights issues. Reflecting on this, she recognised that she was drawing on her personal knowledge and beliefs and responding to pupils’ willingness to discuss their own views.

Post-training and working in a white majority school and area of social deprivation, Aisha’s commitment to social justice re-emerged. She had respect for ‘where these kids are coming from’ but was deeply concerned by their ‘difficult’ backgrounds: ‘It makes my heart bleed to see the gaps in their lives, but I see how we can try to fill them at school’. One of the ‘gaps’ that she sought to address was her pupils’ inability to think beyond the limitations that home life imposed: ‘They think religious education is just about religions, but it is much more about helping them see and think in different ways, so they can find their own way’. 
Aisha remained committed to challenging stereotypes. She believed that the pupils’ lack of contact with Muslims, and Asians generally, led them to see such people as ‘having to do things a certain way and having no personality’. In response, she illustrated her teaching with ‘real life’ examples, responded to questions about her beliefs and life-style and tried to help pupils see her as someone who ‘does the normal things that people do’: ‘It is about them getting to know you. I am not a political activist but I feel like I’m making change just by being me’.

Aisha’s accounts indicate a view of the religious education teacher as one who seeks to challenge and change, for the good of individuals and society but balances challenge by supporting pupils in finding their own way. The themes of ‘challenge’, change and ‘finding one’s way’ were present in her reflections on her own adolescence and appear to have been carried through into her teaching.

*Amir:* During his first placement in a white majority school, Amir made occasional use of his personal life knowledge. This changed when he was placed in a Muslim majority school where he gained great satisfaction from his success with boys from backgrounds similar to his own. Pupils were quick to recognise and respect him as a Muslim and respect grew as he worked with them through some challenging teaching situations.

Many of these pupils were reluctant to learn about faiths other than Islam. Some referred to ‘conspiracy theories’ that Amir had encountered as a pupil and made derogatory remarks in dialects that he understood. When presenting media images of Islam, he met with a hostile refusal to engage in discussion but again, he understood the response. Amir believed that his personal knowledge and experience were crucial in managing these situations: ‘My background and faith has helped me connect with pupils and identify sudden changes in their moods so I can adapt my teaching’.

Building on his insider knowledge and good relationships, Amir sought to challenge negative responses by referring to the Qur’an and Islamic concepts such as ‘respect’ and he encouraged pupils to reflect on and justify their arguments with reference to Islamic teachings. While he did not wish to impose his personal views, he felt a responsibility to guide his pupils in understanding the Islam that he believed in:

I believe that Islam is a peaceful faith and me being a Muslim and following such a life proves that Islam is a faith that can integrate well within secular society … my point (to pupils) is to understand Islam so they reflect on their views and think positively about how they could help the situation.

Amir’s first post was in a white majority school. When re-interviewed, he focused on his relationships with pupils from ‘poor backgrounds’ and with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties. Their lack of aspiration, home guidance and support had troubled him and he felt a need to encourage
them. In doing so, he had shared with pupils his experiences of growing up with little money and in cramped conditions but aspiring to and eventually achieving ‘a better life’. In this school, Amir had not used his insider knowledge of Islam. He felt that the pupils had such little awareness that they needed to learn ‘the basics’ and would find a personal dimension difficult: ‘pupils would not relate to it’, ‘it might just create barriers’.

When talking about the lack of guidance in his pupils’ home lives, Amir reflected on how the death of his father had deprived him of his own guide and the recurrence of the concept of ‘guide’ in his accounts indicates that this was central to his view of the religious education teacher’s role.

**Rani.** During her training in two white majority schools, Rani answered questions about her religious background but did not wish to draw attention to being Asian ‘because I did not know how pupils would respond to it’. In her first post in a similar school, she used factual knowledge drawn from her own experiences, for example, when explaining the difference between Panjabi Sikh and Hindu weddings. At this stage, she felt that she used her knowledge primarily to ‘eliminate misconceptions’.

When re-interviewed in her second year, Rani reflected that she had become ‘more open’ with pupils and her examples supported this. In response to pupils’ assumption that she must be religious, Rani had explained that she had been so as a child but ‘went off the rails’ and now makes up her own mind. For example, she is vegetarian now because she chooses to be, not because of religious reasons. She believed that it was important for pupils to appreciate that people can make up their own minds and change and this includes Asian people, ‘who are not all very religious’.

However, Rani felt that she could offer pupils ‘something special’ in her personal knowledge of Hinduism and Sikhism and help them ‘see religion as something real that affects real people’s lives’. For example, when teaching about ‘Multi-faith marriages’, the textbook had referred to how such marriages can leave children confused about the existence of God:

I realised that this is where I was at in my life, in terms of ‘belief in God’. I shared the problems I faced growing up with parents from different religious backgrounds with the class and how I was very upset by these and could not understand why there had to be differences if we were all supposed to believe in a creator that was all good. The class responded well, asked questions about how this made me feel, how it changed my outlook on God and people and what I think now. I think that sharing my experience with them helped them grasp the pros and cons of multi-faith marriages very well.

Rani viewed the role of the religious education teacher as helping pupils to understand people different to themselves and encouraging them to make up their own minds, on the basis of their understanding. Being different, being
misunderstood and making up her own mind were key themes in Rani’s reflections on her own childhood and adolescence.

*Lima.* Throughout the research, Lima maintained a cautious view of the use of her personal life knowledge. During her placements in two white majority schools, pupils had asked what she believed about matters such as ‘life after death’ and she had felt it important to provide brief but honest answers. Occasionally, she had made reference to her life experiences to stimulate discussion or model the kind of response she wanted from pupils. However, early attempts to use personal examples had made her wary:

I learned quickly that pupils can use this to ridicule you because being a teacher you are not supposed to be a normal human being who has a family and does housework. So I was more careful with my examples.

Post-training, Lima worked in Muslim majority schools and encountered a very different set of issues. Behaviour was generally poor and she began to use her own and the pupils’ Muslim identity as a management strategy:

Pupils responded well to frequent references to me and the pupils as ‘Muslims’ and what ‘we’ believe. They had an acute sense of who they are and what they believe and are very protective about their beliefs. I was very familiar with the school and catchment area that is quite traditional in its interpretation of Islam and using my life experiences worked well. This approach could not be any further from my own but sometimes it was the only strategy left to engage pupils.

Another teacher had told Lima that she used her Muslim identity and experiences constantly and found ‘it works wonders’ but Lima was unhappy about this approach:

I fear it may be perpetuating the Islamic ‘bubble’ that pupils and the community seem to be living in. Pupils were very blatant about their lack of interest in other religions. I cannot see how it can be helping community cohesion if role models are not impartial.

Lima believed that the development of individual pupils and of the community would be best supported by encouraging informed, independent thinking. The religious education teacher’s role should help pupils to explore beliefs and practices sensitively and by stimulating and moderating discussion of these, develop their thinking skills and appreciation of diversity. However, she struggled with the tension between enabling pupils ‘to explore their own beliefs and become articulate in expressing and defending these by having them challenged’, and respecting parents’ and pupils’ commitment to their faith. She posed the question: ‘How can I help to both reinforce and challenge their beliefs?’
Although committed to promoting understanding of and respect for religious and cultural diversity and the value of ‘questioning’, Lima had arrived at a view of the role of religious education teacher as, primarily, an impartial provider of information and facilitator of skills development. There is little evidence of the quest for meaning that she wrote about at course entry and that appeared to reflect her personal life experiences. It seems that in her teaching situation, she had struggled to see how she could ‘generate the idea that we are all in this together, this existential predicament’, given the sincerity of parents and pupils who did not recognise a ‘predicament’.

**Discussion**

The participants in this study were aware, from the outset, that their tutor considered the relationship between teachers’ personal and professional lives to be worthy of reflection. They were clearly encouraged to write and talk about these matters, although the quotations above indicate an openness that was not required. However, participants received no tutor encouragement, during or after training, to make use of their personal life knowledge in their teaching. A commitment to doing so was apparent in their course entry reflections that simply required them to write about their pre-course experiences and aims. Thereafter, there is clear evidence, from lesson plans and observations as well as participants’ own accounts, that all chose to present or draw on their life knowledge in their teaching. While their decisions about when and how to use this differed, all appear to have made decisions in relation to beliefs about the role of the religious education teacher that reflected values, qualities and attitudes that were personally, as well as professionally important to them and that were, or can be, related to significant life experiences. The research enabled me to recognise that these beliefs were maintained in differing teaching contexts and appear to have fuelled commitment to teaching in the face of challenges to this. The following discussion explores the relationship between participants’ personal and professional lives and some of the issues arising from this.

Each of the accounts above concludes with a summary of the participant’s beliefs about the religious education teacher’s role that can be viewed as their teacher metaphor (Bullough, Knowles, and Crow 1992) or image. Although each participant had a distinctive teacher image, comparison indicated a common belief in the importance of challenging pupils to reflect on their assumptions and think for themselves and encouraging questioning, openness and exploration. While these are values and skills promoted in undergraduate and teacher training courses, the participants made little reference to their studies. All did write of powerful, early experiences of challenging, questioning and/or exploring beyond the beliefs and practices that they had been brought up with, eventually reaching their own conclusions.
Examining the different kinds of life experiences that influence teachers, Sikes distinguishes between those that are personal and idiosyncratic and those that are common to large numbers of people and have a more ‘definite historical determination’ (1992, 40). For participants in this study, there appears to have been such a common experience, as examined in Lewis’ (2007) and Sarwar’s (2008) research on the ways in which British-born Asians are exploring and creating interpretations of inherited cultural and religious traditions that connect with their own life experiences and differ from those of their parents. It seems that, as young people, the participants had shared in this experience and that their personal understanding of what it means to develop as a young, thinking person was reflected in their professional emphasis on challenging pupils to question, ‘think outside the box’ and make up their own minds.

UK (Lewis 2007) and Europe-wide studies (OSCE 2007, 2011) have highlighted the need for teachers who can enable pupils from ethnic and religious minority backgrounds to negotiate inter-cultural and inter-generational challenges. All of the participants in this study had experience of negotiating such challenges in their personal lives and their potential to use this to support pupils from similar backgrounds has been indicated. However, it is significant that all made some use of their personal life knowledge in white majority schools and most believed that it was important to do so. In these contexts, a common concern was to address pupils’ misconceptions by drawing on personal knowledge of ‘real life’ religion. The experience of growing up in a multi-faith city was viewed as providing insider knowledge of many of the religions taught in schools: as Aisha explained, despite their ‘religious differences’, South Asian Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs have much in common culturally and growing up in one religious community provides insider knowledge and understanding of the others (Nesbitt 2004). This recognition of a shared cultural background was reflected in participants’ concern to challenge pupils’ assumptions about ‘Asians’. While religious education syllabuses enabled them to address misconceptions about religions directly, there was an underlying concern to present Asian people as ‘normal’ which can be related to the building of teacher-pupil relationships.

All participants recognised the importance of developing relationships that enabled pupils to share their personal views and experiences openly, but they reported differing views about and experiences of achieving this. ‘Communication research’ offers a perspective on these similarities and differences. Richmond and McCroskey review studies which suggest that pupils are more motivated and their learning is significantly enhanced when they have an ‘affinity’ with the teacher (1992, 168–170). Strategies that teachers can use to promote affinity include the ‘techniques’ of ‘Equality/Homophily’, in which the teacher creates a sense of ‘similarity’ between pupils and teacher, and of ‘Openness’, which involves teachers disclosing information about their backgrounds, interests and views. Studies of teacher self disclosure in
the context of teaching religions have found that this can be beneficial, but that great care is needed to avoid inappropriate relationships and/or influencing students' personal views (Ejsing 2007).

For Asian teachers working in white majority schools, the sharing of their personal life knowledge might seem a risky strategy that would increase distance rather than promote affinity. However, Rani became increasingly confident in referring to her own life when addressing pupils' misconceptions and Simran and Aisha were consistently open about their religious and cultural lives, believing that this would promote good, trusting relationships. These teachers' efforts to promote the 'normality' of Asian people might be viewed as not only a matter of challenging stereotypes, but also as a means of addressing the distance that being an Asian teacher might create. In contrast, Amir did not refer to his insider knowledge of Islam because it 'might create barriers', but he did choose to tell pupils from 'difficult backgrounds' about his own childhood difficulties to encourage them, and possibly, create an affinity that would enable them to accept him as a guide.

Another interesting perspective on teacher–pupil 'affinity' is provided by the Muslim participants' experiences of working in Muslim majority schools. All believed that pupils responded positively to them because of their Muslim identity and made use of their insider knowledge. However, Lima and Aisha were concerned by pupils' desire to relate to them as Muslims and to the subject matter through references to Islam. Both disliked trading on this to motivate pupils and saw themselves as different kinds of Muslims to their pupils. This unease with pupils' perceptions was recognised by Osler in her research on 'black' (including Asian) teachers. She found that the advantages of working in a predominantly black school can be outweighed by the expectations that pupils and parents have of black teachers. Some find themselves facing external impositions of identity and facing the challenge of '… managing tensions between their identities as teachers and identities as black people without denying aspects of themselves' (2001, 7). Lima and Aisha were uneasy about being viewed by pupils as 'a Muslim like us' and frustrated that they could not engage pupils in the kind of learning that they were personally as well as professionally committed to.

All of the Muslim participants found Muslim pupils reluctant to study faiths other than Islam and Lima posed the question: 'How can I help to both reinforce and challenge their beliefs?' This question is recognised in recent reports on 'Islamophobia' in European schools (OSCE 2011) and on RE in English/Welsh schools. The latter found ‘… uncertainty about the place of an open, critical, investigative approach to religious education in the context of teaching about the pupils’ faith’, and called for more guidance on 'how to balance respect for the religion and belief of pupils with an open and critical approach to religious education' (Ofsted 2010, 43).
Some valuable guidance is offered in Ipgrave’s (1999) study of English Muslim pupils and ‘secular’ religious education. This found that teachers were concerned by Muslim pupils’ ‘narrow mindedness’ and ‘exclusivity’ (150) and wished to promote an openness to diversity, while also reinforcing pupils’ own faith. Recognising the dilemma that teachers face in attempting to promote pupil openness and to respect faith communities which see openness ‘as fraught with danger’ (148), Ipgrave suggests that the way forward lies in the relationship between teacher, pupil and content. In the ‘most successful’ lessons, teachers encouraged pupils to express and reflect on their beliefs, substantiate their arguments and, through the interpretation of texts, apply principles to a variety of situations. Ipgrave refers to this as a weak form of critical openness in which believers adopt an attitude of appraisal towards their beliefs but do not question their foundation (150).

This approach is very similar to that used by Amir and attempted by Aisha and there are other parallels in Ipgrave’s recommendations for reinforcing pupils’ own faith. Ipgrave draws attention to the conflicts that can arise when teachers’ use of westernised interpretations of Islam differ from the understandings of their pupils. Teachers need to recognise this difference, value pupils’ own understandings and encourage them to express and explore these in relation to other perspectives. In this study, the Muslim participants drew on their insider knowledge of South Asian Muslim pupils’ understandings and concerns to engage, support and challenge them.

Conclusion

While no generalisations can be made from such a small-scale qualitative study, when viewed in relation to larger scale research, it is possible to offer a number of recommendations and indicate findings worthy of further research attention.

First, the study identifies issues that should be addressed during initial teacher training. It has been noted that teachers from ME backgrounds can find themselves attempting to manage tensions between their identities as teachers and as Asian/black people, without denying aspects of themselves. Participants in this study provided evidence of this, in their frustration at being viewed as insiders who would reinforce an insider ‘bubble’ and their concern about the effect that ‘being themselves’ might have on relationships with non-religious, white pupils. Previous research has found that white, non-religious beginning teachers can also experience tensions between their personal self image and the pre-conceptions of ‘religious education teacher’ which they encounter in schools. This can lead to professionally inappropriate attempts to avoid denying aspects of themselves by sharing details of their social lives with pupils or drawing attention to their atheism (Sikes and
Everington 2004). While the participants in this study did not appear to have used personal knowledge inappropriately, they were reliant on their own judgement when deciding what to share and when.

The importance of observing professional boundaries and of guarding against inappropriate self-disclosure is recognised in the Europe-wide and English guidance referred to in the introduction. However, this guidance has not been supported by the kind of practitioner focused research that can provide insights into the dilemmas that teachers face or how to make judgements about the fine line between an appropriate and inappropriate use of personal knowledge and experiences. More research and development work is needed to provide beginning religious education teachers with guidance on, and opportunities to explore, the relationship between their personal and professional identities, potential dilemmas and dangers and ways of managing these. Teacher ‘narratives’ of the kind constructed in this research should be of particular value (Bullough 2008, 7). However, the study also suggests a need for more teacher-led research, enabling those who have the greatest insight into the issues to develop guidance for use in professional development courses. For example, although unaware of Ipgrave’s ‘weak form’ of critical openness, participants in this study recognised the need for this and some had begun to develop their own strategies. Action research aimed at developing this approach would appear to have value for teachers of pupils with religious commitments and those of non-religious pupils from ‘disadvantaged’ backgrounds who, like Aisha, recognise a need to broaden pupils’ horizons as well as affirm their identities and world-views.

Second, the study contributes to substantial research evidence of the need to increase the number of teachers from minority religious/ethnic backgrounds (Cunningham and Hargreaves 2007). The participants in this study brought to their careers personal knowledge that enabled them to provide a much needed ‘real life’ dimension to the teaching of religions and cultures (Ofsted 2010). However, they viewed themselves as being more than teachers of a subject. They expressed a commitment to making a difference to the lives of young people and to working towards a society based on the values of equality, freedom of thought and informed respect for diversity.

These findings should be viewed in relation to those of large-scale studies that have identified caring, empathy and a commitment to social justice as the defining qualities of the ‘good teacher’ and have challenged the view that subject and pedagogical knowledge is of greater importance (Bullough 2008; Goodson and Hargreaves 1996). Studies undertaken in the UK and USA have identified a relationship between the life experiences of ME teachers and commitment to social justice (Nieto 2006; Osler 1997, 2001). They have argued for increasing the number of such teachers, not just as role models for pupils of similar backgrounds, but because of evidence of
their concern to dismantle individual and societal barriers to learning and advancement.

The English/Welsh government has recently withdrawn support from strategies aimed at increasing the number of ME teachers (Hick et al. 2011). In tandem with this, new teacher training entrance requirements are exerting pressure on providers to select applicants on the basis of their academic capabilities and degree level subject knowledge (DfE 2010). In the USA this approach to selection has been challenged (Cochran-Smith 2001) and there is a need for a research based challenge in the UK. This study indicates the value of providing further qualitative evidence of the contribution that teachers from ME backgrounds can make and in particular, of researching the work of RE teachers who are constantly at the ‘sharp end’ of policies aimed at promoting education about and for diversity.

The participants in this study were beginners and did not have solutions to the many challenges they faced. However, their personal life knowledge played a crucial role in enabling them to meet their challenges thoughtfully and creatively and to remain committed to the ideal of ‘making a difference’. In the words of a veteran researcher of teachers’ lives:

To teach means standing for a vision of the good life and good society … we testify (and) as testimony, teaching flows out of the inner life of the teacher affecting not only what is taught but what is learned (Bullough 2008, 9).

Notes on contributor
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