findings

Children's perspectives on believing and belonging

This research sought to explore children's understanding of religion and the role that it plays in their lives, both within the school environment and within the wider community. The study attempts to unravel the impact that religion has on young people's lives by examining the extent to which religion contributes to shaping both their identities and the type of social and friendship networks within which they find themselves. The study, carried out by a team from the University of East London, gives an insight into the views of over 100 children, aged between 9 and 11 years, living in two diverse communities; one in London and one in the North West of England. The research found that:

- Children are more likely to reflect a more complex pattern of religious identity which involves kinship, ethnicity, age and gender.

- Children display different levels and patterns of understanding, observance and personal commitment to religion, irrespective of their particular religious affiliation.

- School is one of the few places where children from different religions and ethnic backgrounds get to meet on a regular basis.

- The majority of children were not aware of any particular religious ethos in their schools and were largely indifferent to faith-based schooling.

- The opinions of children differ as to whether learning about others' religions in school is a positive experience.

- Lunch-times and assemblies at school are seen as events which reinforce religious difference and promote grouping together.

- Religious and ethnic labels are used interchangeably by children as markers of racial difference, underlining how the categories of ethnicity and religion overlap.

- Friendships develop across, and between, religious and ethnic groups in primary school although this experience changes outside school, where children's choice of friends is often shaped by family circumstance and religious affiliation.

- The amount of time spent by the more observant children on their religion impacts on their relationships outside of school, with more devout children having less social interaction with other children.

- Outside school, friendships are often shaped by power relationships between adults and children, with some adults actively discouraging children from mixing across religions.

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Religious identity, social practice, belief and spirituality

The topic of religion and its relationship to notions of integration, cohesion and belonging is complex, particularly so when placed within the context of children's social interaction. The concepts of individual faith and personal spirituality are shaped differently by different cultures. This study demonstrates that this shaping of faith and spirituality is also extended into the playground, with young people describing their beliefs in terms of both social practice and received teachings around morality and ethics. The study developed a typology which helps to reduce this complexity by organising the children's accounts of their experiences into three dimensions:

Religious identity: including feelings of identification with a particular religious tradition and a willingness (or obligation) to participate in the rituals and activities associated with it.

Social practice: including the structured learning and public rituals, ceremonies and festivals associated with the religion.

Belief and spirituality: including the individual's thoughts, beliefs, emotions and personal practices such as private prayer and meditation.

The researchers used this typology to characterise children's assessments of their own religious identity, practice and belief, irrespective of their particular religious affiliations (see Table 1).

This typology is used throughout the study to help make the distinctions that *'religion'* denotes the social and institutional aspects of human relationships with the divine whilst *'faith'* describes the more personal and individual relationships.

Table 1: Children's assessments of their own religious identity, practice and belief

Identity, practice and belief typology	Key characteristics	Commentary – Typically, these children:
Highly observant	■ Religious identity very significant ■ High level of social practice ■ Medium or high level of belief and spirituality	Describe their lives as being significantly shaped by their religion. They are likely to be heavily involved in the practices and institutions of their religion and strongly committed to the beliefs and values they have been taught.
Observant	■ Religious identity significant ■ Medium level of social practice ■ Medium or low level of belief and spirituality	Describe their religious observance as a compulsory, significant and regular part of their lives. They usually accept its teachings and practices, although they may find some or all of it boring and an imposition.
Occasionally participating	■ Religious identity may be significant ■ Low (but may desire higher) level of social practice ■ Medium level of belief and spirituality	Do not get taken (or sent) to religious activities by their parents or other adults, except on rare occasions, and are unlikely to be well instructed in their religion. They do, though, identify with the religion, may attend social observances voluntarily and enjoy festivals, feasts and presents.
Implicit individual faith	■ Religious identity may not be significant ■ High, medium or low level of social practice ■ High level of belief and spirituality	Concentrate on religion as the 'realm of the supernatural'. They talk about personal spirituality, drawing on faith as a resource through prayer, meditation and rituals. They may attend or belong to religious institutions and express a religious affiliation, but these are not essential to their understanding of faith.
Not religious	■ Religious identity not significant ■ Low level of social practice ■ Low level of belief and spirituality	Have little interest in, or understanding of religion. They also have little experience of it outside school and may question or mock those who are religious.

Belief and friendship in school

School is one of the few places within a community where children from various ethnic and religious backgrounds can mix together on a day-to-day basis. Some children see the mixture of people and cultures and learning about others' religions in school as a positive learning experience. Others identify it as a cause for tension and conflict over religion and religious/ethnic identity.

> "I definitely prefer a mixed school because if it wasn't mixed, it would be boring. I wouldn't be learning about Islam or the Hindu or Sikh religions in RE. It's good fun." (Christian child)

Number balance between religious groups also matters to children, especially boys, and they feel anxious if their group is viewed negatively or excluded altogether by a dominant group.

> "I want to go to a Sikh school because in this school there are so many Muslims. At Eid most Muslim pupils stay at home and there are only 5 or 6 of us left in the class." (Sikh child)

The majority of children were not aware of any particular religious ethos in their schools and were largely indifferent to faith-based schooling. For others, though, a lack of religious awareness on the part of the schools or their classmates was seen as an issue and a cause of tension.

Lunch-times and assemblies were seen as events that marked religious difference and promoted clustering. In one school, tables were separately labelled 'halal', 'vegetarian' or 'packed lunch', and staff described some food as 'normal'. In another, children described teacher insensitivity and punishment for not joining in some religious activities:

> "I wasn't singing because it was a Christian song and I told the teacher that I didn't want to sing it because I am not Christian. So she put me in detention." (Muslim child)

The children interviewed did not see wider social constructs (such as race, gender and religion) as determining the nature of their own individual relationships although they were aware of, and used the terms, racism and racist. But, children did recognise that there were group identity issues and patterns of exclusion which formed specifically around religious affiliations.

The ethnic term 'Asian' and the religious term 'Christian' were both used by children as markers of racial difference, underlining how the categories of ethnicity and religion overlap in children's discourse.

Belief and friendship beyond school

It was clear from the interviews that children's lives overlap at school and that friendships develop across, and between, religious and ethnic groups. This is not the same outside school, however, where children's choices of friends are often shaped by family circumstance and religious affiliation.

The research points to growing evidence that religious difference is becoming a marker for hostility between groups, and that children are being actively discouraged by adults from mixing across religions where there are significant levels of racism and intolerance evident in wider society.

The study has identified that the amount of time spent by the more observant children on their religion impacts on their relationships outside school, with more devout children having less social interaction with other children from outside their particular religion than those less devout.

Most children recognise local places of worship as familiar landmarks and they have a sacred and almost supernatural significance for some, although the proportion of children who have visited places of worship other than their own suggests that such places also create a degree of segregation between communities.

There were no reported incidents of the schools organising visits to different places of worship, suggesting that they are not seen as a local resource for the whole community. For many children, youth clubs, uniformed organisations, classes and sports activities are associated with religion only because they are located within a place of worship.

There are many examples given of children of all affiliations attending religious instruction within the community, to a greater or lesser extent, and there is evidence that different lifestyles are shaped by the nature and frequency of these experiences.

Observations and conclusions

Children's involvement in religion, and the friendships made between and across religions, is often shaped by the power relationships which exist between adults and children, the obligatory nature of some religious devotions and the methods which are used to instil discipline and learning.

This study has shown that, for children who attend primary schools in ethnically diverse and multi-faith neighbourhoods, their attitudes towards religious identity are diverse and complex. Primary schools are the key setting for children to unite across religious and cultural boundaries, yet the religious status of the school is irrelevant for most children and, whilst mixing across cultures and religions does take place, many of the friendship circles encountered during this study were religion and ethnically homogenous.

About the project

This study was undertaken by Greg Smith and Afsia Khanom, from the Centre for Institutional Studies at the University of East London. Fieldwork took place in two church primary schools serving multi-ethnic, multi-faith neighbourhoods in a city in the North of England, and at a local authority primary school in a diverse part of an East London borough. A range of qualitative methods were used; interviewing, classroom discussions and worksheet exercises, questionnaires and school based ethnographic observation over an eighteen month period with 100 children aged between 9 and 11 years.

For further information

The full report, **Children's perspectives on believing and belonging** by Greg Smith, is published for the Foundation by the National Children's Bureau as part of the Understanding Children's Lives series (ISBN 1 904787 53 3, price £12.95 or £10.95 for NCB members, plus £3 p&p for orders under £28).

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