



Annual General Meeting
Wednesday 23rd May 2012
Report to Portsmouth SACRE
by Jane Lewis.

The day began well with arrivals and a welcome by the National Chair, Bruce Gill. 'It was a hot day and a hot time for RE' he informed us. 'There is so much goodwill in the RE community but in times of recession we have to cut the garment according to the cloth.' He went on to introduce the first speaker of the day: Professor Robert Jackson: Professor of Religious Education at Warwick University.

1. Professor Robert Jackson: Professor of Religious Education at Warwick University

1.1 RU 4 EC RE? Research and European Policy Making on Religious Education: Taking account of young people's views in developing the subject

Professor Robert Jackson's talk was full of information about the latest research and the findings. He felt it essential to agree on terminology before progressing to the research and also to ascertain why religious education should be studied in publicly funded schools. There are both intrinsic and instrumental reasons:

1. Intrinsic a liberal education should cover all distinctive 'realms of meaning' or areas of experience. (music?)
2. Instrumental some understanding of religion(s) needed for:
 - knowledge and understanding of culture (France)
 - promoting the social development of students, through educating for democratic citizenship, including religious freedom and tolerance (human rights) and promoting social and community cohesion.
 - enhancing the personal development of students (moral, spiritual, faith/belief, character)

1.2 RedCo Research

It was carried out in England involving qualitative and quantitative studies of young people from 8 countries and their views of religion in schools. There

were different national contexts and not necessarily nationally representative, and reflected the views of 14 – 16 year olds.

They found that:

- there was strong student support for appropriate democratic principles in classrooms.
- students see classrooms as a potential safe space for dialogue.
- students want peaceful coexistence based on both knowledge of each other's religions and sharing common interests or doing things together.
- many students with a firm commitment were **not** threatened by dialogue with others / learning about others.
- BUT some (especially when in the minority) religious students feel vulnerable (can be atheists)
- there is a need for contextualisation in each country. Need to be sensitive to the history of both religion and state.
- research leads to policy which in turn leads to practice, e.g. the need for groups like SACRE.

1.3 DCSF Warwick Research 2010: English Case studies

They looked at materials used to teach about world religions. There were 7 researchers doing case studies, resulting in 20 case studies.

They found that kids felt:

- RE helped to develop positive attitudes to others
- discussion and dialogue was valued in developing empathy and self respect and encouraged self-evaluation.
- young people appreciate direct contact with difference through visits and electronic resources.

1.4 WRERU Research- Young People's Attitude to Religious Diversity

There were 2 researchers conducting group interviews in a wide variety of geographical and cultural settings: (4 English, 4 Scottish, 4 Northern Ireland, 3 Welsh and 3 London schools).

They found that it was hard for teachers to generate an interest in religion where there were low levels of religious practice as it can create religious stereotypes.

RE lessons often fail to take account of the diversity within religious traditions. Pupils can find that their experience of their faith is different to that represented in RE. Also they can be uncomfortable when used as a representative of their tradition in the classroom.

Finally he said that RE whether taught as a subject or not, it should be engaging and informative!

1.5 Other Points Raised

How to integrate / address non-religious world views?

Young people need help unpacking the media's representations of religion.

Young people need a safe space for dialogue.

Interdisciplinary approach?

2 Lat Blaylock (editor of RE Today)

2.1 SACRE + Teachers of RE = Good Learning

Teachers are the front line and therefore SACRE's are the second line support services.

Mr Blaylock started by showing a variety of images of religious icons and startled nearly everyone present (mostly grey haired) by showing the visual images of choice by pupils. He asked, "How does SACRE reach unkeen teachers?"

- Deborah Weston sent pupils on a G&T day and sent the pupils back to disseminate.
- Speed dating / Wheels within wheels. Two circles of chairs and every 5 minutes one group move on a chair. Need to be given key questions to talk about.
- Pupil conferences where pupils engage with key issues.

The challenge of SACRE is not maintenance but activism. He gave examples of good practice, e.g. Year 4 and the story of Guru Nanak and the milk and the jasmine flower (the Sikh faith). Every religion has stories that hinge on a moment of enlightenment or a turning point. After a practical task such as making a mod roc milk bowl and an origami jasmine flower the children were challenged with discussion of questions such as:

- Was the bowl full of milk a symbol of something else?
- Why did the Guru add a jasmine flower?
- What was his purpose in doing this?
- What effect did it have on the other people in the story?

While completing the craft activities the children had to think of their own spiritual word which they believed would have apposite impact on others. A

writing activity was set up for the children to reflect on the reasons why they felt sure there was always room for more love, care or kindness in the world. Mr Blaylock also interviewed Marcus Brigstocke, described as a theological enquirer who regrets his irreligiosity (kind of). Teachers were invited to share his wistful take on spiritual development with pupils for some good RE lessons.

2.2 Three Year 9 replies to the question of whether God exists:

Dear Marcus,

God here, I have read your article/ mind puddle of insecure questions and theories of my existence. Well I am here, but I'm afraid your fantasies of an omnipotent, omniscient old man fluttering about the clouds are rather a figure of your sarcastic imagination. I am nothing but a slice of your conscience, a mere shadow of your mind subtly guiding you through your day to day life. I am omnipresent in that everyone has me, but I am certainly not benevolent. Sorry.

Yours God

Dear Marcus,

I have recently read your article, you have a lot of questions but I'm not sure you actually want an answer. It sounds to me like you have already closed your mind to the idea of God. Although you say that you want to believe you're still over thinking things, you don't have to follow a religion to believe in God. Just wake up one day, smile to yourself about all the simple but amazing things you have in your life, and that warm feeling you get inside, that's God. Or if it's raining, look up to the sky and see how lucky you are to be alive and to be able to feel every drop on your face. You can still question your existence, in fact never stop, always wonder and play with different thoughts in your head because that's what makes life interesting. Open your mind up and e happy.

Yours sincerely, your God.

Hello Marcus,

This is the Angel Gabriel. I am sorry but God cannot reply to your message, He is currently on a retreat holiday on cloud nine. I am not sure if He will return in your lifetime, I will have to check the systems, but I am certain He will appreciate your letter.

Here are some tips from me to you, but promise not to pray to God about them...Don't waste your time, He doesn't really care, He is just doing His job. Me and the cherubs do all the Admin anyway. Maybe take up a new hobby or spend some time with the wife and kids that would be more worthwhile.

Yours sincerely A.Gabriel

Lat Blaylock was a stimulating and inspiring speaker and clearly very motivated by his subject.

- 3 **Sarah -----?** (I never did find out her name, but she was **filling in for John Keast** who had cancelled a few days previously). She spoke to the same theme as John Keast was due to speak, i.e.

3.1 **The State of RE.**

Sarah said that the previous presentations had given inspiring insights, but in reality the picture was very mixed. The change of Government and the consequent policies put in place have had a mixed impact. As well as upsides there are many drawbacks, although the number of teachers and hours of RE taught in Secondary schools have gone up.

In the autumn the number of Post Grad training places concerning RE were reduced, and therefore the number of places in Universities had been reduced (19 out of 34 universities were affected). This meant the danger of closure was increased, and the knock on effect of knowledge, experience and skills lost when tutors are lost.

NATRE has shown a strong lead in surveying RE teaching with relation to the English Baccalaureate. Although it's not a qualification in itself, RE has been excluded from the list of subjects. The impact on schools has been that teaching posts, lessons and funding has been lessened. There is no evidence about the effects in the primary sector.

In 2013 there are expected to be fewer entrants for GCSE RE, and the number of schools with no entries will be doubled. (This is anecdotal evidence only as it has been dependent on the response from schools.)

There is a diminishing body of advisors. There are 36 L.A.'s with a member with responsibility for RE. Many talented and experienced advisors are either becoming freelance or having to take on extra duties. It's a gloomy picture as in authorities with a named rep. has a host of other responsibilities, so it is difficult to collect information with regard to the impact of austerity measures, as there is no one to carry out the work. There is also an unclear picture about Academies and free schools coming out of L.A.'s.

3.1 **Three positives:**

1. A scheme called RE Policy Mark has been trialled in the NW England. Like ARTSMARK it will hopefully raise the profile of RE.

2. There is an all-party Parliamentary group for RE which will bring together members across the political spectrum. This is the first support at Parliamentary level.
3. National Review of RE. There was a review of the National Curriculum just before Christmas. The Government don't know what to do with it yet, but RE was left out of the review, but any changes to the NC will impact on RE especially if the new NC narrows to focus on skills alone. Important for schools to be in harmony or schools will find it hard to plan. The RE Council are aiming to do their own review although it will have no statutory weight it will be available to all SACRE's.

It is quite difficult to say anything clear about the state of RE at the moment as a great deal is uncertain.

*These notes are presented as my impressions of the AGM main presentations and should not be seen as reflecting my own views. Thank you all for granting me the opportunity to take part in such an interesting and worthwhile event.
Jane Lewis 28/5/12*