

REforREal

THE FUTURE OF TEACHING AND LEARNING ABOUT RELIGION AND BELIEF

RE for Real is a project within the Religious Literacy Programme in the Faiths and Civil Society Unit at Goldsmiths, University of London. We asked 331 students, teachers, parents and employers about their views on the future of teaching and learning about religion and belief in schools.

The full report is available to download in PDF format at: www.gold.ac.uk/faithsunit/reforreal

A 20th Century Settlement for a 21st Century Reality

An urgent conversation is underway about the future of learning about religion and belief in schools, following growing criticisms of the policy muddle which frames it. Under the 1944 Education Act, Religious Instruction was made compulsory in schools and Local Authorities mandated to provide an Agreed Syllabus. When the national curriculum was introduced in the 1988 Education Reform Act, RE was not included. The stated purpose of RE shifted from 'teaching religion' to 'teaching about religion', indoctrinatory teaching was prohibited and 'Religious Education' replaced 'Religious Instruction'. The Act maintained the model of local determination of RE and multi-faith Standing Advisory Councils for Religious Education (SACREs) became mandatory.

Agreed Syllabuses are now required to "reflect the fact that religious traditions in Great Britain are in the main Christian, whilst taking account of the teaching and practices of the other principal religions represented in Great Britain" (UK Parliament 1988, Section.8.3) – a view which is at least debatable.

In 1994 non-statutory model syllabuses were published which included six 'main' religions, raising the question of what counts as 'main', and who decides? In 2004 a non-statutory national framework was introduced and the range of religions to be studied was further widened, including the study of 'secular philosophies such as humanism'. Which ones to include?

RE's exclusion from the English Baccalaureate Certificate (EBacc) and removal of GCSE short-course results as a measure of school performance, have led to a reduction in already pressed teaching time, with many schools delivering RE through tutor periods, or occasional 'RE days' rather than as a discrete regular subject on the timetable. RE was not included in the government's review of the National Curriculum carried out in 2013. A former Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove, has said that RE has been an 'unintended casualty' of reforms (REC, 2013).

The 1944 settlement is now more than 70 years old, and has been repeatedly amended, in piecemeal ways, usually in the direction of trying to keep up with a changing religion and belief landscape. But changes in the real religious landscape have far outpaced changes in education about it.

The real picture is made up of more believing without belonging, and more non-believing at all. It is a context that is Christian, plural and secular all at the same time. We have a mid-20th century settlement for an early 21st century reality.

This is further complicated by structural changes, especially the introduction of academies in 2000 and Free Schools after 2010, which are not required to follow locally agreed syllabuses. The impact on RE has been an increased diversity of approaches. It is intended that academies and Free Schools will soon become the majority, so their growing freedoms from local authority control make clarity all the more pressing. Is the current RE landscape up to the challenge? This project asks how might it be re-imagined, and what might the alternatives look like?

Goldsmiths
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON



CULHAM ST GABRIEL'S
EXCELLENCE IN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

THE RESEARCH PROCESS

From September 2014 – May 2015, 331 people were interviewed. RE for Real visited 19 schools across the country, including 5 Community schools and 14 Academies, of which 6 are C-of-E, 1 ecumenical, and 7 with no religious character.

Research questions were asked either in semi-structured interviews (parents, teachers, employers) or in focus groups (students) and revolved around three main areas:

- Understandings of the purposes of RE
- Aspirations regarding content of teaching and learning about religion and belief
- Thoughts about the structures of teaching and learning about religion and belief

We convened three Influencers' Groups of key stakeholders in policy, practice and academic settings to help think about the data as the project unfolded. To stimulate wider discussion, 4 short films were made, presenting leading figures on the future of teaching and learning about religion and belief. These are available at www.gold.ac.uk/faithsunit/reforreal

SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

Students

We spoke to 190 Year 10 students in 19 focus groups. Here's a summary of what they said.

- Students are concerned that they hear a lot of stereotypes in the media and in some of their learning. They want to know what's real.
- They think that learning about religion and belief is becoming more and more relevant because they see more of it, and what they see is more diverse.
- Almost all emphasise the role of learning about religion and belief in order to engage positively with diversity.
- Almost all emphasise the importance of learning about religion and belief to their personal development.
- Almost all want to learn about a wider range of religions and beliefs and are worried that many students learn about only one or two traditions.
- Students really enjoy learning about real 'lived' religion, especially through thinking about religion and belief controversies.
- Most of this cohort think RE needs to be a separate subject with subject specialist teachers.
- Many think that RE lacks status.
- The majority think they should study religion and belief up to Year 10, but then GCSE should be optional, not compulsory.

Teachers

We interviewed 97 teachers, including 19 senior leaders, 29 specialist RE teachers and 49 non-specialist RE teachers. This is a summary of what they said.

- Teachers in this study broadly assume that understanding religion and belief will result in positive attitudes to difference.
- They particularly emphasise the importance of learning for cohesion in the least diverse places.
- They think RE has an important task in rebalancing media stereotypes.
- They are frustrated by how little time there is for RE, often resulting in teaching about only one or two traditions.
- Specialist RE teachers emphasise RE as a humanities subject with an academic justification in its own right, while non-specialist RE teachers emphasise learning for cohesion and respect.
- Many see RE as a key space for personal, spiritual and moral reflection in school.
- There is concern about a tension in RE between academic and personal purposes.
- Teachers think religion and belief learning prepares students for the workplace.
- 86% of teachers in the study feel that RE should be a National Curriculum subject. 72% say it should be compulsory to at least 16.
- The majority of teachers in the study think teaching and learning about religion and belief should take place in a distinct RE subject (specific) and also be included as a theme in other learning areas (distributed).

“ A lot of kids are uncomfortable calling it RE.

“ Keeping it as a separate, slightly odd subject that only weird people think is interesting is not very helpful.

“ I think it lives and breathes... it's eternally changing, we should teach it as that.

“ I think it is important that they do obviously understand the ones that a majority of the people in the world follow but there are also other belief systems out there as well that they should be learning about.

Parents

We interviewed 34 parents, who were asked by their children's schools to take part. What they said is summarised as follows.

- Almost all parents in the study think religion and belief learning should prepare students for religion and belief diversity.
- Parents emphasise attitudes – respect and tolerance - rather than knowledge, as being the main point of learning about religion and belief.
- Parents mostly talked in very general terms about RE inculcating morals and spirituality.
- Parents think it is important for young people to understand the 'world religions', though most could not say which religions they mean.
- 1/3 of parents in the study did not know that RE is not in the national curriculum. 94% said it should be.
- 94% of parents in the study think religious education should be compulsory in schools. 70% say up to at least age 16.
- Some want a name change, saying they think RE puts young people off.
- The majority think that students should learn about a wide range of religions and beliefs.
- Almost all think that this should include non-religious beliefs
- Parents think there should be a focus on religion in contemporary society.

Employers

We interviewed 10 employers, deliberately chosen to represent a range of public and private settings in a variety of sectors. Participants are all at senior, CEO, level. In summary, here's what they said.

- Young people need to learn about handling religion and belief diversity in ways that prepare them for workplace diversity.
- Learning about religion and belief should provide students with empathy with regard to the importance of religion in people's lives.
- It should give young people a practical understanding of how religion and belief will manifest themselves in people's lives.
- It should give young people an understanding of what are acceptable manifestations of religion and belief within the work place and what are not.
- Students should learn about non-religious beliefs.
- Most think RE should be compulsory at secondary school, though they weren't specific as to what level.

Adam Dinham and Martha Shaw
Faiths & Civil Society Unit, Goldsmiths, University of London
November 2015

“ I think everyone should do something that is core and then people get to choose their additional.

“ RE has to sort out what it is, we really have to identify what is the purpose of RE.

Points of Connection and Disconnection	Challenges and Questions for Policy and Practice
Purposes of Religion and Belief Learning	
<p>There is broad consensus between students, parents, teachers and employers that young people should learn about religion and belief diversity, with the goal of managing difference and cohesion.</p>	<p>Should the onus for this key instrumental goal be placed on a subject that is so diverse in its delivery? Would these instrumental goals be better and more appropriately met if more distributed across other subjects in the timetable?</p>
<p>They broadly agree that it should also contribute to their personal development.</p>	<p>RE is often seen as the only space for this on the curriculum. Would a stronger PSHE curriculum be appropriate that encompassed aspects of religion and belief, and contextualised them as overlapping but distinct from ethics, morals and spirituality?</p>
<p>Specialist RE teachers tend to see religion and belief as worthy of study in their own right and non-specialist RE teachers tend to emphasise RE for cohesion.</p>	<p>Can RE be both instrumental and academic? How can teachers be better equipped for clarity about its purposes?</p>
Content of Religion and Belief Learning	
<p>All, but particularly students, would like to see a wider range of religions and beliefs studied. However, teachers feel limited due to time pressures.</p>	<p>'How many' and what to teach are live areas in a context where time is so squeezed. To what extent should the range and mix be determined? Who should determine it? The RE time is limited and the space is full. Would more dedicated space outside RE for citizenship, cohesion, and personal development (SMSC) make more room for diversity of religion and belief within RE?*</p>
<p>All groups show an interest in learning about informal, non-traditional religion and belief as well as the traditions, although due to time pressures this is not seen as a priority over the 'main' religions. Teachers and students are also focused on teaching about internal diversity.</p>	<p>*See above Should curriculum planning processes consider the latest research on religion and belief and work to reflect better the real religious landscape?</p>
<p>All groups agree that non-religion and non-religious beliefs should be studied.</p>	<p>*See above</p>
<p>All groups emphasise learning about real 'lived' religion, and religion in society, especially controversies like extremism.</p>	<p>*See above</p>
<p>Students particularly emphasise learning about social and moral issues</p>	<p>How can teachers balance the cross over with PSHE alongside a lack of clarity over what belongs where?</p>
<p>There is broad consensus that learning about religion and belief is beneficial in preparing students for the workplace.</p>	<p>There is an important vocational aspect to religion and belief learning. Should this be distributed to other parts of learning, for example careers education, making more room for other things in the space remaining?</p>
Structures of Religion and Belief Learning	
<p>Almost everybody agrees that RE should be compulsory to at least the end of Key Stage 4. Many across all cohorts are in favour of an optional GCSE.</p>	<p>Should compulsion be retained? Should compulsion be lifted at KS5?</p>
<p>Almost everybody agrees that RE should be in something like a national curriculum. There is a strong call for inclusion in the EBacc.</p>	<p>All state-funded schools will soon be Academies or Free Schools and the national curriculum will be less relevant anyway. As its role diminishes, what scope is there for an alternative framework that supports all schools? How can a national framework be balanced with school-level determination? How would the curriculum development process be managed and who would be involved? This also raises the question of how standards would be assessed.</p>
<p>All groups agree that learning about religion and belief should be a distinct timetabled subject, taught by specialists and also be distributed in subjects across the curriculum. But non-specialist teachers are anxious about their capacity to do this well.</p>	<p>Given the lack of RE specialists, what are appropriate levels of investment in initial teacher training and CPD for non-specialists called upon to teach RE?</p>
<p>All groups expressed some appetite for a change of name due to a perceived status problem.</p>	<p>Some suggestions include: Religious Awareness, Religious Literacy, Beliefs, Ethics and Values Education.</p>