

The Religious Education Council of England and Wales (/)

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14-22 Elder Street, London, E1 6BT

Meeting of 10 December 2013

Inquiry into the contribution of religious education to good community relations.

Session 1

Stephen Lloyd welcomed people to the meeting and explained the work of the APPG and said that he believed that there are now glimmers of light in the place of RE in the public and political sphere. Affirmed his own commitment to religious education.

Cohesion, RE and minority ethnic secondary pupils - Deborah Weston

Director of Spiritual, Moral, Social and Cultural Development, Mulberry Girls' School, Tower Hamlets

Deborah's evidence was based on her experience of teaching and managing in school in Tower Hamlets, an area of considerable and long-standing diversity. Each group had brought its own religious traditions into schools. Challenge in terms of subject knowledge.

Presented data from the last census on religion and the religious diversity within ethnic groups. Quoted evidence from the British Social Attitudes Survey, 2008, including for example that 33% of the population said that religion was important to them. Evidence from the Citizenship Survey, 2007, showed that 93% of Muslims and 90% of Sikhs said that religion is important to who they are. Religion was very important to her pupils and they wanted to know more when they came into RE lessons.

Defined 'community' using the four-fold definition used by Ofsted, 2009: the school community; the community within which the school is located; the UK community; and the global community.

Examined entry figures for RE by religion/ethnicity and showed the importance of religion as a salient marker of identity, according to the Citizenship Survey, 2007. There were interesting

variations on examination entry when viewed by ethnicity: in 2010, 64.9% of Pakistani/Bangladeshi pupils chose to take RE as an examination subject compared to just over 55% of White pupils. This meant that RE/ RS was an important factor in minority ethnic pupils' academic success. The increasing number of Muslims in the 0-24 age bracket needed (nearly 50% of the Muslim population as a whole) to be factored in to an overview of the importance of RE in contributing to pupils' achievement and therefore their post-school opportunities.

How RE contributed to her pupils' understanding of and empathy towards religions was described: including learning outside the classroom - e.g. St Paul's Cathedral and the London Buddhist Centre. Needed to show pupils that their community was wider than they thought.

Pupils' identities and multi-identities to be affirmed by the school and through RE. The work with 3FF, provided a sense of pride in their own traditions and their work on their own traditions - Spirited Arts competition for example and the use of visual arts. Ambassador programme. Face to Faith link with school in Haifa, Israel, and links with other schools. Both did the Christmas shoebox appeal - unifying activity. Gifts sent to Eastern Europe.

Particularly as pupils get older it was important to challenge misconceptions and identify commonalities -links with other schools, including Shi'a Muslim communities.

Outline of the school's scheme of work for RE was presented. Christianity and Islam presented in depth and other religions covered.

School aim: 'Confidence, Creativity Leadership and a Love of Learning'.

Discussion

Stephen Lloyd asked about those pupils who didn't have a religious world view, such as humanists or atheists, to which Deborah replied that many of her students had no idea that people didn't believe in God and they couldn't understand how that could be the case. Secular worldviews taught through the curriculum. He then asked rhetorically how stereotypes were going to be challenged without an effective curriculum.

'How does RE contribute to cohesion in a primary school?' - Sharon Lambert

Head Teacher, Allerton Primary School, Bradford

There had been considerable demographic change in the school's population in the 20 years of Sharon's headship. In 1995 it was mainly white British pupils; now they formed only 33%. Main population (just under half) was now Pakistani heritage and the remainder of the pupils were other Asian, Black and dual heritage pupils.

At the heart of the school's commitment to RE and community relations was its ethos, summed up in the acronym SCARF - safety, caring, achievement, respect and friendliness. Sharon stressed throughout her presentation the importance of values and ethos and the ways in which they were incorporated into school life and helped create its future. One aspect of this was awareness and sensitivity to pupils' starting points, from their entry into the school's nursery - observing and listening carefully to what they said and did. The pupils, their families and their communities were treated with respect and this helped develop pupils' confidence in themselves and their identities. The second key element in the school's success as an outstanding school was the quality of leadership provided by school managers and the governing body.

There was also a commitment to value what others brought and to the sharing of expertise, and so a wide range of visitors (including Faith Tutors from Bradford's Interfaith Education Centre) and friends of the school contributed greatly to the pupils' motivation and learning. Visiting places of worship was another aspect of this and she had participated in these visits to show parents how much they were valued by the school.

Sharon identified the barriers to effective RE and improved community relations:

- Teachers' lack of knowledge and understanding of religion and pupils' backgrounds
- 'Getting it wrong' - the fear of passing on the wrong messages and fear of parental negative reaction
- There were issues about pedagogy. How to involve children, ask questions, to debate and discuss.
- Rapidly changing landscape, some challenges in demographic change.
- Parental pressure - questioned teaching in RE and would prefer more teaching of their own faith - balance and breadth in the RE curriculum were essential.
- She also raised the question of pupils having two or three hours of post-school religious teaching (e.g. at a madrasah) and the impact this could have on pupils' levels of attainment on school.
- Lack of support and monitoring from authorities, despite the best efforts of SACRE and organisations such as the Schools Linking Network. There was a need to monitor the support that was given to schools and a need for the sharing of good practice.

Finally, she identified areas of work in progress in her school:

- Embed SCARF
- Confident teachers with necessary subject knowledge
- Pedagogy that challenged and extended pupils' ability to explore fundamental questions about life, religion and belief
- Maintain diversity and cohesion.

Discussion

Stephen Lloyd raised two issues. First, the difficulty of teaching good RE if teachers weren't properly trained, and second, the difficulty of managing parental pressure. Sharon replied that conversations took place with parents to explain what the school wanted for the children. It was important to have confidence in working with different communities and head teachers needed support in this. Governors were essential so that head teachers had people with different expertise around them. Rokhsana Fiaz raised a question about after-school religious classes and the mindfulness needed in discussing this sort of issue. She also commented on the most recent Ofsted report that found that RE was less than good in too many schools. Sharon responded saying that RE was essential if you wanted true cohesion in a school. Stephen Vickers then raised the question of increased cohesion among parents as well, to which Sharon replied that this was an area of work in progress and she cited some examples of this.

Dialogue on Faith and its contribution to community relations - Aisling Cohn

Schools Team Manager, 3FF

Aisling began her presentation by setting out the background to 3FF, its work and its various programmes. For the past 16 years the joint focus had been on individuals and communities. Key programmes included university leadership, the arts and culture programme, schools work and training programmes.

Not all teachers had the necessary training to remove stereotypes and misconceptions - workshops provided by 3FF aimed to promote curiosity and openness. She provided some examples of the work undertaken by 3FF. First, the 'Encountering faith and beliefs' programme in which leaders were trained to go into schools in order to share their faith narrative. Often this was the first encounter young people had with a person of faith and the first opportunity to ask questions about beliefs and practices. Leaders were trained to make sure that they made 'I' statements rather than generalisations and diversity within traditions was emphasised. These were real-life encounters and could have significant impact on young people. It was important that no questions were off limits because controversial and difficult questions came from a place of curiosity and provided deep learning opportunities. The focus was always on dialogue not debate.

The work that 3FF carried out in schools opened up opportunities to widen pupils' experiences and help them to engage more confidently in the world.

An evaluation conducted by a researcher from the University of Warwick identified the following positive outcomes for pupils:

- Increased awareness about judging and stereotyping
- More comfortable interacting with others who are different from themselves
- Improved skills of enquiry, critical thinking, reflection and communication,
- Increased curiosity, empathy and respect.

Finally, Aisling asked: What next? and identified four key areas for further development:

- Curriculum and resource development to help support RE and SMSC
- Working more closely with school senior leaders, parents and community leaders
- Provision of excellent teaching training opportunities to equip teachers with the necessary tools and methodologies to work with diversity in the RE classroom
- Policy development and implementation.

Discussion

Joyce Miller asked for a point of clarification to which Aisling replied that when referring to Muslim and Sikh schools she was talking about voluntary aided schools.

Religious literacy and community relations - Julia Ipgrave

Senior Research Fellow, Warwick Religions and Education Research Unit, University of Warwick

'Religious literacy is the primary purpose of RE' was Julia's first key statement and thus began a consideration of that issue in relation to RE. Although she was now a highly experienced researcher with Warwick Religions and Education Research Unit (WRERU), Julia also pointed out that she had many years' experience of primary school teaching and this informed her work and her vision of what was possible in the field.

- 2010 research into RE resources, commissioned by the previous government
- 2009 study involving 400 teachers - REDCo
- 2012 study including pupil interviews and a questionnaire completed by 12,000 young people

RE was the primary place for students to find out about religions other than their own. It provided an encounter with religious people and it was viewed by young people as a safe space for discussing conflictual topics. There was a link between teaching about religions and promoting cohesion and respect for difference with the aim of peaceful co-existence.

One of the first pieces of evidence that Julia presented was on young people and the risk of being bullied on account of their religion. In the survey of 12,000 13 to 15 year old students, a significant number reported experience of religious bullying from 43% of the Sikh students to 11% of the Christians (both practising and non-practising). There was evidence of an intolerance of religiosity: pupils were willing to respect their peers' religious identity but not their religiosity. The language they used revealed a lack of comprehension of the religious lives of others and insulting terms were used to describe religious commitment. This should be a matter of concern for RE.

What also emerged from the WRERU research was the fact that young people with a religious life tended to be more tolerant of others' religious lives. When asked about their interest in learning about 'different' religions, 75% of Muslim students found learning about other religions interesting (the highest percentage of any group). Nine percentage points behind were Hindu students (66%) and the group with the least interest at 34% were students of 'no religion'. Those schools where pupils had high levels of religious understanding tended to be those where pupils were from religiously practising communities.

Julia suggested that what was emerging was evidence of a religious literacy gap that may be widening between those that lived in religiously engaged communities and those of no religious involvement. This lack of personal experience could lead to lack of interest. It was important to recognise that RE was the place where this gap could be addressed and the means by which this could be achieved was through promoting religious literacy. This was not only about attitudinal development but cognitive and linguistic challenges as well.

Many RE teachers, however, did not see addressing the literacy gap as a priority and this was reflected in the stated priorities of 627 subject leaders surveyed. Among secondary school subject leaders, their highest priority was reflecting on ultimate questions (77%) and thinking critically about religion (67%). Their lowest priority was learning about the religions of the world (24%) and learning about a specific religion (28%). The position that was adopted was often: 'if they find it hard, let's give them something else'. Clearly, this was unacceptable and would not

be replicated in other subject areas. Secondary RE was often framed in terms of public discourse and media stories rather than religion as experienced by religious people and communities. Schools that continued with a more in-depth study of religions in RE were often those with a religious character or with large numbers of religiously practising students. Thus divergent trends in RE reinforce the widening religious literacy gap.

Primary subject leaders also gave low priority to learning about the religions of the world (27%) and learning about a specific religion (33%). Their highest priorities included promoting good personal values (72%), promoting good social values (66%) and promoting spiritual development (66%).

To counter views that religion is 'boring' and religious lives are 'weird', religious education must present religion in a way that both makes it exciting and normalises it. It needs to introduce pupils to the many dimensions of religions and belief that inspire and guide believers, including the study of scriptures and theology, and it needs to introduce pupils to ordinary people for whom faith was important in their everyday lives. Such learning opportunities would allow for deeper understanding of others and an improvement in community relations.

How does RE contribute to cohesion in Church of England Schools? – Jane Chipperton

Diocesan Adviser for RE, Collective Worship and SMSC, St Albans Diocese

Jane began her presentation by pointing out that Church of England schools taught religious education and not religious instruction. Faiths other than Christianity had been taught in CE schools since the end of the 1970s. There was no such thing as a typical CE school – they were rural and urban and their teachers and pupils came from all faiths and none. There continued to be misunderstanding of the nature and purpose of RE in CE schools.

She quoted Rev Janina Ainsworth in *Strong Schools for Strong Communities* (2009) who stated that church schools:

'place a high premium on dialogue, seeking common ground as well as understanding and respecting difference.'

The CE sector consisted of two types of schools. First, Voluntary Controlled schools:

- 2281 Primary schools
- 26 Secondary schools

Voluntary Aided schools:

Staff and community were of all faiths and none. Schools may teach a multi-faith RE syllabus.

She provided a range of evidence from Section 48 inspections, both primary and secondary, showing: the impact of RE on cohesion, promoting understanding and respect, encouraging openness, children feeling valued, and thinking about their lives and the world around them. She also identified examples of good practice in RE including pupil participation in the Bedford Faith Tour. RE as a safe learning environment was emphasised, in which enquiry and understanding were promoted and in which the impact of RE 'ripples out across the curriculum'.

The second key point that Jane made was that schools needed to be clear about their ethos, vision and values: schools aimed to serve their communities by providing high quality education within the context of Christian belief and practice. Schools encouraged understanding of meaning and significance of faith and promoted Christian values. The role of school senior leaders in this was essential.

Jane closed by quoting Prof David Ford, Regius Professor of Divinity, and Cambridge, saying that the task for CE schools is:

'To learn to be a community:

- *of the weaker and stronger*
- *poorer and richer*
- *more and less 'successful'*
- *more and less 'able'*
- *more and less 'religious'*
- *more and less Christian*
- *non Christian.'*

So what is RE for? Adam Dinham

Professor of Faith and Public Policy, Goldsmiths, University of London

Adam Dinham raised a series of thought-provoking questions including: 'Do we know what RE is for?' He suggested that there was a whole range of answers not only from different academic disciplines but also by geography and history. It was important to remember that secularised Europe was an exception rather than the norm when viewed globally: most people across the world saw religion as a significant part of their lives and RE had to be cognisant of that.

This, he said, was a little bundle of big ideas that overlapped and mingled. What did religion teach in relation to each of these? How did we teach RE to engage with these issues? How did we know these were the issues on which we should be focussing? Why should we take on this burden? What should be taught and what for? We didn't properly understand the relationship between religion and the issues we're addressing through it and so RE was in crisis.

Adam suggested a number of ways of engaging with these questions. First, he asserted that religion itself should be taught rather than just proxies to religion, such as philosophy and ethics. Like other speakers, he raised the question of religious literacy and quoted Grace Davie who had commented on the lamentable quality of conversation about religion just when people needed it most. There were pressing reasons why this was the time for high quality conversation about religion: 84% of the world's population were religious and because of globalisation and migration, everyone had a daily encounter with religion and belief. We needed to equip young people to live in plurality and everyone had a role to play in this, including policy makers and politicians as well as educationists.

Religion has been neglected. Grace Davie had pointed out that we paid too little attention while the religious landscape had changed dramatically. In Britain, Christianity was declining while Muslim groups were growing. There had been an increase from 3% to 5%; there had also been a leap in those of 'no religion' which stood at 25% in the 2011 census. What was more interesting was that church attenders were only 6.4% and more than a third of them were members of independent Pentecostal churches. This was a dramatic change in Britain's religious landscape.

What people believed had also changed. Belief in a personal God was stated by 26% of the population now while belief in 'a spirit' had doubled in the same period. There was increasingly a consumerist, behaviourist approach to religion, what could be called a 'pick and mix' approach. The data also showed that Humanism and other secular beliefs were also now important. This was not a simple story of decline. Adam quoted Linda Woodhead who thought that 'real religion' was the everyday 'lived religion' while hierarchical forms were diminishing. This meant that religious forms were changing and we were increasingly illiterate about the religious landscape. Religion was not a series of traditions but part of real and lived messy identities that changed all the time.

Adam argued that there was confusion between the real religious landscape and the policy landscape. How could we equip young people to deal with the religion that they would encounter? How did we think about religion as a category? Society not just religious or secular but deeply both; we had lost the ability to look at it.

Adam argued that public conversation about religion was characterised by moral anxiety

including issues related to sex, women and violence. Education could do better than this. The pressing and social question of our time was how we equipped young people to get to grips with real religion and not just anxieties. Rather than thinking of RE as a means of achieving cohesion. We should focus instead on dealing with religiously lived lives and the ways in which young people would engage with religion in the adult world and he cited a number of examples: how would they work as professionals dealing with religious people, as social workers, for example? How did they develop a discerning approach to religion on-line and in social media? How did they work in a world where many people had religion as a key aspect of their lives?

In Britain, there was a growing body of questions about religion as a public category and many of these were viewed negatively but most religion isn't risky and young people needed to deal with religion as it is lived, as a normal phenomenon.

He summed up his arguments: 'A more distributed understanding of religion is necessary', one that went beyond the old hierarchical traditions to one that took on board the complex, messy lived religion of ordinary people.

Discussion

Stephen Vickers asked about formal and informal expressions of religion and how young people could deal with this complexity. Adam replied that the situation in Britain was different from religion as seen globally. It was important that RE wasn't about an 'exotic other' that was monolithic and block-like. Religion was a shifting phenomenon with some static-ness and some movement. Deborah Weston added that thinking about diversity liberated students and their thinking. Joyce Miller asked if Adam meant that students should become miniature social anthropologists and he replied that he was interested in a more 'distributed understanding' of religion across school life. Stephen Shashoua then asked about the concept of block communities and asked how Adam saw ways forward for what he was suggesting. He replied that it was good for power distributions to be unsettled. Julie Ipgrave said that it was really important we did not forget the value of communities in religions, and the sense of loyalty and belonging that many people have to these. One of the dangers of some of RE at the moment is that it was becoming atomised and individualised, but actually a very powerful religious experience for many millions of people is the sense of community and belonging that comes from a religion. It was important to maintain that. Adam agreed with this but said that we should think about caricatures as well. We should not assume that talking to each other about religions would necessarily help us get along. Sarah Smalley then asked if the logic of a distributed understanding meant that RE would cease to exist. To this, Adam replied that if he his own way, RE would be everywhere. Joyce Miller asked a question about whether the removal of the requirement to report on community cohesion from Ofsted inspections had impacted negatively on schools. She also asked if there was a conflict between raising levels of attainment and promoting cohesion? Sharon Lambert replied that it hadn't impacted on her school because it was based on a set of values which promoted that anyway. Joyce then asked if demography

made the difference and whether there was any evidence to help deal with that question.

Deborah Weston suggested that in an area where cohesion was at the centre of the agenda the removal of Ofsted inspections from that area would not make much of a difference. She added that guidance on spiritual, moral, social and cultural development included cohesion.