

Policy, Practice and Powerful Knowledge

*Address given by Paul Smalley at the Mid-point Plenary of 20:20RE,
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The 1988 Education Reform Act imposed a National Curriculum upon the country as part of a wide ranging and whole scale reform of the education system, which enshrined market based structures in education. RE was to an extent shielded from this by its place in the Basic Curriculum, outside of the National Curriculum. We did not have to cope with annual inquests about why our pupils' performance in Key Stage 2 RE SATs was lower than last year, or Key stage 3 results below the national average for similar schools. We did not have to deal with the "over-complex and over-prescriptive 1991 Geography Order" (Rawling, 1999:276) for example. Nor the overnight instruction that the only way to teach our subject was through Synthetic Phonics (Rose, 2006). Instead the system of SACREs was enshrined in Law – a local, legally constituted group consisting of local policymakers, practitioners and those with knowledge of the religions who would collaborate to oversee the Religious Education and Collective Worship in the schools in that area. However, if you believe Clarke and Woodhead: 'the whole area of religious education has suffered from being treated very differently from other subjects.' (Clarke & Woodhead, 2015:7).

Educational policy changes, sometimes quickly (rather like Secretaries of State!) and so now the academisation of everything is an ambition, rather than an enforced target (United Kingdom, HC Deb 27 October 2016 Vol 616 Col 16Ws). This of course effects all subjects: National Curriculum status has not saved the provision of art and design in many primary and secondary academies (Payne & Hall, 2018). Michael Gove has “conceded that RE had been an ‘unintended casualty’ of [his] reforms, and acknowledged that in thinking that RE’s ‘special status’ was protected ‘he had not done enough’. (REC, 2013:8) Meanwhile, he deliberately imposed his own particular understanding of “the proper narrative of British History – so that every Briton can take pride in this nation.” (Gove, 2010) on the History curriculum.

One of the strengths of the SACRE model is that it devolves this power locally to include representation from faiths, teachers and the authority, where Practice, Policy and Powerful Knowledge meet to contribute to the workings of the SACRE and the Syllabus. They can be useful fora for much inter-faith dialogue, remembering that SACREs are places where faiths can work alongside one another to benefit the children.

In the strongest SACREs there will be a distinctive nature to the syllabus that has been developed locally, often together with other neighbouring SACREs. Where the syllabus has a history of excellence this will mean a revision of the existing syllabus, rather than a wholesale baby and bathwater rewriting. But always involving real connection between policy and practice.

Good SACREs have systems in place to monitor the RE in their area, and they know what the strengths of schools are – where the best RE is taught in primaries, secondaries and special schools across the authority. They will facilitate schools working together to develop the RE in the very local area to share good practice. The very best SACREs have put in place mechanisms for the young people themselves to contribute, with RE Ambassadors from schools contributing to a form of Youth SACRE or some similar grouping.

A strong successful SACRE in one area will invest and provide quality RE support which is able to attract buy in from schools, including free schools and academies, and engagement from teachers over a wide area. They will provide guidance on issues such as collective worship or assessment, and provide training for teachers of RE, through pupil and/or teacher conferences, networks and other CPD events. The best SACREs are those which still have dedicated RE advisors – whose powerful subject knowledge, enables them to provide high quality advice, guidance and training to teachers of RE across the age phases. In the very best SACREs these advisors will be not only tied into National Associations such as AREIAC and NASACRE, but will be viewed as having national expertise and able to contribute for example to national conferences, like 20:20RE.

SACREs tell us that what makes life difficult is not an anomalous legal situation, but pure and simple funding. The government has promised to continue to fund SACREs through the CSSB – but in some places this doesn't seem to be happening. With better funding all SACREs would love to do more.

Let me end with some Tibetan Buddhist philosophy: “Everything changes, and at the same time, nothing changes.” As long ago as last July, Nick Gibb in a written answer to a Parliamentary question again reiterated that “The Government does not have any current plans to remove the duty on local authorities to establish SACREs and include RE in the National Curriculum.” (*United Kingdom*, HC Deb, 14 July 2017, cW) So the question for us, as teachers, academics and SACRE members; practitioners, policymakers and those with powerful knowledge, is how can we work together within the current structures to ensure that as many pupils as possible, from early years to the sixth form and beyond, get the very best RE provision?

References

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