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The aims and outcomes of RE: embracing diversity

Mark Plater

Introduction

Lawrence J Peter famously once said, 'If you don't know where you're going, you'll probably end up somewhere else' (Peter & Hull, 2009). Working on this premise, most of today's education guidebooks begin by stressing the need for clarity of aims and objectives.

In England, however, since Religious Education (RE) moved from being confessional in style - as it was until the 1970s - to the explicitly-non confessional style adopted post-1988, the subject has found itself caught in a whirlpool of competing aims which have sought to drive both RE and the national curriculum subjects, and the whole educational system generally. Recent Ofsted reports and other analyses of the health of RE refer to such lack of clarity (eg Ofsted, 2013; Conroy et. al., 2013), arguing that this has hampered the subject and been a cause of confusion, especially for non-specialists.

The work of SACREs

Because of the peculiar legal framework for RE, the subject finds itself being moulded by hundreds of volunteers who comprise membership of the various committees of local Standing Advisory Councils for RE (SACREs). Within this convoluted framework, it is these people who determine the purpose and shape of the RE curriculum in our schools.

In spite of their legal and practical significance, little research has been carried out on the activities and makeup of SACREs, and there has been no attempt to explore the views or practices of individual SACRE members. Therefore as a contribution to the debate about the purpose of RE it seems appropriate to explore what individual SACRE members might consider should be the main aims for the subject.

In early 2015 a short online survey was devised, comprising a mix of Likert scale items (1), forced choice scales and a rank ordering task. The intention was to explore participants' views about why the subject of RE should be on the school curriculum: what should be its aims and purpose?

The survey ran from August to December 2015, and was completed by 513 SACRE members, representing 131 of the 152 UK SACREs. The results reveal an interesting insight into the preferences and leanings of the participants. A full analysis of the results has yet to be completed, but the headlines make for interesting reading.

SACRE members' views on the aims of RE

When forced to choose between various possible aims for the subject, participants rank them in the following order of importance:

- 1 religious literacy (m=2.83)(2);
- 2 personal development (m=3.24);
- 3 social cohesion (m=3.29);
- 4 challenge (ie critiquing everyday assumptions)(m=3.67);
- 5 heritage (understanding how religion has shaped our culture)(m=4.17);

- 6 nurture (of personal faith)(m=5.31); and
- 7 achievement of good grades and qualifications (m=5.5).

When offered a Likert system for scaling responses to various options (Absolutely essential ... to Totally unnecessary/Inappropriate), participant responses average out in the following order:

- 1 understanding (of other people and cultures)(m=1.5);
- 2 competency (religious literacy)(m=1.56);
- 3 social-political (RE for social cohesion)(m=1.73);
- 4 wisdom (self development)(m=1.79);
- 5 revolutionary-subversion (critiquing everyday assumptions)(m=1.89);
- 6 achievement (academic excellence)(m=2.28);
- 7 faith development (m=2.54).

Apart from the *Understanding* (of other people and cultures) and *Heritage* options in the two Likert scale sections of the survey, the order and ranking of the two sets of comparable aims is very similar: religious literacy, social cohesion and personal development come out on top, and religious nurture, good grades and critical challenge take the lower places.

The same emphasis is reflected in participant responses to six quotations: the social cohesion and religious literacy quotations receive the highest scores (1.62 and 1.67 respectively), and the religious nurture and academic achievement quotations score lowest (1.92 and 2.84 respectively), indicating an overall level of consistency throughout participant responses.

SACRE members' views on the purpose of RE

On the other hand, individual SACRE members offer very differing views on the purpose of RE. For instance, in the rank ordering task, although 143 participants ranked Religious Literacy first, a further 34 people placed it last. Likewise, although Excellence (of grades and qualifications) was placed last by 214 SACRE members, a further 31 of them placed it first! Likewise for Nurture: 173 placed it last, but 19 gave it first place, and a further 24 ranked it second. In fact, for each of the seven optional aims provided in this task, all of them gained the full range of ranking scores from participants, with the most evenly balanced of them being Heritage (understanding how religion shapes/ has shaped our culture and history) with 32 placing it first and 30 placing it last. Interestingly, it was also the Heritage aim which gained such disparate responses in other sections of the survey (see above), suggesting that this is an aim that about which SACRE members are quite ambiguous and undecided.

Making sense of the responses

So what are we to make of the above? It would suggest that SACRE members have very different emphases when describing the purpose of RE, and that some participants will advocate all of the seven aims which were offered in this survey. Some aims are clearly considered more important than others: for instance, in each of the Likert scale sections, five of the seven options gained mean scores which indicate that they are *Absolutely essential* or *Essential* for RE (understanding of our world, religious literacy, social cohesion, personal development, and critical challenge), while the other two (academic achievement and faith development) gained mean scores suggesting that they are *Quite*

important. So SACRE members can be counted on to endorse at least five different aims for RE and possibly seven, or maybe even more if these were offered.

These results seem to confirm the claim that RE is both unclear about its aims, and probably trying to achieve too much. SACRE members propose that it should be providing factual information about beliefs and cultural-religious practices, as well as acting to change society for the better, while also helping young people to make sense of their own culture and heritage, face the existential questions that they encounter in the course of daily life, and make sense of the impact of religion on wider past and present society; and all of that in fifty minutes per week, and - even though SACRE members suggest that this is not so important - with the additional pressure of trying to achieve good examination grades.

Embracing diversity

But is this actually a problem, or is it rather just a fact of life? Isn't it a simple reality that education is complicated, and learning for life is a messy and dynamic process? If the purpose of RE was simply to deliver some particular facts about religion, and to nurture some skills for applying those facts to everyday life, then our task would be easier. But actually, we don't have a skill-set and corpus of knowledge in the same way that Maths or History do, and we are not seeking to engender a religious perspective on life in a comparable manner to the PE or science teacher, hoping that our pupils will all be a budding Isaac Newton or David Beckham. Rather, RE is a multi-disciplinary subject, which, in keeping with the subject matter that it studies, is keen to develop the whole person, morally, socially, cognitively, and, in that all-too amorphous sense, spiritually as well. Furthermore, teachers coming to the subject will have a range of leanings and preferences: some will be more socio-ethnographically inclined, some will have a philosophical bent, and some will lean more towards an ethico-citizenship stance.

Perhaps, therefore, rather than taking our lead from the discipline-specific facts and skills-based national curriculum subjects, RE should instead embrace its wide range of aims and cross-disciplinary perspectives, proudly defending its position of drawing together elements of the whole curriculum in order to challenge pupils holistically to be good humans, citizens, lovers, thinkers and friends. And perhaps the model for such teacher-pupil engagement is not just the performative and assessment-driven structures which have increasingly become the norm of public schooling, but also the negotiating style of the Rogerian psycho-therapist (Rogers, 1951), who sought to play down the power structures that inevitably exist between client and helper, and instead to focus on the engendering and enhancement of personal responsibility and self-esteem. In practice, good teachers – of every curriculum subject - have always done this: they plan carefully, putting themselves into the shoes of their pupils, identifying pupil interests, gauging the level of understanding, and knowing and judging what stages are necessary to move pupils on in their understanding, skills and attitudes. But once the lesson begins, such teachers are also sensitively aware and can respond to the needs of the moment: what Schön calls *reflection in action* (Schön, 1984). Sadly, too often in school lessons today, in order to meet the established objectives of the lesson, a teacher will quickly refocus the class from any intruding 'distractions' in order to get back to the intended learning objective. In a negotiating style as outlined above, however, where a class shows genuine interest in pursuing an alternative line of purposeful exploration or enquiry, the teacher, as a sensitive practitioner of this method, will negotiate the direction and aim of their study in order to pursue the living dynamic of the class rather than the pre-determined objective of the lesson.

I believe that such sensitivity of RE teachers over the years has helped to nurture and encourage the present range of aims for the subject. Because of the real life significance of much that is taught in RE, pupils have responded - when given the opportunity - from both heart and mind, sharing thoughts, feelings, attitudes and assumptions, including their real joys and sorrows, and have thus negotiated the focus and direction of the syllabus with teachers. And surely, this is how it should be. Historically, we have called this child-centred education, although I am arguing the case from a subject perspective: that this approach is integral to the concerns and content matter of our subject.

Pursuing this line of argument, a case can be made that the initial aims of the teacher and of the curriculum are not what is of greatest importance for the subject of RE. This is not to deny that a detailed grasp of educational purpose and rationale is a necessary foundation and understanding for the RE teacher, but what matters most is that they can 'read' a class and can respond in an appropriate manner *in the moment*. This might be to challenge stereotypes or inappropriate attitudes, to expand understanding of 'others' in the community, to draw attention to how religion has shaped our history and culture, to nurture a knowledge-base and language so that pupils can know how to think about and discuss significant existential issues and questions, and so on. Perhaps this is the wisdom of the locally determined approach to RE: that it is the local context which determines the aims and content of the curriculum rather than any pre-determined central state official or national committee because, in essence, RE teaching is acknowledged as an organic, negotiated and personal process rather than a routinely mechanised delivery system.

Drawing things together

From the above argument it might seem as if I am against the development of a national curriculum for RE. However, as a pragmatic reality, my vote is for one, simply because, if the withdrawal clause were also abolished, this would help to remove RE from its present outlier status and move it towards having an equal footing with other national curriculum subjects. That national framework could then celebrate the wide diversity of aims for the subject, and encourage a multi-disciplinary approach in exploring the range and breadth of the subject matter. The document could make clear that this is a vital subject, which tackles complex and sensitive issues head-on, requiring RE teachers to be especially well equipped for the task, and particularly well supported in terms of time, continuing professional development and practical classroom resources.

In this article I have noted the call for an urgent debate about the aims and purposes of RE within the school curriculum, and have drawn attention to the ambiguity of SACRE members' views on the question of aims for the subject. I propose that our present task is not to narrow down or limit the aims of the subject but, rather, to celebrate its breadth, and encourage RE teachers to recognise their own preferences and leanings, but also to shape the content and emphasis of the taught curriculum in negotiation with their pupils, ensuring that the subject is relevant, dynamic and responsive to the needs of the moment, not only in terms of the children's personal lives, but also in relation to the wider world that we all share and experience from day to day.

Notes

- (1) *A Likert scale is pre-coded scale which is used to allow individuals to express how much they agree or disagree with a particular concept or statement.*
- (2) *Use of the average or mean score is the most popular method used by researchers for comparing sets of data such as this. One disadvantage however, is that it ignores the range or variation of scores in the data set.*

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