

READY - Religious Education and Diversity

Sharing experiences of, and approaches to,
teacher education in the context of
"Education and Training 2020" (ET 2020)



Religious Education in England

Religious Education (RE) is compulsory for pupils aged 5-18 years in all state-funded schools in England. RE shares a similar status to sex education and collective worship as it lies outside the National Curriculum with parents maintaining the right to withdraw their children from RE. Students over the age of 16 also have the right to withdraw themselves from RE lessons. No reason is required by law for this withdrawal and implementation if of this Conscience Clause is not commonly exercised.

The Conscience Clause is a reminder of the origins of the subject which began as an official school subject in 1944, with many families exercising this right to withdrawal from religious education when children were sent to schools with a denominational religious affiliation different to their own. At the time, what is now called RE was known as Religious Instruction (RI) and conformed with the Anglican (Protestant Church of England) or Catholic denominational character of the school. Indeed, RI was confessional, even in the case of a common (secular) school, and was a subject through which teachers aimed to build Christian character and morale in a society that had suffered the effects of two world wars. The subject was also considered to be a way to protect society against political ideologies of dictatorship that had developed in mainland Europe during the second world war.

Despite these aims for the subject, falls in church attendance and movements of people of diverse faiths, resulted in a subject that no longer related to society (see Cox and Cairns 1989, Davie 1994) and presented teachers with an unrealistic task. As the 1960s brought further change and movements of people, the challenge of how to include students of non-Christian background in RI lessons now required a re-imagining of the subject. In 1971, with the publication of the Schools Council Working Paper 36 (Schools Council 1971), non-confessional, multi-faith religious education was introduced. This new subject was also heavily influenced by the pioneering phenomenological approach to the study of religions and the work of Ninian Smart.

The first syllabus to emerge as a result of this new development was created in Birmingham and consisted of curriculum content pertaining to the six most popular faiths in England, namely, Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam Judaism, Sikhism as well as the first introduction of non-religious worldviews such as Humanism. This development was

amended further with the Education Reform Act of 1988 in which the teaching of both Christianity and other world faiths became a legal requirement in which the new curriculum “must reflect the fact that the religious traditions in Great Britain are in the main Christian, whilst taking account of the principle religions represented in Great Britain” (Clause 8/3). The 1988 Act also made the significant change from ‘Religious Instruction’ to ‘Religious Education’ to stress the move away from the earlier confessional nature and purpose of the subject.

The introduction of the National Curriculum in 1988 did not include the subject of RE as the subject stood alone as part of the ‘Basic Curriculum’ that maintained the Conscience Clause. The legal requirement stated that:

“Every state-funded school must offer a curriculum which is balanced and broadly based, and which:
promotes the spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development of pupils, and prepares pupils at the school for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of later life...

[and]

All state schools... must teach religious education... All schools must publish their curriculum by subject and academic year online.”

(‘The national curriculum in England: Framework document’, September 2013, p.4).

Each local authority is required to provide an ‘Agreed Syllabus for Religious Education’ through the formation and consultation with a Standing Advisory Council for Religious Education (SACRE). The SACRE is composed of councillors, teachers and faith representatives, whose remit is to support and advise on RE in schools in the local authority. Non-religious schools are free to choose a locally agreed RE syllabus or a syllabus from another local authority. Schools of a religious character usually follow an RE syllabus that is in keeping with the denominational priorities of the school and yet conforms with national expectations.

Today there are considerably more types of state funded schools than in the past; these include, community schools, academies, free schools and schools with a religious character. All maintained schools are obliged to follow the National Curriculum from the age of 5 to 18. This obligation includes the teaching of RE, albeit with parents and pupils over the age of 18 maintaining their right to withdraw from the subject. This legal detail arguably highlights the confessional origins of the subject and draws attention to the outdated perception that RE is the RI of the past. The rare instances of both religious *and* secular reasons for withdrawal from RE are, unsurprisingly, exploited by the media and thus give voice to the ‘conflict model’ that RE professionals are keen to extinguish through the (albeit contested) aims of community cohesion, moral development and philosophical enquiry that are associated with RE’s networks of teachers, teacher education and scholarship.

The vast majority of pupils study for GCSE examinations (General Certificates of Secondary Education) from the age of 14-16. Since 2016 the GCSE Religious Studies exam required students to study two different religions and there is a considerable increase in curriculum content regarding diverse beliefs and practices within each of those two faiths. On the

whole, schools will opt for Christianity or Catholic Christianity in addition to another religion. This is the choice of the school and RE department for non-faith schools. This choice does not apply to all schools though; for example, at GCSE, Anglican schools are expected to teach Christianity and Islam and Catholic schools are expected to teach Catholic Christianity and Judaism. A' Levels (Advanced Level of study at ages 17 and 18) in Religious Studies also present the opportunity to study philosophy, ethics and more than one faith.

There is also a legal requirement that schools deliver some form of RE for all pupils when the programmes for public exams begin (from the age of 14) to meet the expectation that RE is taught until the age of 18. This may take place through extra-curricular or 'off timetable' activities, workshops, assemblies, visits or visitors. Despite this requirement, a recent report by the Religious Education Council and National Association of Teachers of RE revealed that 56% of schools allocate 3% (approximately 40 minutes) of curriculum time to RE, with 43% of students studying for their GCSE in under one hour a week, despite its popularity as a GCSE choice. A lack of RE subject specialists and provision of the legal requirement after the age of 16 also remain an issue in non-faith schools.

The networks of RE teachers, professionals and academics are in continuous collaboration to put pressure on the government to increase the status and time allocation of the subject. Debates around the aims, nature and purpose of the subject persist and form, arguably, the conversations that keep the subject responsive to society's aspiration and concerns and therefore vital to young people's education.

Key Documents

Report on deficit in legal RE requirements in schools:

<https://www.religiouseducationcouncil.org.uk/news/secondary-pupils-lose-out-on-religious-literacy/> (last accessed 2.5.18)

All Party Parliamentary Group on Religious Education (APPG) (2013). *RE: The Truth Unmasked. The supply of and support for Religious Education teachers*. URL:

http://www.mmiweb.org.uk/publications/re/APPG_RETruthUnmasked.pdf (last accessed 2.2.18).

Commission on Religious Education (2017). *Interim Report. Religious Education for All*. URL:

<http://www.commissiononre.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Commission-on-Religious-Education-Interim-Report-2017.pdf> (last accessed 6.2.18).

A New Settlement: Religion and Belief in Schools (2015) Westminster Faith Debates

<http://faithdebates.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/A-New-Settlement-for-Religion-and-Belief-in-schools.pdf> (last accessed 2.5.1.18)

Religious Education Council of England & Wales (2013). *A Curriculum Framework for Religious Education in England*. URL:

http://resubjectreview.recouncil.org.uk/media/file/RE_Review_Summary.pdf (last accessed 2.2.18).

National Association of Teachers of Religious Education

<https://www.natre.org.uk/>

RE: ONLINE

<http://www.reonline.org.uk/>

The religious Education CPD (Continuing Professional Development) Handbook

<http://www.re-handbook.org.uk/>

References

Cox E & Cairns J (1989) *Reforming Religious Education: The Religious Clauses of the 1988 Education Act*. London: Kogan.

Davie, G (1994) *Religion in Britain since 1945* Oxford: Blackwell Publishing



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