

Does Religious Education Work? A three-year investigation into the practices and outcomes of religious Education:

A Briefing Paper

Prof James C Conroy and colleagues

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Introduction.

‘Your office of a schoolmaster throws you amongst the ancient authors who are generally reputed the best.

But as they are commonly read and taught, the only use that seems to be made of 'em is barely to learn the language they are written in, a very strange inversion of the use of that kind of learning: to read of things to understand words, instead of learning words that we may be the better enabled to profit by the excellent things which are wrapt up in 'em'

This prescient quotation, from a letter by the 18th century parliamentarian and 'Man of Letters' Edmund Burke, to his friend Richard Shackleton well sums up the predicament for contemporary Religious Education in the British Isles. Much attention is paid to the activity of learning words (the creation of a, somewhat vague, lexical familiarity) rather than using the language to immerse the student in the claimed meanings of religion. This is a problem rooted in both the time and resource available to religious education and its evolution within British education.

When compulsory education was established under the Forster 1870 (1872 Scotland) Act religious education was one of the most contentious areas of debate. Although, contrary to received wisdom, religious education was not actually compulsory in 1870. While there may have been an expectation that a handful of schools might have been secular (adopting no religious formulary) this would have been seen as being exceptional. And religious education was seen to be a central component in the drive towards universal education and became central to the debates on the provision of general educationⁱ. The main reason for the debate was the fear particular Christian groups had that their specific doctrinal attachments would be ignored, mistaught or underminedⁱⁱ. Because schools were unevenly distributed across Britain with respect to these particular traditions realistically children from one religious group might only have the option to study in a school sponsored by a different religious group. This led to a range of compromises around the teaching of religion, especially to an agreement that it would be possible for parents to exercise their conscience and remove their child from religious education. One hundred and forty years on religious education remains a site of contest and, as we will illustrate in these findings, the legacy of the conscience clause has shaped religious education in particular ways that have undermined its effectiveness as a contemporary educational enterprise.

Allied to these complexities of a historical nature are more contemporary epistemological and cultural considerations, which affect the nature of the provision and the capacity of teachers to deliver effectively on all the demands made upon them. Unlike other subjects on the curriculum such as history, geography, maths or physics, religion is a social practice. Other subjects in the curriculum, with the possible exception of citizenship – though even that is in doubt – and PSHE (which is not in any event, a subject but artifice) are not social practices. Rather they draw upon different lenses to make sense of the world and its structures; they are heuristic devices for interpreting and interrogating the world. Religion, on the other hand, represents a way of standing in that world. In other words,

‘the life of the religious person or community is, so to say, a social practice entailing living a life refracted through complex sets of attachments, beliefs and correlated actions. These social practices establish certain forms and patterns of relationship between the individual and/or community to the political, cultural and social life of a polity as a whole. Hence Roman Catholics believe x and wish that this belief be considered (with the expectation of real influence) by legislators in shaping social policy.’ⁱⁱⁱ

Of course education itself is a social practice and one that is itself nested in a blizzard of normative concerns, social expectations, economic considerations and cultural anxieties. Because religious education carries with it a significant explicit burden to address many of these social forces as part of its charge to shape young people’s spiritual, moral and social attitudes and behaviours its identity is not bounded by the study of religion simpliciter (see below). Yet more interestingly, when one looks at the list of expectations laid upon religious education by politicians and educators alike, for very different reasons^{iv} we see that religious education is not so much a subject to be studied as, itself, a social practice. And, because many politicians and head teachers alike harbour very different conceits of its purpose as a social practice the terrain is studded with pitfalls and ‘foxholes’ Given the wide variety of relations within and across religious communities, this inevitably creates a very complex picture of the ways in which influence, policy and practice are transacted and performed in a polity (see for example Judge 2002). It is as a consequence of these extraordinary complex forces and entailments (matched nowhere else in the curriculum)

This report is based on a 3-year research project, funded jointly by the Arts and Humanities Research Council and the Economic and Social Research Council, created to try and understand the particular and peculiar nature of religious education.

To Answer the Question?

The aim of gathering this extensive body of data has been to understand whether or not religious education does what it says on the tin. But, what does it say on the tin?

Does Religious Education Work? – A heavily qualified, yes.

In general religious education offers students a positive experience and a pedagogy that focuses on developing their discursive abilities and makes a contribution to multicultural awareness.

Key findings

Positively

Religious Education:

- is often led by highly committed and thoughtful teachers
- teachers are often highly regarded by students
- makes a positive contribute to multicultural awareness
- is often shaped around local demographic and cultural needs and expectations
- occupies a liminoid or threshold place in the school – this has positive and negative aspects – allows Religious Education to be different but sometimes those differences allow HTs to marginalize it
- in some cases emphasizes skills of debate, reflection, and creative discussion in contrast to an increasingly exam-driven curriculum in other subject areas
- stands as counter cultural within the school (even religiously sponsored schools^v)
- departments that are fortunate to have a significant body of staff in religious education would appear to offer many advantages in coping with the myriad entailments and expectations of the subject

Negatively

Religious Education

- does not, in the main, make students religiously literate
- sees pupils demonstrate widespread ignorance of basic religious concepts
- suffers from
 - too many competing expectations
 - under-resourcing
 - limited time allocations
 - placing examination and non-examination pupils in the same class
 - being too dependent upon local conditions and the disposition and skills of the teacher^{vi}

Teachers:

- feel under a lot of pressure, under-confident and in many cases undervalued^{vii}
- struggle to find a pedagogic middle path between allowing pupils to develop their own values and offering more substantive accounts of particular values/claims/doctrines.
- are not infrequently under qualified with the result that their coverage of a given subject can be limited^{viii}

- find themselves caught between the goals they want to pursue in helping students explore the big questions of life, and the increasing need to teach to the test in order to secure resource and status

Unclear

- promoting community cohesion through inter-religious understanding (DCSF 2010)
- RE is witnessing something of a shift away from the study of substantive religious doctrines and practices to something more philosophical, which doesn't require more than minimal assent around generalised principles
- places enormous emphasis on discussion

Methods

In 2007 a team of educationalists, psychologists, anthropologists and philosophers set out to offer a nuanced account of what and how religious education is taught in British schools. We were also interested in how it was received by students. Commonly studies of student attitudes to religious are based on Likert-type scales (strongly agree to strongly disagree). While these have their place in understanding attitudes they only allow a superficial account if they are not embedded in much richer data. Consequently, the core of this research consisted of sending ethnographers into schools over a two-year period to see what religious education was like from the inside.

To do the analysis^{ix} we

- observed and annotated a large number of classes in 24 schools across the UK
- recorded and analysed classes
- analysed pupil work for linguistic sophistication
- tracked students across their day
- gathered data on school policies, resources, timetabling
- conducted interviews with religious education teachers and head teachers
- conducted focus group discussions with the students

Additionally we

- reviewed and examined a range of policies and policy documents, Agreed Syllabuses and local arrangement documents
- conducted and recorded a two-day expert seminar drawing on the experience and knowledge of RE advisers, University lecturers, church advisers – those deemed to influence and shape policy
- conducted a student survey based on the emerging data from the ethnography
- supported a range of locally determined practitioner enquiries. (5 completed to date)
- organised interim findings seminars

Basic Statistics

We invited in excess of 120 schools where RE was deemed, by repute, self-nomination or inspectorate reports, as good to take part but many refused on the grounds that they did not wish for such exposure and felt vulnerable. Perhaps this is true for teachers across all subjects but from the responses of Heads of Religious education the anxiety appeared heightened. Participation proved to be something of a challenge:

24 schools Scotland (7), Northern Ireland (4), North East England (3) and South-East (inc London) England (10) took part. Denominational designations included:

Anglican
Catholic
Common
Integrated

(We were unable to secure Jewish or Muslim schools but did have one school where c.97% of students were Muslim and another where ±95% were Asian from a variety of religious traditions). The schools are all high performing in their context, according to exam pass statistics and Inspectorate Reports.

They all were deemed to have religious education that was good or outstanding.

The recorded material (ethnographic notes; transcribed interviews and focus groups, programme notes etc) extends to in excess of 3,000,000 words.

Pupils in 50% of the schools responded to the online questionnaire (n=483)

Detailed Discussion of Main findings

General Observations

1. The decision to concentrate on centres where religious education was deemed good meant that much of what we witnessed and recorded appeared to be of high quality and the teachers involved were both highly committed and, in many cases, highly innovative and imaginative. Some of the teachers we looked at went to extraordinary lengths to source new experiences for their students.
2. Religious education partakes of many of the same challenges that other subjects face but there are some very particular issues that have emerged that are specific to RE and its history. These issues are constitutive of religious education in Britain and are largely a result of its evolution out of religious schooling and significant shifts in the values base of the country. As long as there exists a legal clause that indicates to pupils, parents, teachers and the public at large that opting out of religious education is both appropriate and ethical then religious education will always be constituted in difference and pay a price.

Policy and Policy makers

1. One consequence of maintaining some of the structural features of religious education created in the nineteenth century into the twenty-first century has been that policy makers are unclear about the specifically educational purposes of religious education. They do not wish to give up religious education for significant political and cultural reasons but have freighted it with too many competing imperatives. These include, but are not exhausted by substantial contributions^x to the following educational entailments (many of which have overlapping elements):
 - a. Religious literacy (knowledge and understanding religious ideas and language and their social and cultural impact)
 - b. Citizenship education
 - c. Dealing with truth claims and pluralism
 - d. Multicultural awareness
 - e. Spiritual and social cohesion –contributing to school ethos
 - f. Nurturing pupils in particular communities (including catechesis)
 - g. Philosophical understanding
 - h. Moral development
 - i. Very particular ‘Socratic dispositions’
 - j. Spiritual life and religious observance
 - k. Understanding heritage
 - l. Enhancing local demographic considerations
 - m. Sex and relationships education.
2. On top of this, in many schools, religious education appears to be a site for a wide range of social imperatives. This manifests itself in RE teachers being frequently called upon (certainly significantly more than other teachers) to lead on or substantially support Religious Observance/school charity activities and initiatives connected to community cohesion.

This is too large a burden for religious education to carry and it necessarily sacrifices some of these entailments to foreground others. Which are sacrificed and which are foregrounded is generally locally determined and this means religious education struggles to enjoy a well-defined academic space in schools.

Religious Literacy, Religious language and Concepts:

1. Religious education deals with concepts and vocabulary which have a unique status within the subject. While every academic discipline has its specialist vocabulary, there is an expectation in religious education that students will also be able to engage with the concepts expressed by this vocabulary on a personal level, to ‘learn from’ as well as ‘learn about’ religions.
2. To learn ‘from’ religion requires that students understand religious language from the inside. While teachers work hard to get students to

understand this particular language too little attention is paid to its complexity and too much in translating the language of religion into non-religious analogues. If religious education is transformed into a form of sociology why do we need to bother with the specific subject? At times the activities pursued under the title of learning 'from' religion proceed from a position of too little content knowledge (the GCSE exam at times encourages this) which can distort and take time away from effective RE.

Religious Education and Citizenship

1. Both our experts and RE teachers expressed considerable anxiety that citizenship education (especially in England) encroached on the traditional territory of religious education. Their fears appear to be borne out by student attitudes. When asked what subject religious education was least/most like a significant majority (50.9%) opted for citizenship and this was the case across all groups. (History and PSHE also scored significant percentages (15.1% and 15.7%).
2. In common schools where the faith allegiances of pupils are quite diverse, and more generally weaker, teachers struggle to make sense of religious concepts for everyone. Consequently they fall back on secular analogies and students would appear to struggle in extending their religious understanding.
3. Teachers, especially but not exclusively in 'common schools' display strong anxieties about making any definitive ethical claims because they are apprehensive that this will be seen as an imposition. Consequently much effort is put into answering students' questions by asking a further question. This Socratic method can appear pedagogically attractive but does have the effect of limiting students understanding of the requirements for progression, and the definitive nature of the claims of religious doctrines and beliefs.
4. Going back beyond the Forster Act legislation regarding religious education has allowed for withdrawal on grounds of conscience. While this may have made sense at a time when education itself was almost universally rooted in religious communities it is a problem in the twenty-first century since it assumes that the study of religion is qualitatively different from the study of citizenship communities. We unearthed a significant reticence in teachers' willingness to offer a more substantial account of the nature of religion in its own terms.
5. Religious concepts often appear as an afterthought to some common social problem. One cause of this is the construction of National and Local syllabuses. Because of the anxiety around 'forcing commitment'.
6. Localism (shaping the curriculum according to local needs) is strongly evident in religious education where it is encouraged by legislation, the creation of Agreed Syllabuses, the pre-eminence of Christian studies in N.Ireland, where communities across the religious divide come together to see religious education as a vehicle for various forms of catechesis (nurturing people in the dominant traditions of their own community) Such localism would not be tolerated in other areas of the curriculum – while other subjects such as History leave the choice of periods of study at teachers' discretion, there is at least consensus around the aims and skills of the subject, even more the kind of content to be addressed. As the skills agenda sets more and more of the curriculum priorities across the UK, the ambiguities around the

dominant aims and purposes of RE make it difficult for some teachers to articulate a sense of value and status for the subject.

Truth and Pluralism

1. Some teachers are clear that they do not wish to impose, or uphold, any particular values or ethical or religious claim; others are equally clear that their job is to offer pupils a distinctive and concrete moral frame. Importantly, the difference here is not, as might be thought, between religiously denominating and common schools. Some teachers in religious schools are reticent to offer definitive moral, social or religious claims whereas some in common schools are very clear about the moral importance of developing particular moral and social attitudes.
2. Teachers are caught between wishing to let pupils explore issues and offering substantive accounts of morality.
3. A dominant pedagogical tactic is to respond to pupils' questions not by answering but by posing further questions. Hence pupils are very clear that there is much more discussion than in other subjects.
4. Equally they believe that teachers talk much more in religious education than in other subjects.

Multiculturalism

While the imperatives of multiculturalism significantly overlap with pluralism there are some distinctive findings.

1. Much emphasis is placed (or indeed misplaced) by teachers on multicultural respect but very little attention is devoted to multicultural understanding.
2. This confusion between respect and understanding tends to create a post-Imperial dislocation where distinctions between religion and culture are elided, and where what emerges is a curatorial mindset that creates a kind of 'cabinet of curiosities for ordinary people'. These 'cabinets of curiosities' are not infrequently to be seen in the material conditions of the classroom.
3. There is something of a consequent failure to ignore the 'rough edges' of religion and a consequent elision of difficult questions. Critical multiculturalism^{xi} is difficult to achieve in an examination culture that privileges the lexical over the substantive.
4. However, pupils' responses do suggest that many are interested in better understanding the other.^{xii} This is a testimony to the durability and aspirations of teachers, often frustrated by their less than ideal circumstances.

Contributing to spirituality School ethos, resource and subject status:

1. The ethos of a school and the status of RE are often linked particularly where school management see a contributing role for RE in helping to promote positive values in accordance with the school's aims and standards.
2. Resources for religious education differ widely across schools with the worst resourced receiving less than 50 pence per annum. Resources depend on the attitude of the Headteacher. A number of teachers complained that religious education was not well treated in the school. Others maintained that it was very well supported. Again, the distinction was not between religious and common schools. In a number of common schools religious education was seen as key to the school's overall success as it made a particular contribution to the outreach of the school into the life of the local community, especially where that community consisted of a religious and ethnic minorities or where its student demographic reflected the coming together of two different religio-cultural traditions.
3. The reorganization of many schools into a faculty structure leads to positive relations with other subjects that develop similar analytical abilities, e.g. History, Geography, but these changes are often viewed with suspicion.
4. RE teachers in the Catholic schools in the study generally felt well-supported.
5. In many school contexts, religious education teachers are also expected to take a lead in collective worship, volunteering and outreach programmes and citizenship and personal health education – where these programmes are effectively integrated into the purposes of RE, used as examples in class discussion, part of the life of the school, they can effect a genuine 'learning from' religion – where resources are already scarce, however, such projects can further diminish the focus of teachers and call into question the 'academic' status of the subject.

Moral Education

1. Religion and Morality are closely aligned in syllabus claims. In England and Northern Ireland these are rooted in Acts of Parliament, in Scotland in the Curriculum Guidelines^{xiii}.
2. Despite the claims in some curriculum documents that students should form their own values base, perhaps unsurprisingly, there is a great deal of work conducted on the sources of authority in moral education.
3. While this is an area of incessant conversation in the RE classroom it is also the area where teachers frequently close down the conversation around particular controversial topics.

Sex and Relationships Education

1. The very specific challenges for RE crystallize around sex education.
2. RE is often expected to combine two contesting impulses, which are located in the syllabus documentation across the UK. As well as teaching religious education expectations on RE teachers are high regarding their contribution to sex education^{xiv}. They are to do so while upholding pupils Right to self-determination in such matters of value and propagate very specific attitudes^{xv}.
3. The materials in use in some schools (often commercially produced) which attempt to compare attitudes towards sex across religions tend to be superficial. This does not imply that the teaching is always such but that in experienced hands (and in religious education this is not uncommon) they are likely to be unhelpful in grasping either the complex social and religious arguments for the emergence of particular religious attitudes to sex and sexuality^{xvi}.
4. Religious Education is of course not the only site for sex education, which makes matters complicated given that there are regular collisions of values and consequently discourse as between teachers, teachers and home/local cultural values and teachers and pupils.
5. The treatment of sex within and across religions was, in the main, both superficial and misleading. Moreover, on occasion it invited pupils to reflect on and discuss their own sexual habits – a somewhat off thing to do at the cusp of legality^{xvii}.
6. In church schools it was common for the RE department to take the lead on 'sex education'.

The Status of RE and the Role of Examination Success

1. The link between examination success, resource and subject status is complicated. Many religious education teachers express a desire to pursue aims beyond those required for examination success – various strategies for such an approach were seen at work in the course of the research, with varying degrees of success. However, they often find themselves curtailed by school expectations^{xviii}.
2. The data reveals a complex relationship between textbooks, other resources and technology, teachers' skills and abilities, and the pressures in many contexts to perform and satisfy examination requirements.
3. Examination pressures often appear to dominate the classroom experiences of individual schools, based on the data gathered, where much of what goes on is in careful preparation for exam questions.

4. Despite the emphasis on examinations religious education tends to be afforded less time than comparable humanities subjects but is often expected to achieve in the same way and according to the same measures.
5. This, in turn, makes a difference to which texts and resources are used, and how the teacher employs them in the classroom. For example, textbooks which have the strongest connections to exams and qualification authorities may be followed more closely in some cases, pressurizing 'real', 'good' or 'worthwhile' RE—for example, exploring values more deeply—to taking place apart from the exercise of following those texts that are understood to lead to good exam results. Engagement with questions of relevance to students' lives is often deferred until A-Level/Higher.
6. While there are benefits to RE attaining a formal examinable status in the curriculum, this appears to risk an outcome where exam requirements come to assume too dominant a role in RE—its disciplinary identity and content—impacting upon the higher aims and ideals prized in many of the classic expressions what RE is and should be?
7. This has a knock on effect on the religious education of those pupils not entered for public examinations who are left wondering why they are studying the subject and unable to see in their studies either exam relevance or the in-depth discussion that would see them grapple with some significant religious issues.
8. For examination classes teaching is dominated, directly or indirectly, by a small number of textbooks, written to meet the specific demands of examination boards. Too often the texts are written by teachers who are also employed by the exam boards.
9. These text books now have, as their central aim not the furthering of particular forms of religious understanding, but the provision of limited material to answer exam questions. Unashamedly these books are marketed as texts for passing exams.
10. Textbook content at this level is dominated by a superficial attention to the surface practices of particular religious traditions. It is in very stark contrast to the intellectually challenging material offered at AS and A level.

Pupil Attitudes

1. The complexity of pupil attitudes echoes the complexity of the expectations on the subject with many seeing it as different from other subjects – more dialogic, less specific but this they also see as being a

source of exploitation amongst their cohort^{xix} - some evidence of a distinctive pedagogy.

2. Most like citizenship education.
3. RE is generally rated positively in regard to being a space that deals with diversity and difference.
4. That said, while pupils who are Catholic or of non-Christian faith are the most religious, Catholics tend to be more positive about the position of RE in their schools and the way it is taught – this would seem to suggest from a pupil perspective single denominational school with same religion owners appear to offer a more integrated experience to their students as opposed to de facto single denominational school with different religion owners. It might also suggest that those from certain non-Christian traditions find critical approaches somewhat antithetical to, and in conflict with, the religious traditions of the home. Such an interpretation of the statistics receives substantial corroboration from the ethnographic findings.
5. Catholics are significantly more likely to say that their RE classes have lots of discussion and listening, while others are significantly more likely to say their RE classes have more writing or watching videos, and they are more likely to say that they find the language in RE classes confusing. All this raises some issues about the teaching of minority traditions.
6. Despite these nuances, RE is generally rated as a low priority subject, with one intriguing caveat: Students in Catholic schools rate RE as more important than Citizenship, but the non-religious rate Citizenship as more important RE.

Teacher Attitudes

Teachers

1. often feel that they are apologists for a subject that is under-valued and under-resourced^{xx}.
2. resent the limited time offered for their subject.
3. are not always persuaded that the increasing emphasis on evaluation in some exam boards (in one 50% of the marks) has been a positive since some of them argue that pupils can only evaluate out of a knowledge base^{xxi}.

Appendix: Data Gathering Instruments and Heuristic Devices

1. Guide for Ethnographic Fieldworkers:

I am at the school. What do I look out for?

Spatial/Temporal Information

Layout of class room

Photos of classroom as a reference point (displays, desk layout, presence or absence of religious images, etc.)

Get a desk plan from the teacher (to enable us to get to know who the students are and to identify who is speaking)

How room/space is used during teaching (i.e. small group work Vs facing the front for a lecture)

Use of artefacts and teaching tools

Use/Availability of IT

Wider school layout (to place classroom in the wider context of the school)

How does the RE classroom compare to the rest of the classrooms

What kinds of resources are available in other parts of the school (i.e. library)

Communal areas (i.e. places where staff or students meet and talk about stuff). How are these used, what happens in them, how do teachers/students behave differently in them?

Community layout (to place the school within the wider context of the community)

Where is the school located (map)

Urban/rural

Social/ethnic class of neighbourhood

Proximity of places of religious worship (Are these used for fieldtrips or as a source of guest speakers? Do these places have public events that students may attend without any link to the school)

Time of day when RE takes place (duration, format — how is it delivered etc)

How much time within the school week do students and teachers devote to RE

Whole school ethos and influence on relationships

Are aims shared and embedded (in pedagogical practice, in staff-student relationships, in student-student relationships, in behaviour management, in school's public presentation, in management values, in teacher values.)

Teacher-Student Interaction

Power relations

How authority is managed and maintained and how this might be affected by social variables (age, gender, ethnicity, religious background) ex. Young teacher having problems controlling class and getting the respect of students, RE in a Catholic school taught by a nun as opposed to a lay person. Does classroom activity follow a predictable routine?

How might students undermine the authority of the teacher (i.e. talking, saying 'you're not Muslims so how can you tell me, who is a Muslim, about Islam', etc.)

Do students buy into what they are being taught and the methods being used (i.e. are they willing or reluctant participants, are they on task?)

Way the teachers presents themselves to the students (i.e. giving personal info to the students so that they can see what their biases might be (i.e. religious background, marital status, sexuality, etc; clearly expressing their values or just sticking to the curriculum; willing to be open about how they may or may not agree with the curriculum; or taking that attitude that 'you're here to learn and you don't need to know anything about me'). Note: this will clearly affect student-teacher relations and issues of authority and 'buy in'. Quality of student-teacher relationship, (language used to maintain authority over students)

Discourse

teacher talk about management and admin issues
teacher talk that merely provides a description (i.e. this is what happens during a Baptism)
teacher talk that looks at conceptual issues (i.e. what is 'sin', justice')
teacher talk that looks at more abstract issues
teacher's questions to students that deal with admin issues
teacher's questions that test student's recall
teacher's questions that examine student comprehension (i.e. what is justice?)
teacher's questions that examine how students can apply conceptual issues (i.e. can you give me an example of sin)
teacher's questions that examine student ability to analyse or interpret
teacher's questions that examine student ability to synthesise data (i.e. what are common elements when we make comparisons of rites of passage)
teacher's questions that invite students to make evaluations or judgements
students respond to such questions, if they answer in a way that is deemed 'acceptable' or correct by the teacher and classmates
how these interactions might change when students move to small group work
Teaching methods/ techniques, and how these intersect with pedagogical intentions
Teachers' self perception as against students' and other teachers' perspective (competence, rapport)
Inclusion — description or engagement, language of challenge or compliance, do teachers assume all students have same beliefs, or take account of different cultures in the classroom? Where work is differentiated by student ability, does the work of the low ability group have the same broad learning aims as the high ability group?
Student-Student Interaction
Do certain students seem to dominate?

Teachers and students' interaction with curriculum/resources and values

Content of lesson and methods used to deliver
Didactic/reflective
Content driven, topical, discussion, 'personal search'
Balance between student needs and exam cramming
Bias?

How do students, amongst themselves deal with diversity (i.e. differences of gender, class, ethnic or religious background and hierarchies) Where do students gain their understanding of diversity? From the RE classroom, from elsewhere in the school, from outside school?

What happens in small group or project work?

How does RE teaching compare with that of other subjects?

Teaching methods and course content

Perceived 'usefulness'

Status of RE as a discipline

Characteristics of teachers, are they promoted or unpromoted, active in wider life of the school etc.

Teacher-Teacher Interaction (outwith classroom)

issues of hierarchy (how is RE syllabus designed and communicated)
i.e. do they have group meetings or does the head RE teacher just dictate (note: it would be useful to attend a curriculum planning meeting)

how teachers talk about curriculum to other specialists (specialist discourse, buzzwords, current issues, hopes/fears)

how does RE fit in with school management structure (is there a Head of Department? Is it embedded within a 'Humanities' faculty structure? How many teachers are specialists? How many non-specialists teach RE?

how teachers relate to other subject specialists

how teachers talk about students

how teachers talk about school

how are RE teachers viewed within school (status))

Outside/guest speakers and partners involved in delivery and planning of RE. Field trips etc.

Who is involved and why

how are they identified

frequency

what is their role and relationship with school?

Do students find these valuable or useful?

Do staff find these speakers' input useful?

Relationship between ethnographer/teacher/students We need to build and maintain rapport which facilitates openness and trust, we need to be aware of power variables (eg age, gender, ethnicity, religious background) and to establish professional relationship: researching not judging, building capacity with their practitioner enquiry. Recognising own limits and strengths.

We need to establish expectations about what they can expect to receive from us (reports, comparisons, presentations to students, etc.) Note: people are more willing to participant if we 'give' and not just take.

We need to be aware of, and note, any impact our presence is having on the teaching and learning dynamic and context etc.

We obviously need to see how this might stick to or deviate from how the head of RE sets the curriculum

Teachers' relationship with curriculum and resources

Awareness of available resources within school and wider, awareness of role of resources and curriculum guidance

Are links made with other subjects, e.g. history, art, social education, are teachers able to make these links?

Teacher willingness to deviate from lesson plan and agreed syllabus!
 accommodate contrary views! discuss controversial topics (what might their motivation be for doing this?)
 Control — are they planning own lessons or using what is given to them from others! teaching passively from text book (if a text is used, which one and why? What ones were rejected?)
 Language used to talk about Religious Education as a subject, and subject matter within it
 Teachers' views of inspection and examination regime
 Teachers' relationship with values of curriculum and resources
 Are teacher values made explicit?
 Are teachers aware of their own values and how this might influence their teaching?)
 Student relationship with curriculum! resources (e.g. values! content of curriculum and resources).
 What values and influences do students bring to their learning — e.g. external influences (parents, religious communities, media, other students)?
 We need to get a feel for the difference between the 'frontstage' (i.e. class room performance of the teacher (or student)) and the 'backstage' (i.e. curriculum planning meetings, how teachers go about making a lesson plan, how they are influenced by the need to get good exam results, what backstage student activities (i.e. gossip) might affect how they act in the classroom)
 Non-Teaching Activities in the Classroom
 Direct spiritual interventions, e.g. prayer — how conducted? Student or teacher led? Are all students expected to take part?
 Behaviour management
 Extra-curricular activities centred around the RE classroom — are these connected to RE in any way, e.g. Scripture Union, or are they unrelated, e.g. a chess club that meets in RE classroom because RE teacher supervises them?
 General student talk, non-teaching student-teacher talk — is this different in the RE classroom than in other classes? Why might this be?
 Questions to teachers about their influences and marshalling of resources.

2. Guide to Key Themes in Classroom Discourse

- Is the conversation open or closed? – In other words, does it offer possibilities for students' disagreement? Are they able to articulate such disagreements effectively? Are such disagreements rooted in an understanding of argument and evidence? Does the teacher try to supply or point to sources which do or might provide such evidence?
- Does the language presuppose consent?

- To what extent are the students enabled to engage in forms of self-narration? Is the conversation conducive to cultivating and probing a sense of self?
- Do the resources (iconographic, auditory, etc.) deployed carry pre-ordained conceptions of the religious or moral good? Or, are they used/deployed in such a way as to ensure that the conversation is morally monoglot?
- Is the undergirding epistemic framework consistent and coherent? – in other words, does the teachers consistently articulate a particular understanding of what would count as good or right? This is quite important though establishing consistency or inconsistency does not of itself constitute grounds for any judgment as to moral propriety or priority or indeed educational efficacy.
- Does the teacher explore not only the content of faiths other than her or his own but also explore and engage with ideas beyond their own at a metaphysical or epistemic rather than at a descriptive level?
- Do they engage with the boundaries and borders between religious ideas where there is enhanced porosity? Do they step back from or go through these boundaries?
- If religious education is concerned with more than a set of descriptions of other beliefs and practices then it might be concerned with the symbolic order – that is how the world is represented through ideas, images and practices. To what extent does the classroom discourse engage with the symbolic order? Indeed, does the conversation engage the claim that religion evokes and attends to mystery? Of course, some traditions (particularly in the Christian corpus) may not draw on the discourse of mystery but on holiness. It is important also to attend to this distinction in our observations.

3. 10 Themes Emerging from Ethnographers' Conference at end of pilot phase, June 2009

Contextual themes

A: The role of examinations in setting the aims and content of RE;

B: The fit between teacher, pupil and school values in the RE curriculum, and the relationship of RE to the school ethos;

C: The level of resource and support given to RE;

Discourse-centred themes

D: The language and treatment of immanence and transcendence, touching on pupils' levels of religious experience and religious literacy;

E: The level of intellectual challenge offered by RE, relative to other subjects in the curriculum, with particular reference to differentiation;

F: The frequency and practices of engagement with texts in the RE classroom;

G: The impact of teachers' pedagogical style;

H: The role and approach to multi-cultural awareness in the RE classroom;

I: The epistemic claims made about truth and plurality in the RE classroom.

4. Student Survey Questionnaire Questions and Categories

QUESTIONNAIRE ITEM	OPTIONS
Is your school in... England, Scotland or Northern Ireland (FILTER)	England, Scotland or Northern Ireland
Is your school (named schools) FILTER - ENGLAND	NAMES OF SCHOOLS
FILTER -NORTHERN IRELAND	NAMES OF SCHOOLS
FILTER -SCOTLAND	NAMES OF SCHOOLS
HERE ARE SOME QUESTIONS ABOUT YOU AND YOUR FAMILY	
Are you a ...	boy or girl
What is your religious background?	Catholic /Anglican/Presbyterian/other Christian/ Muslim/Jewish/Hindu/Sikh/other religion/none
Would you describe yourself as religious?	not at all/a little/a lot
Would you describe your family as religious?	not at all/a little/a lot
Do you attend religious classes outside school (for example, Sunday school or Madrassa)?	not at all/less than once a week/once a week/ more than once a week
Do you attend religious services outside school (for example, going to Church or Temple or Mosque)	not at all/less than once a week/once a week/ more than once a week

HERE ARE SOME STATEMENTS ABOUT YOUR PLANS AFTER SCHOOL	
I plan to go to university	strongly agree/agree/don't know/disagree/strongly disagree
My teachers encourage me to go to university	strongly agree/agree/don't know/disagree/strongly disagree
I want to leave school and get a job as soon as I can	strongly agree/agree/don't know/disagree/strongly disagree
HERE ARE SOME STATEMENTS ABOUT YOUR SCHOOL	
my school encourages pupils to take on leadership roles	strongly agree/agree/don't know/disagree/strongly disagree
in my school pupils' views are taken seriously	strongly agree/agree/don't know/disagree/strongly disagree
my school challenges racist attitudes	strongly agree/agree/don't know/disagree/strongly disagree
my school encourages pupils to carry out volunteer work in the community	strongly agree/agree/don't know/disagree/strongly disagree
my school organises collections for charities	strongly agree/agree/don't know/disagree/strongly disagree
my school encourages caring for the environment	strongly agree/agree/don't know/disagree/strongly disagree
my school has somewhere I could go for prayer or reflection	strongly agree/agree/don't know/disagree/strongly disagree
there is someone in my school I could talk to about religious and moral questions	strongly agree/agree/don't know/disagree/strongly disagree
the RE teachers normally take Assemblies in my school	strongly agree/agree/don't know/disagree/strongly disagree
religious charities work with pupils in my school	strongly agree/agree/don't know/disagree/strongly disagree
HERE ARE SOME QUESTIONS ABOUT SOME OF YOUR SCHOOL SUBJECTS	
how often do you read about the experiences of different cultural or religious groups in English?	not at all/a little/a lot
how often do you read about the experiences of different cultural or religious groups in Religious Education?	not at all/a little/a lot
how often do you read about the experiences of different cultural or religious groups in Personal and Social Health Education?	not at all/a little/a lot

how often do you read about the experiences of different cultural or religious groups in Modern Languages?	not at all/a little/a lot
how often do you read about the experiences of different cultural or religious groups in History?	not at all/a little/a lot
HERE ARE SOME QUESTIONS ABOUT WHAT YOU HAVE LEARNED IN SCHOOL	
do you think lessons at school have helped you to better understand points of view different from your own?	not at all/a little/a lot
In your classroom how comfortable are you working with students from different cultural or religious backgrounds?	not at all/a little/a lot
When you get a job, has your school prepared you to work with people who are of a different religious background?	not at all/a little/a lot
Do you believe your school has helped you get along better with members of other religious groups?	not at all/a little/a lot
HERE ARE SOME MORE QUESTIONS ON WHAT YOU HAVE LEARNED AT SCHOOL	
my teachers encourage me to understand people who are different from me	strongly agree/agree/don't know/disagree/strongly disagree
Religious Education helps people to understand others who are different from them	strongly agree/agree/don't know/disagree/strongly disagree
Religious Education encourages people to stay with their own kind	strongly agree/agree/don't know/disagree/strongly disagree
HERE ARE SOME MORE QUESTIONS ABOUT SOME OF YOUR SCHOOL SUBJECTS	
how often are controversial issues discussed and explored in your History classes?	not at all/a little/a lot
how often are controversial issues discussed and explored in your Religious Education classes?	not at all/a little/a lot
how often are controversial issues	not at all/a little/a lot

discussed and explored in your Citizenship classes?	
In your classroom how comfortable are you discussing controversial issues?	very comfortable/comfortable/not sure/uncomfortable/very uncomfortable
HERE ARE SOME STATEMENTS ABOUT YOUR RELIGIOUS EDUCATION CLASSES	
in Religious Education classes we discuss things a lot more than in other classes	strongly agree/agree/don't know/disagree/strongly disagree
in Religious Education classes we listen to the teacher talking a lot more than in other classes	strongly agree/agree/don't know/disagree/strongly disagree
in Religious Education classes we write a lot more than in other classes	strongly agree/agree/don't know/disagree/strongly disagree
In Religious Education classes we just talk about things all the time	strongly agree/agree/don't know/disagree/strongly disagree
In Religious Education classes we watch videos all the time	strongly agree/agree/don't know/disagree/strongly disagree
The language we need to learn in Religious Education is confusing	strongly agree/agree/don't know/disagree/strongly disagree
Religious Education is an important subject in my school	strongly agree/agree/don't know/disagree/strongly disagree
Religious Education is one of the easiest subjects to pass	strongly agree/agree/don't know/disagree/strongly disagree
Religious Education classes are interesting	strongly agree/agree/don't know/disagree/strongly disagree
HERE ARE SOME STATEMENTS COMPARING RELIGIOUS EDUCATION TO OTHER SCHOOL SUBJECTS	
RE is as important as subjects like Maths or Science	Much more important/more important/about the same/less important/much less important
Religious Education is as important as subjects like English or History	Much more important/more important/about the same/less important/much less important
Religious Education is as important as subjects like Citizenship or Personal and Social Health Education	Much more important/more important/about the same/less important/much less important

Which of these subjects is Religious Education most like:	Maths, English, Science, Citizenship, Personal and Social Education, Modern Languages
Which of these subjects is Religious Education least like:	Maths, English, Science, Citizenship, Personal and Social Education, Modern Languages

ⁱ There is a very interesting paper outlining the major issues and annotating the various legislative and related conversations on what has commonly been called ‘the conscience clause’ by Lowden, Louise (2003) *The Conscience Clause in Religious Education and Worship: Conscientious Objection or Curriculum Choice?* Oxford: Culham Institute. (downloadable at http://www.culham.ac.uk/Res_conf/conscience_clause.pdf)

ⁱⁱ The dilemma faced by early legislators and their response is clearly seen in the first reading of the Bill in 17.2.1870, Forster [Vice-President of the Committee of Privy Council on Education] detailing conditions for schools to be public elementary schools, vol 199, col 438-466 secular efficiency, undenominational inspection, ... col 447–448:

I come now to another condition upon which also up to this year there would have been much difference of opinion, but as to which I expect there will be very little at present, and that is that after a limited period we attach what is called a Conscience Clause as a condition to the receipt by any elementary school of public money. I do not think there needs much argument to prove the propriety of such a condition. It seems to me quite clear, if we approach the subject without any prejudice, that in taking money from the taxpayer to give his children secular education, we have no right to interfere with his feelings as a parent or to oblige him to accept for his children religious education to which he objects. Therefore, inviting public money, or making public provision for elementary schools, we hold that they ought not to be schools from which the public would be excluded. The principle of that condition is so clear, and the violation of it has been found so mischievous, that I am glad to find the opposition to the proposed change has almost disappeared. ...

ⁱⁱⁱ see Conroy, J. and Lundie, D. (2011 forthcoming) L.Woodhead (ed) *Innovative Methods in the Study of Religion*, Maidenhead, Berks: Open University Press.

^{iv} Many politicians, for a complex variety of reasons, most often concerned with perceptions of its status as a site for moral development/education or cultural nostalgia or, more recently, its perceived power to address inter-religious conflict, wish to retain religious education. Many professionals collude with politicians in the hope that they will support the retention of a subject often perceived to be under significant pressure. Their imperative is the survival of the subject in a, frequently, inhospitable climate. As we have witnessed in this study, even in religiously denominated schools there exists no guarantee of the fulsome support of the principal or head teacher.

^v The following extract from ethnographer’s notes in a religious school highlights the juxtaposition between the critical engagement of RE and less critical stances in other parts of the school. ‘The corridor of the Media Studies block has a display which includes pictures of scantily clad women from gossip magazines, these are presented uncritically, unlike in Religious Education...’ (Card Hume HS)

^{vi} For example, 2 teachers in adjacent schools with similar demographics and catchment areas had widely differing views on the purpose of religious education –for one the purpose was to keep organised religion out of the school; for the other it was to combat pupil’s antipathy to organised religion.

vii A common sense was that the subject is undervalued, e.g. 'I also see it as an academic subject. I feel very strongly that it is sometimes seen as that *'Cinderella Subject'* that the kids have to do and that we don't give it any academic thrust I suppose. To me that's very much wrong because it is an academic subject' (**Northwest High School**).

viii Again, quite a number of teachers expressed their concern at the intellectual skills gap. Here a teacher who studied philosophy, not theology or religious studies, expresses a common view amongst RE teachers. 'Between you and me and in the confidentiality of these four walls, there is a skills gap. I am assistant [unclear], I can teach philosophy and ethics and a supply teacher (?) for the children of year 13...If I do ever leave there is a serious issue about who has the knowledge and degree level skills to be able to teach [unclear] and that is a potential issue. (**Brockton Community School**)

Another similar observation from a teacher in a quite different context, starkly illustrates the challenge. 'Now I had remember having a discussion about a member of staff in the Humanities department who was, not this year but the year before, helping us out with the 2nd year class, and he was teaching Islam as if, em, it was Arabs and camels, right, not something that touches the humanities curriculum at all. Now, em, and he said he enjoyed it, and the kids enjoyed it, yes, but it's just information-topping-up, it's not trying to relate that to what it is like to be a Muslim in 21st century, what it is like, why there is conflict in the world between, eh, Islam and Christianity...' (**Kinraddie HS**)

ix For further information on the conduct of the ethnographic analytic framework see appendices 1 and 2 below.

x See, for example a typical parliamentary debate around sex education and homosexuality that illustrates the conflicted policy agenda at <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200910/cmhansrd/cm100408/debtext/100408-0011.htm> downloaded 2nd December 2010.

xi May, S. (1999) *Critical Multiculturalism and cultural Difference: Avoiding Essentialism* in S. May (ed) *Critical multiculturalism: rethinking multicultural and antiracist education*, London: Falmer.

xii See for example this excerpt from field notes on Dickson School: ...students from ethnic backgrounds were usually from religious families and so felt that religion was important... One Muslim student said he wanted to learn more about Judaism, ("Muslims and Jews are killing each other, so I would like to know more about what Judaism is all about")

xiii But one example of a general expectation is to be found in the Bristol Agreed Syllabus for Religious Education, where moral development is to be offered 'through helping learners to consider and respond to areas of morality whilst using their knowledge and understanding of religious and ethical teaching. This enables them to make reasoned and informed judgements on religious and moral issues and to respond to moral questions in a moral way'. It is important to note that this is moral development not moral education begging quite as many questions as it might proffer.

xiv This excerpt from one of the interviews of RE teachers (in a common school) is symptomatic of these wider expectations regarding the expertise, inclinations and purposes of RE. 'I worked for eight years as a youth and community worker in ... going into schools doing, they called it 'sex, drugs and rock'n roll' so there was a whole lot of stuff round homophobia, stuff around alcohol and sexual issues, so once I was in this school doing that work they then needed, there was a vacancy for a religious studies head of department, and

they knew my background, so that's it. From then I was head of department because of the stuff I had done before.'

^{xv} This clash of values: is particularly evident in the following field notes from a religiously denominating school. 'In the choice of materials, particularly the juxtaposition of traditional and contemporary visual art and media used in the RE classroom, it is possible to see the tension that exists between embedding notions of Catholic faith learned in childhood and challenging these notions in such a way as to deepen understanding. Also in the disjunction between teacher's personal lives and the claims they have to uphold in Catholic school.

Again the push to close down particular questions using a questioning format is seen in discussing contraception in the Catholic school.

On another occasion, Ms ... is discussing contraception with a top-set Year 11. She begins by asking why contraception isn't allowed, one boy says because "the main purpose" of sex is supposed to be to procreate. Ms ... says "good", then uses a limiting way of asking an open question:

"Does anyone have a problem with the, that natural family planning is OK?"

(the negative form, not does anyone have a problem with the idea that contraception not OK) one girl says "doesn't always work though does it?"

Ms ... explains how some contraceptives work, explains that the coil leads to "mini-miscarriages" but asks if NFP is any different to condoms? She ends by saying "but the traditional Catholic line is that..." which leaves her own view on the matter unstated.

^{xvi} See for example the interactive software of Boardworks Ltd in sex education.

^{xvii} At times, the presumption that sex is a part of students' lives passes without much concern, such as the teacher who remarked that she encourages her students studying Islam in S2 to contemplate 'what it would be like to give up ... food and drink and tobacco and sex, during the hours of daylight' (**Kinraddie**) In other cases, teachers are constrained in talking about sex as a moral issue, for example a teacher who prefaced the beginning of an S4 unit on sex and relationships by cautioning students not to 'speak about personal experiences in a manner that may be illegal... [most of the class are 15], I would prefer that you do not talk about your personal experiences or about what other people have done' (**Dundon Grammar**).

^{xviii} The following excerpt from field notes represents a common perception of RE teachers; - 'X is also responsible for PSHE and Citizenship. He feels undervalued and mentioned the fact that although he does take an active role in extra-curricular activities he never features in the weekly bulletin's 'thank you' section. He does not think that the school appreciate what happens in RE and the contribution that the subject can make to the education of pupils – particularly with regard to raising self-esteem and the personal qualities encompassed by 'learning from' religion'. The school in question is a church school and the Head of RE's sense of grievance finds resonance in the Principal's message to the school which is unequivocally focused on economic purposes and interestingly, for a church school, makes no mention of its religious or communal purposes.

^{xix} The following excerpt from one of the many focus groups (**Queen's High School**) is not untypical of student attitudes and is corroborated by the questionnaire.

P1 The lessons are a lot more relaxed – it's easier to communicate, you feel that you can express your opinions

P3: RE's down to what people believe so its relaxed

P1: But some people use the subject and its advantages against the teacher, it's annoying because they take advantage. The teacher isn't dealing with sure answers so there is openness to discussion but some people can exploit this.

P6: It's about different beliefs but some people have fixed opinions and think it isn't an important subject. They won't learn because they think there is nothing to learn because it is just what I believe.

P2: Worry about what other people think of you – it's not a good 'cool' subject and this affects how much you want to join in.'

^{xx} As one Scottish teacher put it, 'I teach history and RMPS and I like doing both of them and I think I tend to find if children see that you do teach more than one subject perhaps it may give them a different perspective on me as a person instead of just teaching RMPS...' (**Burns Academy**). It is not apparent that other teachers, whether in the sciences or humanities feel the need to teach another subject in order that students will have a different attitude to them.

^{xxi} Teachers commonly expressed their anxiety about the decline of knowledge and understanding. The following excerpt from a teacher interview was not uncommon. 'About, over the years....I mean I've been here, however many years I've been here...and the level of knowledge and understanding of Islam has got less and less and less and less...to the point that the number of misconceptions and the amount of misinformation, actually not just misconceptions, misinformation that you have to sort out before you start is...I'm quite worried about it actually from the point of the community...' (**Linden Girls School**)