



Standing Advisory Council For Religious Education (SACRE)

Sixth Public Annual Lecture

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Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA)

**“Future Developments
in Religious Education”**

Transcript of the lecture

held on

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at the Christ Church Centre
91 Coombe Road,
New Malden.
6.30-7.30pm

The Chair, Mrs Maria James, warmly welcomed those present to the 6th Annual Kingston SACRE lecture for which the SACRE was delighted to welcome Graham Langtree who as Consultant for Religious Education at the QCA, had steered through the publishing of the first 'National Framework for RE' which had been launched by the Secretary of State, in October 2004. The SACRE was particularly grateful to Graham for agreeing to give this lecture during a very busy period following the publishing of the Framework ...Graham had actually travelled all the way from Dorset to come to give the lecture in Kingston and would be travelling straight on to a conference in Birmingham afterwards.

Graham Langtree:

Before I worked for the QCA, I was an HMI in Birmingham and then Dorset. I began my teaching life in Birmingham and I spent eight very lively and interesting years there and then moved on to Dorset, which as you can imagine, was a spectacularly different experience! People think it is strange but I often say that I really miss Birmingham. How can I miss Birmingham when I'm living in such a beautiful county? Well, I missed Brummy kids – the uniqueness of their humour....

I remember when I was doing an OFSTED inspection in a Birmingham school where the Head of RE was on long-term sick leave, and the only other NQT (qualified teacher) was also off sick and it was a supply teacher taking a class –one can imagine how she was feeling covering in these circumstances during a full OFSTED inspection! It was a Year 8 class which had been left a fairly low-level task in relation to Judaism – the 10 Plagues of Egypt and the leading of the Hebrew slaves from Egypt. The task was to match pictures to the words for each plague – you can imagine that matching a picture of a frog to the word for 'frog' wasn't going to take 13 year olds very long– they had finished the task in about 90 seconds. So the supply teacher began trying to extend the lesson (in accordance with good practice to provide differentiation in lesson plans!) and said to the class, ' Now think very carefully – which of the 10 plagues do you think was worse?' One pupil thinks for a moment and declares 'Boils, miss. Boils is a truly horrible plague'. That wasn't quite the answer that the teacher had been hoping for! So she said, 'Now think, John, as bad as boils is – and it certainly is a horrible plague – do you think it really is as bad as...for example...the death of one's first-born son?'Now, John was an 'independent learner' – way ahead of Key Stage 3...and he immediately replied,' Course it is, Miss, you might be dead but at least you don't have zits on your face!'

I met John the next day when he was setting up equipment for the school assembly and he said to me 'You're one of those Inspectors, aren't you? You were in my RE lesson.' I said yes and that I had enjoyed his answer in class. He continued 'Well, it seems to me that this inspection is going really well...but may I ask you a question? Why is that we are having prayers this week? Whenever we have an OFSTED inspection, the amount of prayers just seems to go up' ...At that point, the Year Head came in – and promptly asked John to get on with putting the chairs out at the back of the hall! John inevitably asked why more chairs were needed...'For members of staff, of course'...Well, you can imagine John's next comment: 'Staff?? But usually none of the staff come to assemblies...they say they're all busy taking 'valuable non-contact planning time'. (I particularly liked how John had picked up the precise jargon for the situation!)20 more minutes with John and I know I could have cracked the inspection of that school!

So - young people and their learning – you might say that the slogan of the National Framework for Religious Education is: 'It's all about the learning'.

It is of course the local responsibility of the LEA and SACRES to ensure the effective provision for RE in their area but I learnt, as the consultation on the Framework proceeded, that there were actually three types of audience which it was going to have to address:

Firstly the audiences one might expect: the LEA, the SACRES, the faith communities and the RE teaching professional community.

Secondly I found it must address those headteachers who might be more cynical about RE. How can we convince *them* that RE is worthwhile? that it is a stimulating, risk-taking activity and one which, if children don't engage in it during their school life, would leave their learning impoverished?

Thirdly there was... the Press! To present the Framework to the media in England -this was something of a steep learning curve for me! This must have been the first time RE was found on page 2 of The Sun! 'National Curriculum axes God' by The Sun 'RE Correspondent'. (Good to know, at least, that The Sun has an 'RE Correspondent'!) The Observer headline was : 'Children to study atheism in schools'. (or maybe 'Thank God for that – Children to learn atheism in schools') Well, the press reporting was riddled with inaccuracies – the Media focussed on atheism but in fact the word 'atheism' doesn't appear in the National Framework.

During the period I was an HMI I was inspecting a Primary School class (probably to observe the impact of RE on the literacy strategy or something similar) and the teacher was holding a plenary session following a lesson on the Good Samaritan. It had been a good lesson; the dramatic enactment of the robbers was particularly impressive. So during the plenary session the teacher asked why it was an important story. And the class had been able to provide answers that it was a story in the Bible, the holy book for Christians, which was telling Christians that God wanted them to love their neighbour and that their neighbour was anyone who was in need. So far, so good....and then a child asked the teacher: 'Miss, who or what exactly is God?'

Now that's a great question when you are four. It's maybe not a great question for the teacher when the HMI is sitting in the corner. So she said 'Andrew, what a brilliant question, children did we all hear Andrew's question? Wasn't that marvellous? Who thinks they can help Andrew?' But Andrew is not going to be fobbed off by that, because when you are four, the teacher is the fount of all knowledge or wisdom. 'But, Miss, I want *you* to answer 'who or what exactly is God?'

I love that word 'exactly' - Andrew doesn't want any old vague ontological argument (because he did that in nursery school) - he's ready for the hard information now. At this point you can see the teacher's colour draining from her cheeks, but in moments of desperation, teachers can be inspired...she said 'Well, that's a lovely question, Andrew, and aren't we lucky today because..... we have a special person in the classroom who can help us answer it!'

And (while I did explain to Andrew that I wasn't exactly an "HMI for God"), we certainly did, after the lesson during the break-time, have a good conversation together about the kind of ideas and images people have of God.

Every child in England matters as far as their RE is concerned. This is the main point I'll be making tonight, as I talk a bit about the Framework itself, and say something about what the state of the nation is with regard to RE, and finish with a view on where I think RE is heading in relation to the bigger picture of learning.

What kind of expectations for the learning in RE of our children do we want to develop? In the National Framework for RE we tried to set out some national expectations.

The most important section in the Framework is the statement at the beginning on **The importance of RE** (top of page 7 of the Framework).

Ultimately RE is interested in answering the question 'what does it mean to be a human being?' And out of that, what does that word 'religion' and 'beliefs' mean? and what does that matter to people in a society where the portrayal of the word 'religion' is characterised by warfare, bloodshed and sectarianism?

There is a real challenge in the Framework to answer the question 'What does it really mean to belong to a religion?' and how can we help children from an early age to recognise that people do have different beliefs and ideas about the world in which we live.

The only 'given' about the Framework is that it is quite deliberately modelled on the subject orders in the National Curriculum house style.

The first part of the Framework is the rationale for RE and how RE contributes to literacy; IT, citizenship and PSHE.

The second part is 'what are the programmes of study? and 'what are the key learning outcomes?

One of the decisions on which we consulted was whether we could retain the language of learning '*about*' religion (attainment target 1) and learning '*from*' religion (attainment target 2) or whether these should be merged. It was very clear from the consultation that we should keep them distinct.

Consequently we have set out six key dimensions to RE:

Attainment target 1:

1. beliefs, teachings and sources
2. practices and ways of life
3. forms of expression

Attainment target 2:

4. thinking of own responses to the world of belief and religions; questions of meaning; - children are fascinated in this – 'is it true? What does it mean? (Andrew's question about who or what exactly is God? If Andrew's ideas and images at 94 are the same as they were at 4, that would be a sign RE hadn't been doing its job.)
5. identity and belonging - finding your position in this world and understanding yourself and your culture
6. values and commitments – 'who and what do I truly value?'

Now Kingston may be a spiritual haven in an increasingly secular world but my experience in Dorset and across the nation is that the vast majority of children in our schools are now secular. There is little or no connection with Christianity for most of these children, even though Christianity has a particular position in the country for legal and historical reasons.

Good RE has to start with the children themselves and then move in to this world called religion. So it is helping children think 'what about me? –my special places, my stories, my special objects....and then look at what these might be for a Muslim, a Buddhist...

So the second strand in AT2 is 'What do I learn about 'me'? and 'How does that help me to be a human being?'

The third strand in AT2 is 'who or what do I truly value?'

When my daughter, Naomi, was 4 she was very upset when her grandmother, my mother, died after a painful struggle with cancer. Naomi asked 'So why on earth should Jesus have Grandma all to himself?' If this had been asked in an RE class, I might have said 'well, that's an important and interesting a question' and explained how a Christian or a Hindu or a Muslim might understand it and respond to it...but actually what I did was hugged her and cried with her and then laughed when we remembered her grandmotherand her endless knitting of huge jumpers (Naomi started wearing at 10 the one she was given at 3!) ..The important thing was the acknowledgement that Grandma is alive in the memories that we have of her.

So I think that RE has this unique role in helping children in their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. We are hoping that the section (page 14 of the Framework) with ideas on promoting spiritual, moral and social and cultural development through RE will be widely read.

The Framework is trying to say that religion, no matter whether you believe in it or not, is here and is a powerful influence in our world and that RE is interested in responding to the big questions. At 4, Andrew was an exceptional performer. I don't want him to become embittered and cynical at 16, but to hold on to that innate sense of wonder and have the freedom to explore what really matters to him.

Of all the communities who expressed an opinion on the Framework, it was the teaching community who were most positive in their feedback. LEA's and SACRE's had tangential issues. The LEA's were more concerned with issues concerning the legal status of the framework, the balance between the religions and beliefs. What the teachers were looking at was 'how might this impact on me and on my classroom practise?'. People felt that we had set challenging but, hopefully, realistic expectations. They also liked the way 14 -19 was looked at as a continuum rather than a clear division, as we had based it on what we believed would be the findings of the Tomlinson enquiry.

Some LEAs were concerned that it was a take-over of RE nationally (from local determination) – which it absolutely isn't. The framework is purely non-statutory guidance and it is up to the LEA and SACRE to decide how they might utilise it because the Framework is not a nationally agreed syllabus. Some big choices about the content - for

example, which local-based faith community to study - these are entirely matters for a LEA.

The framework is trying to set out national agreed standards and learning outcomes which are then locally developed in terms of content and further guidance.

So what are the strengths and areas for development in RE?

How many pupils do you think gained an RE accreditation at GCSE either full or short course last year? 400,000 – 70% of the cohort. And we are beginning to see a knock-on effect at A level. In 2004 there were 35,000 students taking RE at A level - 5yrs ago it was only 8,000.

RE is now a medium sized subject. The downside of this is: why is the figure not even bigger? why not 600,000? – the same as for English language? Many pupils never get the chance. Even after 10 years of OFSTED and 3 cycles of inspections, 35% of secondary schools don't provide RE to pupils at key stage 4.

Religious Education is considered to make an important contribution to children's social, moral, cultural and spiritual development. Moral and cultural development are fairly straightforward to understand but what do we mean by 'a school which is spiritually developed'? a school that gives space and time in its busy, hectic, text-led, fact-driven curriculum in which there is the space to think 'what does it mean to be me?'

Where is the space to develop this important skill called reflection? Where can I begin to develop empathy? How do I start to understand another person's perspective? Where can I begin to reflect on what matters ultimately to me as a human being?

RE is a powerful tool for children's learning because, if you get the spiritual side of development right, not just in RE but in the bigger picture, then I think it will lead to a gentler and more reflective society.

In relation to 'cultural development', RE of course has contributed well to developing children's awareness of special moments – especially at Primary Schools when festivals are celebrated. There are attitudes which are essential to learning RE: children's self-esteem; children's appreciation and wonder; helping children critically develop respect for all and respecting the beliefs and values of other people.

And RE is not just about enjoying festivals but also about combating prejudice; combating stereotyping, combating discrimination. The former Secretary of State for Education, Charles Clarke, was particularly supportive of the National Framework initiative – probably for two main reasons: firstly it was about improving learning; and secondly it was about developing respect and building community cohesion.

In September 2003, there was a lot of support for the QCA from LEAs in the north of England – a number of head teachers had reported that far-right political parties were targeting children as they left their junior schools, saying that they should tell their parents to withdraw them from RE unless it was 'proper' RE i.e. RE only about Christianity, because 'you shouldn't be learning about these other dangerous religions'. The reality in 2003 was that there was a lot of fear about religion. Yet to be equipped for life in a multicultural society one needs to understand why beliefs are important.

In terms of the state of RE in our schools currently: there has definitely been an improvement in Primary Schools in the coordination of the curriculum for spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. But in HM Chief Inspector's Annual Report it is RE which is described as the worst taught subject in primary schools and this is maybe due to an overemphasis on the part of some schools on literacy and numeracy and a lack of emphasis on children's creative development.

There are two key targets for the Framework: 1) to persuade the cynical head teacher who doesn't appreciate the subject and 2) to support schools in their monitoring and evaluation in RE. My experience as an LEA Inspector and an HMI is that the more time an RE coordinator can spend in talking to children, the better the monitoring and evaluation of the subject will be. One can evaluate the lessons by listening to what children say about what they have learnt. We had a QCA project doing just that – talking to children about why RE was important. It is always worth asking 'What do you remember about that lesson?' and 'How might I have helped you better to understand that point?' We underestimate the evaluative tool of just speaking to children. We can evaluate planning, scrutinise work, evaluate lessons but we should also evaluate the time spent simply talking and discussing things with children. For example, is it true in practice that the RE has promoted respect for another's faith? We looked at 15 schools across all ages – encouraging the pupils to talk. One outcome we found was that the findings in relation to Year 9 boys was not dovetailing with the other ages.

In terms of evaluation, I've found children are usually committed to the truth: I remember during an inspection to a school, I was admiring a wonderful display of artefacts and posters – it was a treasure trove – and I started talking to a pupil about the display and he proudly showed me the poster he had done about Yin and Yang and was explaining how long it had taken him to do it and about ideas of good and evil...and I asked him how often he had his work displayed – and he replied never before. That's unfortunately often the case, the quality of work during inspections is exemplary but sometimes it's not part and parcel of the normal school life.

Where are we at now? In the development of RE we should be proud of our contribution to the increase of moral, cultural and spiritual awareness. We have bigger challenges in the future to see whether RE really can make a difference to children in terms of developing respect and sensitivity. Can it be a force for good in combating prejudice and discrimination? As well as the technical remit for the Framework, the acid test of the Framework is: how many LEAs use it to review their syllabuses. And consequently, will the learning in RE improve? Can we keep the same high profile we have at Key stage 4, and convince more students to continue with RE post-16? The focus of the Framework is teaching and learning and to show that Religious Education makes a relevant and powerful contribution to that learning.

***The importance of religious education**

(taken from page 7 of the National Framework)

'Religious education provokes challenging questions about the ultimate meaning and purpose of life, beliefs about God, the self and the nature of reality, issues of right and wrong and what it means to be human. It develops pupils' knowledge and understanding of Christianity, other principal religions, other religious traditions and other world views that offer answers to questions such as these. It offers opportunities for personal reflection and spiritual development. It enhances pupils' awareness and understanding of religions and beliefs, teachings, practices and forms of expression, as well as of the influence of religion on individuals, families, communities and cultures.

Religious education encourages pupils to learn from different religions, beliefs, values and traditions while exploring their own beliefs and questions of meaning. It challenges pupils to reflect on, consider, analyse, interpret and evaluate issues of truth, belief, faith and ethics and to communicate their responses.

Religious education encourages pupils to develop their sense of identity and belonging. It enables them to flourish individually within their communities and as citizens in a pluralistic society and global community. Religious education has an important role in preparing pupils for adult life, employment and lifelong learning. It enables pupils to develop respect for and sensitivity to others, in particular those whose faiths and beliefs are different from their own. It promotes discernment and enables pupils to combat prejudice.'