

Impact case study (REF3b)

Institution: University of Glasgow
Unit of Assessment: C25 Education
Title of case study: Shaping public, political and practitioner debate on the place of religious education in UK schools
1. Summary of the impact

University of Glasgow research into Religious Education (RE) in the UK significantly informed public and political debate on the place of RE in UK Schools. The findings received widespread coverage in radio, print and digital media outlets. The research provided an evidence base for the Religious Education Council's Review of RE in 2012 and was used in the development of a myriad of national CPD events for teachers and education policy-makers and professionals.

2. Underpinning research

The University of Glasgow has developed a substantial body of research on Religious Education and religious literacy across a number of projects and publications. The research has recently been significantly developed through a methodologically innovative large phase research project on Religious Education (RE) in UK schools entitled: *Does Religious Education Work? An Analysis of the Aims, Practices and Models of Effectiveness in Religious Education across the UK ('Does RE Work?')*. The 3-year project, funded jointly by the ESRC and AHRC as part of the £12million Religion and Society programme, aimed to create the single most comprehensive study to date of the state of RE across the combined jurisdictions of the United Kingdom.

As principal investigator, Professor James Conroy (Professor, Education, 2005; UoG Staff since 1999) worked with Professor Vivienne Baumfield (Professor, University of Glasgow from 2005) to lead a team of researchers from the University of Glasgow; the broader team included co-investigators: Dr Philip Barnes (King's College London) and Professor Tony Gallagher (Queen's University Belfast). In his role as PI, Conroy brought his expertise from previous research on the issue of RE in schools to the project.

The study tracked the trajectory of RE in religious and non-denominational secondary schools (n=24) in the UK from the aims and intentions represented in policy through its enactment in classroom practice to estimations of its impact by students nearing the completion of compulsory study of the subject. Using an innovative combination of philosophical, theological and ethnographic approaches, the project team investigated the local, social, cultural, pedagogical and professional practices which determine and shape the delivery of RE in secondary schools through policy analysis, ethnographic case studies, semi-structured interviews and the development of a practitioner enquiry network.

Key insights from the project demonstrated that RE:

- is often led by highly committed and thoughtful teachers who are highly regarded by students;
- makes a positive contribution to multicultural awareness and is often shaped around local demographic and cultural needs and expectations;
- occupies a threshold place in the school which allows it to be different but which can at times lead to its marginalisation;
- at its best cultivates skills of debate, reflection and creative discussion in contrast to an increasingly exam-driven curriculum in other subject areas; and
- departments that are fortunate enough to have a significant body of specialist staff appear to offer many advantages in coping with the numerous entailments and expectations of the subject.

Conversely, the research demonstrated that there were certain structural and pedagogical limitations and constraints on the success of RE in schools. These findings revealed that RE:

- does not, in the main, make students religiously literate, with pupils demonstrating widespread ignorance of basic religious concepts

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- 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.
- is striated with conceptual and epistemological confusion.

The research unearthed substantial underfunding in the UK with RE receiving as little as 60p per pupil per year, a finding subsequently corroborated in a recent Ofsted report (2013). As this case study will illustrate (Section 4), the findings received extensive media coverage, provoking much public debate around RE in UK schools as well as a significant programme of professional development.

3. References to the research

- (1) Conroy, J. and Davis, R. (2008). Citizenship, Education and the Claims of Religious Literacy in M.A. Peters, A. Britton and H. Blee (eds) *Global Citizenship Education*. Rotterdam: Sense. ISBN 9789087903732 [available from HEI]
- (2) Conroy, J.C., and Gallagher, T. (2009) Should the Liberal State support religious schooling? In: Arthur, J. and Davies, I. (eds.) *The Routledge Education Studies Textbook*. Routledge, London, pp. 81-92. ISBN 10:041547955X / 13:978-0415479554 [available from HEI]
- (3) Conroy, J.C. (2010) The contribution of religious schooling to citizenship. In: Alexander, A. and Agbaria, A. (eds.) *Religious Schooling in Liberal Democracies: Commitment, character and citizenship*. Routledge, London. ISBN 9780415879743 [available from HEI]
- (4) Baumfield, V.M., Conroy, J. C., et. al (2012) 'The Delphi method: gathering expert opinion in religious education'. *British Journal of Religious Education*, 34 (1). pp. 5-19. (doi:[10.1080/01416200.2011.614740](https://doi.org/10.1080/01416200.2011.614740)) [Output published in international peer-reviewed journal, which is the leading journal in Britain for the dissemination of research in religion and education]
- (5) Conroy, J. C., Lundie, D., and Baumfield, V. (2012). 'Failures of meaning in religious education'. *Journal of Beliefs and Values*, 33 (3). pp. 309-323. (doi:[10.1080/13617672.2012.732812](https://doi.org/10.1080/13617672.2012.732812)) [Output published in an international journal following rigorous peer-review process]. [REF 2]
- (6) Conroy, J.C., et. al. (2013). *Does Religious Education Work? A Multi-dimensional Investigation*. Bloomsbury, London. ISBN 9781441127990 [REF 2]

Key Grants: *Does Religious Education Work? An Analysis of the Aims, Practices and Models of Effectiveness in Religious Education across the UK*, ESRC/AHRC, £348,597.28, 2007-2010. PI: Prof. James C. Conroy

4. Details of the impact

Shaping Public and Political Debate about Religious Education

As part of the Religion and Society Programme, in which *Does RE Work?* was integral, a series of Westminster Faith Debates was launched in February 2012. These debates were designed to bring the best research and thinking on religion into public debate. Professor Conroy discussed the project findings at the debate which addressed the question of 'What's the Place of Faith in Schools?' held on 22 February 2012 in Whitehall. Other participants included high-profile public figures Richard Dawkins and John Pritchard, Bishop of Oxford and Chair of the Church of England's Board of Education. To date, the [YouTube video](#) of the debate has received approximately 18,600 views.

Dawkins and Pritchard responded to the research findings discussed in open debate with a large audience which included politicians, members of religious and secular organisations, and the general public. Conroy drew on the research findings to argue that RE in Britain is drastically under-resourced, intellectually conflicted, torn between competing aims, and rapidly becoming the dumping ground of the curriculum. Conroy pointed out that schools spend less money and less time on RE than on any other examination subject. The findings from the research that many schools spend less than £1 per pupil a year, as well as the conceptual confusions around delivery figured prominently in the discussion and coverage of the debate. The Westminster Faith Debate

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received extensive coverage in the media and in this way the research findings from the project were used to influence the public and political debate around RE in schools.

The research significantly contributed to public understandings about the state of RE in British schools at a time when the place of religion in society was being debated. It was featured by numerous media outlets, including *The Daily Mail*, *The Guardian*, *The Metro*, *The Guardian Teacher Network*, *The Tablet*, *The Scottish Catholic Observer*, and *BBC News Online*. The ESRC featured the research on 2 occasions in its *Britain In* series, in 2009 and 2011. Additionally, *The Times Education Supplement*, the market-leading education publication in Scotland, featured the research twice (11 March 2011; 2 March 2012) in its main publication and also on *TES Connect* (8 October 2010), which provides free online resources to teaching professionals. In February 2012, it also featured on the [website](#) of the European Wergeland Centre, a resource centre on education for intercultural understanding, human rights and democratic citizenship based in Oslo. Conroy gave live news interviews and participated in debates on the research for BBC Radio 4 (26 February 2012) and BBC Radio 5 Live (22 February 2012).

Providing Evidence to Parliamentary Inquiry and Human Rights Bodies on RE

Baumfield and Conroy gave evidence to the Religious Education Council's for England and Wales (REC) on-going review of RE, which it carried out with the support of Culham St Gabriel's Trust and the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on RE in 2012. Baumfield presented the research to the Expert Panel of REC's *Phase 1 Subject Review of Religious Education in England* in late 2012. The final Phase 1 Report published on 16 January 2013 cites Baumfield's contribution and findings from the *Does RE Work?* project when drawing conclusions and making recommendations about the appropriate aims of RE in English schools.

The REC RE Review Project Manager responsible for drafting the report noted that the impact of the research was strongest in this early part of the study where *'the Expert Panel considered the findings of the project...and called Vivienne Baumfield to speak at the second meeting of the panel (in Birmingham) in person'*. The Project Manager also met with Conroy in September 2012 and noted that the report was helpful *'specifically on the importance of subject knowledge; the danger of RE spreading itself too thinly when, on insufficient curriculum time, teachers tried to make too many claims for the impact of the subject on pupils'*. These observations, she states helped *'to triangulate with other sources of evidence used in the Review'*.

The Chair of the Expert Panel also notes the usefulness of the emergent research findings from the *Does RE Work?* Project at the Birmingham meeting, going on further to highlight that the research *'was particularly useful in giving the REC review expert panel a broader perspective, ... in that the Glasgow team had partly based its evidence on visiting a range of schools...in England as well as Scotland. One of the findings that was noted and discussed by the expert panel was that there has been a tendency for the RE community to spread justifications for the value of RE in schools too wide - contributing to values education, citizenship, spiritual/moral/social/cultural education, thinking skills etc'*.

The resultant REC report made an important contribution to the evidence base for the APPG's Inquiry on Religious Education. Additionally, the RE lead officer at Ofsted has commented robustly on the influence of the project on his own recent work and the field more generally.

Equality and Human Rights Commission

As part of a project to assist the Equality and Human Rights Commission (the Commission) in thinking about its mandate for 'religion or belief' and in setting priorities for research, Conroy presented the research to the Commission at a Glasgow-based Expert Seminar on 7 May 2009 (c.60). The Commission held three Expert Seminars in London, Lancaster and Glasgow, bringing together academics, practitioners, policy-makers and members of the Commission.

Conroy was able to draw from the emerging research findings to contribute to the discussion of RE and religious literacy as it related to the work and remit of the Commission. The final report by the Commission on *'Religion or belief: Identifying issues and priorities'*, uses the research and

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Conroy's representations of it to highlight the need for new approaches to RE provision and research.

Professional Development on the Research Findings

Conroy and Baumfield used the research findings to design and organise workshops and professional training for teachers and educational professionals in the UK, in particular in Scotland and Cornwall.

Scotland : Conroy and Baumfield were invited to present the annual lecture for the [Association of Religious Education Teachers in Scotland](#) in May (11-12) 2010 and May (8-9) 2013. Additionally, Conroy used the research findings in a keynote presentation to the 2009 Religious Education in Roman Catholic Schools conference organised by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education (HMIE) for approximately 150 teachers and education professionals. The conference was designed to explore good practice of how effective, innovative practitioners in pre-school, primary, secondary and special schools were working together to implement RE. Conroy's presentation of the emerging findings from the *Does RE Work?* project provided a stimulus upon which teachers were subsequently required to reflect in further CPD sessions.

Cornwall: As well as designing and facilitating several day-long workshops on the research in Salford (c.150) and 2-day workshops to all the Head Teachers and senior staff of Catholic schools in Newcastle (c.300), Conroy shared the research with Cornwall Standing Advisory Committee for RE (SACRE) who then circulated the research report to all 32 Cornish Secondary Schools in July 2011 to use as a base for their self-evaluation in the coming academic year. The research was subsequently used as a basis for discussion with secondary Heads of RE at their Conference in the autumn of 2011. Additionally, as the SACRE County Advisor for RE in Cornwall notes: '*the research paper influenced the SACRE Agreed Syllabus for RE in a number of ways, including:*

- *The clarification of the aims and purposes of RE in terms of the syllabus;*
- *A closer attention to the content of RE and its relationship to the programmes of study for RE, based on the National Framework for RE (QCA 2004);*
- *The content of the implementation training which looked specifically at the liminal nature of RE in many schools as it sought to justify itself in relation to other curriculum areas and the emerging demands on schools in relation RE as a tool for social melioration.'*

Cornwall County Council's use of the research culminated in Conroy delivering the 2012 Annual SACRE Lecture (c.100) in Truro on 19 October 2012.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

Contribution to public and political debate

1. Westminster Faith Debate, 22 February 2012 YouTube video [\[link\]](#); representative sample of media coverage at Westminster Faith debate page [\[link\]](#); BBC Radio 4 [You and Yours](#) 21 Feb 2012; [Daily Mail](#) 22 Feb 2012; [BBC News Online](#) 21 Feb 2012; [Guardian Teacher Network](#), 22 Feb 2012; [Huffington Post](#) 22 Feb 2012
2. REC Report *Phase 1 Subject Review of Religious Education in England*, 16 January, 2013: [\[link\]](#)
3. Equality and Human Rights Commission, *Religion or belief: Identifying issues and priorities*, 2009, EHRC Report 48: [\[link\]](#)
4. Statement from Chair of the Religious Education Council, including corroborative comments from REC RE Review Project Manager and Chair of Expert Panel [available from HEI]
5. Statement from Director of Culham's St. Gabriel's to support impact of research on the work with APPG on RE [available from HEI]
6. National Lead for RE at Ofsted Statement attesting to research impact on Ofsted's review of RE [available from HEI]

Contribution to continuing professional development

7. Statement from SACRE County Advisor for RE, Cornwall, Statement quoted in §4 above [available from HEI]
8. 2009 HMIE Conference on Religious Education in Roman Catholic Schools, [\[Video link\]](#)