**REforReal**

**Influencers Group 2**

**March 18th 2015**

**Present**

Adam Dinham

Steven Evans

David Ford

Abdullah Sahin

Stephen Shashua

Martha Shaw

Timothy Stacey

Bharti Tailor

Paul Tyler

**Absent**

Mike Battcock

Paul Deemer

**Research findings**

After introductions from the group, Martha Shaw from the research team outlined preliminary findings from the second stage of the project: focus groups with students. (These were presented as early findings and a full analysis will be available in the final project report later in the year).

The following key points emerge from the initial analysis:

**Purposes**

* Knowledge for knowledge’s sake:
* To understand people in diverse society:
* To overcome stereotypes:
* To avoid causing offence:
* To promote respect but not moral values:
* To develop spirituality
* Agreement that RE shouldn’t be teach students to be religious

**Benefits**

* The opportunity to explore, articulate and reason their own opinions in light of the opinions of others.
* A safe space
* Transferable skills (Critical thinking; Reflection; Self confidence; Relating to others)
* Workplace skills (How to communicate; How to accommodate; How not to get sued)

**Content**

* Religious and non-religious perspectives on moral and social issues
* Interested in contemporary religion and religious landscape
* History
* The controversial
* Practices – The ‘Why?’ not the ‘What?’
* Individual interpretations of traditions
* Lived religion
* Debate on whether philosophy should be in RE or not

**Structure**

* Most think RE should be compulsory up to GCSE
* GCSE should be an option
* Lack of status
* When combined with other subjects students like the focus on the contemporary but dislike the lack of focus on religion & belief

**Discussion**

* Referring to student interest in the meaning of religion but not theology, it was asked how to distinguish between these. It was suggested that while scholars may not see a discrepancy, students might be alienated by the term theology.
* With reference to student interest in the “real religious landscape”, it was asked what this was opposed to. It was explained that this was opposed to the imagined religious landscape, which may often be closer to the mono-faith landscape of the 1950s.
* It was suggested that the self-selection of schools might skew findings. It was explained that issues here should be cleared up in the quantitative stage of the project.
* Referring to students’ desire for greater breadth of religions to facilitate self-exploration, it was suggested that this might apply especially to minority faiths. But it was explained that Christian students in Christian schools were just as likely to show this desire.
* It was suggested that this desire was exactly what religious communities feared, since they wanted to bring up students in their own religion.
* It was asked whether best practice in pedagogy had been explored. It was explained that such an explanation would be involved in the implementation phase of the project.
* It was asked whether the findings suggested that religious content helps students to grapple with the wider world. It was explained that such a suggestion would have to be clear that there is a broad drawing away from theological texts and towards the contemporary lived and controversial landscape.
* It was added that non confessional RE connected well with where students are.
* It was suggested that Muslim parents often worry that RE indoctrinates students into secular thinking.
* It was added that students are very attuned to when teachers are biased. It was agreed that bias might not be as concerning as ignorance.
* It was suggested that RE should be far less theological and far more sociological.
* There was a debate about the difference between meaning and theology. It was suggested that theology is not a useful word, since it only applies to certain religions. It was suggested that the rich meaning of religion is important to understand.
* It was suggested that religion had to be understood as a language, and that while some students might only have the capacity to learn one, more advanced students might learn many.
* It was alternatively suggested that the key focus should be on students exploring each other’s identity.
* Referring to research from James Conroy, it was stressed that it was difficult to be simultaneously sociological, rich and interactive, with just 45 minutes a week and only 65p per student per year. It was suggested that the question is, which area to prioritise?
* It was agreed that student interest was on religion in society. It was suggested that that this may be to do with the way children are normatised in contemporary society.
* It was asked whether the future of RE should be guided by employers and children. It was suggested that while it should be informed by them, it had to be accepted that part of education is formation.
* It was suggested that the question of Religious Literacy raised the question of how to read well, and referred to *Religious Reading* to illustrate the question of reading as consumption vs. reading for wisdom.
* It was suggested that RE often neglected the focus of religions on justice. It was suggested that having empathy for people’s faith was very different from having a concern for justice and being motivated towards social action.
* It was suggested that RE should be about Religion, while the desires of employers and policy makers should be shared across the curriculum, including in PSHE and Citizenship.
* It was stressed that notwithstanding the need for improvement, in contrast both to theocracies and secularist regimes, and to private providers, RE in the UK should be celebrated as a champion of the objective study of all faiths and none.
* It was suggested that “Religious” in RE alienates some students, educators and policy makers, which contributes to the poor status of the subject.
* It was suggested that perhaps the aim of RE, like scriptural reasoning, could be to improve the quality of disagreement.
* It was stressed that it is important to explore the diversity of how faith is lived out in order to challenge the perception of certain religions as monolithic, both amongst critics and followers.
* It was stressed that the focus should be on how to navigate through diversity.
* A four point plan was proposed: 1 understanding and empathy for life together. 2 reading for depth as with poetry 3 wisdom for the whole society from religion or secular ethics 4. Focused in two hours a week AND through other classes AND through the institutional ethos.
* It was stressed that much more focus should be on teacher training.
* It was stressed that a national curriculum is required.
* It was requested that early findings be shared on a confidential basis.

The next influencers group meeting will be held on June 10th 2015