**REforReal**

**Influencers Group 1**

**January 14th 2015**

**Present**

Alan Brine

Mike Castelli

Andrew Copson

Adam Dinham

Nigel Genders

Bruce Gill

Robert Jackson

Martha Shaw

Jasjit Singh

Linda Woodhead

**Apologies**

Paul Deemer

**Research findings**

After introductions from the group, Martha Shaw from the research team outlined preliminary findings from the first stage of the project: interviews with employers. (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**

* Encounter
* Tolerance and respect
* Cohesion
* Identity (of others, not self)

**Benefits**

* Empathy, in support of tolerance
* Equality and diversity compliance
* Handling diversity practically
* Creative and enriching culture

**Content**

* Sociological over and above theological
* Meanings and manifestations should be there
* But the key should be a focus on religion in society – its impacts, controversies
* The real religious landscape
* Including non-religious beliefs
* Historical context – especially Christian heritage
* Big Questions – but queasy about truth claims

**Structure**

* Should be compulsory to learn about religion and belief
* But not necessarily a separate subject
* Better to be distributed and woven in
* Alternative models proposed include ‘Religion Awareness’; ‘Religious Literacy’ and ‘Life Studies’.
* An emphasis on changing the name

**Discussion**

* Employers’ awareness of a stretchy, quite broad idea of religion and belief was noted. This was thought to be surprising (and pleasing) by some in the group, but expected, and driven by legal cases, by others.
* An element of sample bias was noted, and accepted as inevitable.
* It was suggested that a quantitative survey be applied to triangulate these findings in a cross-sectional population sample.
* It was suggested that respondents’ ages might have impacted on how they were taught RE and therefore their viewpoint
* It was agreed that an age analysis will be useful as other evidence suggests that people of whatever age base their understanding on what they did in school.
* The question was raised of sampling and what a regional comparison of employers views might look like. It was considered that London-based Chief Executives might have a very different attitude to religious diversity and equalities to people elsewhere.
* Whilst empathy was raised by employers as gained from RE, it was noted that they did not stress RE as primarily useful for transferable skills.
* At the same time, it was commented that RE itself puts a big emphasis on transferable skills, for example, the ability to argue, to reason etc.
* The wider value of qualifications in RE was also discussed; Law and English departments will often highly value an A-level in RE. Employers talked about students being “equipped”.
* The focus on relationships was also noted with interest - that employers want RE to teach people how to relate to one another.
* Stress was placed on being non-discriminatory and people respecting each other. It was noted that what doesn’t seem to come out from the findings so far is “I’m worried about people wearing crosses or asserting belief positions”. Would that be different after France?
* There was some discussion over use of the terms ‘sociological’ above the ‘theological’. People wanted to be clear what was intended by each term.
* There was some discussion of the status of RE and the group felt that there was not much sense in the findings so far that RE is seen as a serious subject. Is there a divide between those that want it as a serious academic subject, and those that prefer the way that Citizenship/SMSC etc have been occupying the space.
* It was noted that the responses make a distinction between the minority of those that want to study religion to a more advanced level, and a general foundational level.
* It was suggested that such a model might be found in the combination of the Intercultural Education approach at lower school with a revised more specialist qualification at Key Stage 4. However, it was noted that a citizenship approach that included a good religion and belief dimension would depend on teachers and that there must be RE specialists, even in the absence of specialist RE teaching.
* There was some discussion on the aims of RE, and that a serious problem is it’s trying to do too many things.
* It was noted that the focus in the research findings is on the practical, moral and cultural, not on the spiritual, and that this would probably contrast with what many RE teachers would want. Spiritual development was only brought up by one respondent and there was disagreement among the group as to whether RE teachers do or don’t see this as a core part of RE. It was suggested that religious organisations, including humanist ones, tend to want spirituality explored. There was consensus that this is a difficult area to explore due to the many interpretations of the term ‘spiritual’ .
* It was suggested that the employers might be more interested in spirituality if they took the Ofsted definition, which includes the development of the non-materialistic, spiritual side to life including: a sense of identity, self worth, personal insight, development of pupil’s soul, personality or character. Here the issue was raised that these are things asked of education generally, and not necessarily specific to RE.
* There was some discussion on SACREs, with the following points raised:
* they have diminishing influence due to growth in the Academies programme
* there is an important debate about whether traditional religious authorities should be the people to be deciding what children should learn
* their dual function is the problem: as both syllabus writers and a meeting place for discussing ideas and resourcing the subject. Could this be resolved?
* they could be useful in giving the local community a voice in shaping RE
* they raise the question of what defines localism geographically
* is there a problem of turf wars between religious leaders?
* The question was raised of what can be done about the connection between teaching in school and in HE. It was commented that there is often a disjunction between RS degrees and teacher training for RE. It was agreed that a better connection could be made between universities researching contemporary religion and belief, and teacher trainers.
* The need for continuing education was stressed to ensure sharpness in teacher training and practice.
* It was felt that non- specialists can be valuable but there is the need for an educated core of senior advisers that teachers can turn to.

The next influencers group will be held on March 18th, after which another report will be produced.