“Through the Hourglass”
RMPS Policy and Practice – tracing a scheme of work from intention through enactment to outcome.

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1. Background and Overview
2. Research Methodology
   2.1) first model – policy analysis
   2.2) second model – linguistic ethnography
3. Pilot Findings – Key Themes

1. Background and Overview

1.1 Research Background – “Does RE Work? An analysis of the aims, practices and models of effectiveness in Religious Education in the UK.”

One of the research themes outlined by the AHRC/ESRC Religion and Society Programme was ‘Education and Socialisation’, defined as a general interest in encouraging ‘attempts to understand the place of religion within formal and informal learning.’ (AHRC/ESRC, 2009). Given the statutory nature of school-based Religious Education in a culture which boasts some of the lowest rates of religious practice in the world but retains strong rhetorical attachments to the religio-spiritual impulse, there are indeed interesting questions to be asked about the status and efficacy of Religious Education in schools. For this reason, a team led by educationalists and ethnographers at the University of Glasgow, in collaboration with colleagues at King’s College London and Queen’s University Belfast secured funding for a Large Research Project running from 2007-2011 to investigate current practice in RE in secondary schools in Scotland, England and Northern Ireland. Among the research aims, the team sought to answer the questions:

- What are the discursive goals for and claims made about Religious Education by government legislation, faith-community leaders, religious educators, local education authorities and interest groups?
- How does observed classroom teaching and learning relate to the stated aims and objectives of Religious Education?
- How effective is Religious Education in promoting such goals in different sectors and locations?

In formulating the research questions, an ‘hourglass’ model was proposed. At the top of the hourglass, at its’ widest point, are the ‘blizzard’ of policies, aims, interests and pedagogic models proposed by key stakeholders in the Religious Education field. The hourglass narrows toward classroom enactment, which forms the ethnographic empirical element of our study, and widens again in considering the diverse impacts of RE practice on pupils, their local communities, faith communities and educational and vocational aspirations. It is hoped that analysis at each stage will enable the ‘tracing’ of intentions through the hourglass, allowing us
to evaluate the effectiveness of divergent aims and models in synthesising aim, practice and outcome.

1.2 Policy Overview

Various historical factors have distinguished Religious Education policy from wider curriculum policy in the different parts of the UK. In England, the 1944 Education Act mandated ‘Religious Instruction’, comprising both collective worship and religious education, to be offered in every school, but with provision for parental withdrawal. While it was anticipated in the 1940’s that Religious Instruction would be of a largely Christian character, the Act retained the ‘Cowper-Temple clause’ of the earlier 1870 Education Act, stipulating that Religious Instruction in the common school must not follow the formulary or catechism of any one denominational church. The 1988 Education Reform Act, which established a National Curriculum for England and Wales, retained the mandate for what was now termed ‘Religious Education’, but did not prescribe a National Curriculum, leaving the determination of RE content to Local Education Authorities, which were mandated to convene a Standing Advisory Committee (SACRE) consisting of representatives of the principal religious traditions in the area, the Church of England, teachers and the LEA. In 2004, the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, in consultation with teaching representatives and representatives of religious groups, published the first Non-Statutory National Framework for Religious Education. This was followed by the first National Exemplar Framework for Wales in 2008, and a revised QCA framework for England in 2009. The policy context for Scotland and Northern Ireland diverges from this, though there are similar themes, not least of which the state of flux in curriculum design which may be observed in all 3 contexts.

Running parallel to policy changes, changes in practice since the 1970’s have seen a move away from Christian confessional Religious Education toward a more phenomenological approach to multi-faith education. The work of Ninian Smart (1968, 1973, etc) and the publication of the 1975 Birmingham LEA Agreed Syllabus ‘Living Together’ were instrumental in these changes. In order to gauge the state of this para-legislative professional discourse, a conference of key professionals and stakeholders employing the Delphi technique was convened at the outset of the project (see Baumfield et al. forthcoming).

2. Research Methodology

2.1 First Model – policy analysis

The initial approach to tracing the effectiveness of aims and intentions in the RE classroom adopted a policy analysis model which was derived from previous work on disability policy analysis (Lundie, 2007). This model focussed on the text of national policies, SACRE policies, school choice of resources and teachers’ selection and use of those resources. By identifying discursive similarities between texts, it was hoped to trace the influence of policy on practice. The approach drew on the discourse analysis tradition, treating texts as found objects. This initial approach met with two key difficulties. Firstly, on a practical level, the volume of material generated from this analysis proved difficult to manage. Due to frequent curricular changes, mapping curriculum changes over time from teachers’ draft schemes of work often required recourse to 10 or more drafts, numerous website and textbook resources, some of which were no longer in existence. While extensive documentary evidence (media reports, select committee reports, Hansard, etc.) could be summoned for the process of national policy formulation, in the case of SACRE policy formation, there was scant evidence of the key influences and processes of policy formation. Secondly, on a more fundamental level, the influence of the language of the para-legislative context proved to be much more evident in classroom practice than the language of the legislative documents. The policy analysis model was incapable of authentically tracing the mode and strength of key stakeholders’ influence on RE in practice.
2.2 Second Model – linguistic ethnography

Returning to the Delphi conference for further directions, it quickly became apparent that many of the questions raised were questions of language and discourse, lending itself to the approach of linguistic ethnography. Ethnographic approaches to religious research acknowledge that “understanding is in intersubjective, not subjective or objective” (Carspecken, 1996, p189), building on the Wittgensteinian understanding of religious language, which was also discussed in the Delphi discussions. The private data of religious experience are not available to the religious education teacher or to the researcher in the classroom. Building on a linguistic ethnography approach, which, unlike discourse analysis, treats language as a culturally situated artefact, it was possible to interrogate the participants as to their constructions of meaning emerging from RE policy and practice. An ethnographic study of brokerage, involving the construction of a sociogram of key brokers, and a linguistic ethnography of the classroom resources in use, began to yield richer, more organic results. In a series of short semi-structured interviews after observed lessons, teachers were asked the following 5 questions:

- Tell me the story behind this lesson. Where did the idea for it come from?
- Is this lesson typical of your teaching? Is it typical of the department?
- What are/have been your main influences?
- Tell me about the resources, where are they from?
- How often have you taught this lesson? Has it changed?

This allowed teachers the freedom to narrate their own understanding of their marshalling of the key resources.

3. Pilot Findings – Key Themes

The ethnographic study was broken into 2 phases, a pilot, or ‘comprehensive’ phase (Hymes, 1996) which sought to investigate what themes exist in the discourse of brokerage, what factors influence the effectiveness of tracing an aim through the hourglass from top to bottom, and “why do these particular cultural themes exist” (Carspecken, 2001, p22). The second, ‘hypothesis oriented’ phase (Hymes, 1996) will seek to focus more narrowly on the particular aspects identified in the pilot, to seek out evidence on particular propositions and questions. It was decided by the project team to carry out 10 days of ethnographic observation per school in 24 schools across the UK. Following a meeting to review the pilot phase of the ethnographic findings, a set of 10 themes emerged, of which 3 relate to contextual factors and 7 address discourse and language:

**Contextual themes**

- The role of examinations in setting the aims and content of RE;
- The fit between teacher, pupil and school values in the RE curriculum, and the relationship of RE to the school ethos;
- The level of resource and support given to RE;

**Discourse-centred themes**

- The use of ICT in the RE classroom;
- The language and treatment of immanence and transcendence, touching on pupils’ levels of religious experience and religious literacy;
- The level of intellectual challenge offered by RE, relative to other subjects in the curriculum, with particular reference to differentiation;
- The frequency and practices of engagement with texts in the RE classroom;
- The impact of teachers’ pedagogical style;
- The role and approach to multi-cultural awareness in the RE classroom;
- The epistemic claims made about truth and plurality in the RE classroom.
The following analytical framework was agreed for the initial coding and presentation of ethnographic fieldnotes, the expanded content of which forms the basis of the subsequent section:

1. Context of School:
   1.1 Community layout
   1.2 Wider school layout
   1.3 Layout of classroom
   1.4 Whole school ethos and influence on relationships
   1.5 Teacher-teacher interaction (outwith classroom):
   1.6 Relationship between ethnographer/teacher/student

2. Context of RE:
   2.1 RE teachers’ expressed values
   2.2 Content of lesson and methods used to deliver
   2.3 How does RE teaching compare with that of other subjects?
   2.4 Resources and funds available to RE
   2.5 Time of day when RE takes place
   2.6 Teacher biographical information
   2.7 Department documentation and teaching resources

3. Methodology and Teacher Engagement:
   3.1 Planning
   3.2 Power relations and teacher engagement
   3.3 Discourse
   3.4 Teaching methods
   3.5 Non-teaching activities in the classroom
   3.6 Outside/guest speakers and partners involved in delivery and planning of RE field trips etc

4. Pupils:
   4.1 Student-student interaction
   4.2 Pupil feedback on their RE learning experiences
   4.3 Pupil work – examples of pupils RE work
   4.4 Pupil relationship with curriculum/ resources
   4.5 Background information on students

Making use of the above framework, a template was constructed for the input of fieldnotes into an NVivo 8 database. Data from multiple sources was entered into the database, including fieldnotes, policy documents, pupils’ work, interview transcripts and examples of teaching materials. Sources were organised into cases by country, school type, age group of pupils and recording ethnographer. Coding nodes were created corresponding to the epistemic questions and emergent questions discussed above.

The above framework represents a microcosm of the ‘hourglass’ structure, with the narrowest point occurring at 3.3 Discourse, with the preceding two categories providing the general and specific contexts, and the subsequent category allowing reflection on pupils’ intersubjective constructions of the effectiveness of classroom discourse. The narrowest point produces the thickest and richest descriptions in the field-notes, and constitutes a fundamental axis for all of the research questions addressed in the project.

Given all of the above structures, a vast 3-dimensional matrix may be constructed, with the 24 schools running along the X axis, 24 the aspects of observation in the analytical framework running down the Y axis, and the 10 themes emerging from the preliminary review meeting forming the Z axis. Such a matrix gives us a total of 5760 possible intersections, each of which is a question query of the type:

“What does Y tell us about Z at X?”

i.e. “What does student-student interaction tell us about the level of intellectual challenge offered by RE at Segget Academy?”
Initial pilot findings comparing similar questions across contexts have confirmed initial findings that local context and policy conditions, but does not predetermine, the aims and outcomes of RE. A forthcoming study of 2 Scottish schools (Lundie, forthcoming), employing the above matrix to interrogate data around 3 discursive questions, illustrates the importance of teacher aims in marshalling locally available resources to meet specific aims, which may diverge significantly from the aims of policymakers, examination syllabi and local brokers.

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