Religious Literacy through Religious Education: The Future of Teaching and Learning about Religion and Belief

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Abstract: This article reports on research undertaken between July 2014 and November 2015 in secondary schools (for young people aged 11–16) across England to ask what young people need to know about religion and belief in schools in order to increase 'religious literacy' when they go in to the workplace and wider society. The research arises in the context of an urgent debate which has been underway in England about the future of Religious Education (RE), a subject which remains compulsory in England under the Education Act 1944, but which gives rise to widespread confusion about its purposes, content and structure, as reflected in growing criticisms of the policy muddle that frames it. The key findings are: that there is an appetite for review and reform of teaching and learning about religion and belief in schools, inside and outside the RE space, in order to clarify confusion about its purposes, content and structure; that the key perceived purposes which are emerging are the ability to engage with diversity, and personal spiritual (but not religious) development; and that stakeholders want to learn about more religions and beliefs, and ways of thinking about them, which reflect a much broader and more fluid real contemporary religion and belief landscape of England and the world than education has reflected.

Keywords: religious literacy; Religious Education; RE; education policy

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In England and Wales, Religious Education (RE) is compulsory for all under the Education Act 1944, whose provisions are explored below. This research explores the contribution RE may make to religious literacy, by understanding it as only one part of a process which needs also to encompass what happens in higher education (see, e.g., (Dinham and Jones 2012) on this subject), as well as professional and vocational training (see, e.g., (Davie and Dinham 2016)).

The term 'religious literacy' extends and borrows from E D Hirsch's notion of 'cultural literacy' (Hirsch 1988) and has grown in use and popularity in the UK and elsewhere (see (CORAB 2015)). It is a metaphor connected to the ability to read and write; like reading and writing, literacy in religion is about an understanding of the grammars, rules, vocabularies and narratives underpinning religions and beliefs. In our conception of it, it is also a response to a problem (see Davie 2015b). The religious literacy critique starts with the observation of a lamentable quality of conversation about religion and belief in the developed West, just as we need it most (see Davie, in Dinham and Francis (Davie 2015b), foreword). A century or so of secular assumptions has resulted in the West talking not very much and not very well about religion and belief, and the secular-mindedness which frames it is itself challenged due to a lack of precision in the face of the considerable contestability of the idea (Dinham and Baker 2017). Indeed, as Davie notes, Britain continues to be Christian, as well as more secular and more religious at once (Davie 2015c). Others observe a post-secular turn in which

pervasive religion and belief find a new space in the public sphere (see (Dinham and Baker 2017)), though Beckford dislikes the term 'post-secular' itself for its focus on what it is not, rather than what it is. At precisely the time we have mostly been looking away, the religious landscape has changed enormously. In England, the proportion of the population who report having no religion increased between 2001 and 2011 from 14.8% to 25.1%. There is a massive internal realignment away from Anglicanism and Catholicism, towards independent churches within Christianity alone (see (Woodhead 2012)). *What* we believe has also changed. Belief in 'a personal God' roughly halved between 1961 and 2000, from 57% of the population to 26%. But over exactly the same period, belief in a 'spirit or life force' doubled, from 22% in 1961 to 44% in 2000 (see (Woodhead 2012)). Others have observed non-religious beliefs that are deeply important to them, such as humanism, secularism and environmentalism (see (Lee 2016)). Yet as religion and belief come under renewed scrutiny now, under pressure from extremism, migration and globalisation, we find that the ability to talk well about religion and belief has largely been lost (see Dinham, in Beaman and Arragon (Dinham 2015)). The question this poses for every educative sphere is how can we equip people to get to grips with religion and belief, as it turns out to be pervasive and persistent after all? In England, and in varying ways elsewhere, schools play an important role in this. This research addresses what sort of teaching and learning about religion and belief can help.

1. The RE Policy Muddle

These are questions both for RE and beyond, in the wider lives of schools, and in society. It has been observed that state policy on religion and belief in schools, and on school RE, is in a confusing state and that this may be a major contributing factor to a widespread lack of religious literacy in wider society, often making the conversation about religion and belief ill-tempered and difficult (see Davie, in Dinham and Francis (Davie 2015b); Dinham, in Beaman and Arragon (Dinham 2015)). What young people learn about religion and belief in the confused environment of schools underpins how they handle it throughout their lives. Under the 1944 Education Act, it is a requirement in English law that learning about religion and belief must take place in all state-maintained schools, including those in reception classes and sixth forms (though not in further education colleges). The 1944 Act also made it mandatory for fully funded state schools to follow an 'Agreed Syllabus' for what it called 'Religious Instruction', developed within each of England's 56 Local Educational Authorities by a 'Syllabus Conference', consisting of representatives of the Church of England and other Christian denominations. Reflecting this, during the period up until 1988, teaching was almost entirely based on a Christian, scriptural approach.

Though these provisions continue, the field, like society, has not been static. The 1988 Education Reform Act maintained the model of local determination of RE, rooted in the Local Education Authorities, but at the same time it shifted the stated purpose of RE from 'teaching religion' to 'teaching *about* religion', and indoctrinatory teaching was prohibited (UK Parliament 1988, Section 9). 'Religious Education' replaced 'Religious Instruction' and multi-faith 'Standing Advisory Councils for Religious Education' (SACREs) replaced the Christian 'Syllabus Conferences'. Agreed Syllabuses are now required to "reflect the fact that religious traditions in Great Britain are in the main Christian, whilst taking account of the teaching and practices of the other principal religions represented in Great Britain" (UK Parliament 1988, Section. 8.3)—a situation which is at least questionable in relation to the real religious landscape.

In 1994, the School Curriculum and Assessment Authority (SCAA) published non-statutory model syllabuses, which included six 'main' religions and used the two attainment targets of 'learning about' and 'learning from' religion. While this raises the unresolved question of what counts as a 'main' religion, these models were widely adopted in Agreed Syllabuses. In 2004, the successor Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) introduced another non-statutory national framework to support those responsible for syllabus development locally. The aim was to clarify the required standards in RE (see (QCA 2004)). The range of religions to be studied was further widened and it was recommended that students also have the opportunity to study "secular philosophies such as humanism" (QCA 2004).

The 1944 Act also mandates a daily act of collective worship in the Christian mode, which continues to be required, though in practice is widely ignored. At the same time, parents have a right to withdraw their children from the act of collective worship, as well as from RE itself. It has been suggested that collective worship and the right to withdraw further confuse the place of religion and belief in schools, both in the overall environment and within RE (see (Clarke and Woodhead 2015)). This draws the religion and belief perceptions of parents and young people outside of schools in to the policy muddle within them.

Changes in school structure have also been important. The advent of new 'academy' schools after 2000 has introduced local curricular determination, giving schools new freedoms from national and local government control over what to teach. The subsequent expansion of the academies programme since 2010 has led to a situation in which an increasing number of schools are not required to follow Agreed Syllabuses or the national curriculum. Free schools are also outside these requirements. This increase in free schools and academies has permitted more schools 'with a religious character' within the state system, and the ambition is for the majority (though not all) of schools to be academies or free schools by 2020 (Department for Education 2016). The impact on RE has been an increasing diversity of approaches in a context which was already complex. Whether this complexity helps or hinders the growth of religious literacy is a matter for debate.

Alongside this, the decision to exclude RE from the new English Baccalaureate Certificate (EBACC) has been widely acknowledged as having led to a reduction in teaching time devoted to RE (NATRE 2015). The introduction of 'Progress 8'[1] in 2016 has further contributed to the subject's lack of status. Many schools have taken to delivering RE through tutor time, or occasional 'RE days', so RE is marginalised rather than preserved as a discrete regular subject on the timetable. Within this there is concern about a failure to clarify the relationship between the general aims of schooling, to which RE makes a contribution, and particular aims specific to Religious Studies (see (RE Council Religious Education Council of England and Wales 2015)). Another concern is that RE in England has increasingly been colonised by proxy themes such as ethics, citizenship and cohesion, which overlap with, but are not in themselves, religion or belief (see Gearon (2010, 2013)). The implication is that religion and belief learning is intended to perform a primarily social task—to form citizens who can connect across difference.

The 1944 settlement is now more than seventy years old and has been repeatedly amended, in piecemeal ways, usually in the direction of trying to keep up with a changing religion and belief landscape. But changes in the real religious landscape have far outpaced changes in education about it. The real picture is made up of more believing without belonging (see (Davie 2015a)), and more non-believing (see (Lee 2016)). It is a context that is Christian, plural and secular all at the same time (see (Weller 2007)). The requirement for RE of a 'Christian character', the notion of 'six main religions', the continuing mandate for a daily act of collective worship, the right to withdraw, and massive change in the real religious landscape suggest that, in relation to religion and belief, we have a mid-20th-century settlement for an early-21st-century reality. This is likely to both reflect and reproduce religious illiteracy among school leavers, who are confused by the religion and belief messages communicated in schools, and by extension, in wider society. In this sense, what happens in RE in England may be understood broadly as emblematic of how religion and belief are understood and engaged across European and Western societies.

This is set against, and results in, the growing vigour of debates about religion and belief across a range of public settings and sectors, largely driven by new laws against discrimination on the grounds of religion or belief, and by anxieties about extremism. The question of how to generate religious literacy in general collides with the issue of how best to educate about religion and belief in schools. Is the current RE landscape up to the challenge? How might it be re-imagined, and what might the alternatives look like?

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[1]   Progress 8 is a new measure of school performance. It replaces the previous measure of 5A*–C including English and Maths, and shows how well pupils of all abilities have progressed, compared to pupils with similar academic starting points in other schools.

2. Methodology

The research is qualitative and indicative, conducted with a sample of teachers, students, parents and employers (N = 331) via semi-structured interviews (*n* = 141) and focus groups (*n* = 190). These took place in nineteen schools across England, selected to represent a geographical spread and a mix of rural and urban. This included five Community Schools[2] and fourteen Academies. Of these, six are Church of England academies, one is ecumenical, and seven are academies with 'no religious character'. We excluded 'faith schools'[3] on the basis that the issues there are highly complex and specific in themselves and would best be handled via a separate study.

Each school was asked to select up to five teachers and up to five parents for interview, and to select ten students from Year Ten (aged 15) to take part in focus groups (*n* = 190 across 19 focus groups). The final sample from the schools consisted of 97 teachers of which 29 were RE specialists and 19 were members of senior leadership teams. There were 34 parents. Within the sample selection we wished to reflect the fact that RE is taught by a mix of specialist and non-specialist teachers, and hoped to explore the extent to which specialisation makes a difference. The main difference we discovered was in the confidence of non-specialists. We also wished to explore how the RE muddle plays out in relation to permeability with overlapping but distinct topics including ethics, philosophy and citizenship. Ten employers were interviewed, who were self-selecting from a list of seventeen potential participants in a purposive convenience sample, intended to reflect a range of organisations within the public and private sectors. In each organization, the participating member was working at Chief Executive/Director level, or with a lead responsibility for employing staff.

Participants have been entirely anonymised, including in reference to their school location or workplace, to ensure that their identities could not be revealed or deduced. Every interview and focus group was recorded and transcribed using NVIVO, and analysed using theme identification (see (Boyatsis 1998)). The research questions revolved around three key areas, and the findings are presented in relation to these three themes:

(1) Understandings of the purposes of RE
(2) Aspirations regarding content
(3) Views about what teaching and learning of religion and belief should look like, both inside RE and outside, in the wider school environment.

3. Purposes

The key finding in terms of what this sample thought is the purpose of RE is that it is there to prepare young people for encounter with religion and belief diversity.

> "I'd say as Britain is becoming more multi faith and multicultural, it's important to learn about it because it's becoming more and more relevant...I think it's important so you can understand what other people believe in life, in society." (Student)

This was supported by parents, who agreed that "[young people] have to be aware of the kind of diversity there is now", particularly in less diverse schools:

> "When I was at school we were purely taught Christian beliefs, mostly Protestant. So there's little I know about any other religion. But my children have been taught lots of religions. And I think that makes diversity a lot easier." (Parent)

Teachers, too, saw preparing for diversity as a key aim so that "[students] can be more sympathetic towards the multicultural society that we are in." There was a widespread assumption among teachers that understanding develops a positive attitude to difference.

However, teachers in particular distinguished between instrumental and academic purposes, stressing the importance of knowledge and understanding about religions in more academic terms:

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2 State schools controlled by the local council.
3 We use the term 'faith schools' here to refer to voluntary aided and free schools with a religious character.

"the objective analysis and discovery of a range of different world views." Within this, specialist RE teachers particularly emphasised the intrinsic value of religion and belief learning as "the academic study of religion as a phenomenon in the world." Conversely, non-specialist teachers of RE tended to emphasise its role in diversity and cohesion:

> "Ultimately it's not about someone who can answer the pub question on Hinduism; it's about someone who can go out there and relate to someone of the Hindu faith." (Teacher)

Among students this emphasis on cohesion was linked to concern about not offending others:

> "It's for our future as well, because if you're not used to being around them sort of people now... when you're older and working and you come across one of them, you know what to say and what not to say... so you don't accidentally say something they could be offended by." (Student)

Students also displayed a developed sense of how religion and belief diversity may manifest itself in the workplace, and saw RE as key to preparing them for this:

> "Understanding why, if you're an employer, why different people might have to do things slightly different to others, so when they have to take more time off for religious reasons, why they work a certain amount of hours, why they have to work differently, speak to people differently. And some Muslims have to pray a certain amount of times and people need to understand that." (Student)

This reflects employers in this sample who also said that "education about religion serves a fundamental purpose—teaches tolerance and understanding." This understanding was seen as crucial to the workplace:

> "So I think that whole notion of diversity in the workplace, respect and 'good working' that understanding and awareness of other religious faiths in such a diverse society as we are becoming is absolutely what every employee needs to be equipped with." (Employer)

Alongside these instrumental purposes, a second important strand sees RE as a space for 'spiritual development'. While a few students talked about RE helping them find a 'pathway' or 'worldview', most saw it as a key area for exploring and forming opinions with respect to moral and ethical issues. Some of the teachers said they see RE as the only space in the curriculum for what they described as spiritual development:

> "In terms of developing a moral view on something, I think that is unique to RE." (Teacher)

However, there was also insistence that this should not be the responsibility solely of RE:

> "I'd say that's the purpose of all education actually. But not particularly religious education. I don't think it has any special claim." (Teacher)

Parents also stressed that 'moral and spiritual development' should be a key aim of religion and belief learning. Most saw the development of moral values as an intrinsic part of RE, but they wanted it to be exploratory, rather than dictating or determining a moral framework:

> "I'm not interested in developing someone's religious belief, I don't want to convert them to any particular religion, but I want to enhance their spirituality, so that they know it's okay if they want to go down that route, and to investigate that." (Parent)

4. Content

As perceptions of the proper purpose of RE revolved around preparation for diversity, alongside moral and spiritual development, issues of content largely reflected this. Though the 'world religions' were the most referenced content among all cohorts, in every school the most prominent theme was the desire among students to study a wider range of religions and beliefs. This was not affected by whether the school was with or without a 'religious character'. In line with the focus on the

instrumental, students related knowledge about a wide range of religions and beliefs to real life encounters:

> "We live in a country with loads of different religions and I think we should learn about each different one, so if you do come across them, you know what they're on about, and you know who they are." (Student)

In this context, teachers agreed that the focus on one or two traditions in learning from age 14 to 16, leading up to the examined General Certificate in Secondary Education (GCSE), is too narrow, but were concerned with how to deliver breadth with depth, particularly given time constraints.

> "I'd learn the different sects and denominations but you can't spend much time talking about differences between individuals because there's not enough time." (Teacher)

Across the sample, there was recognition of internal diversity within, let alone between, religions and beliefs, and students and teachers especially thought that RE should have more time to explore these complexities:

> "I think it is important that they do obviously understand the ones that a majority of the people in the world follow but there are also other belief systems out there as well that they should be learning about." (Teacher)

> "I'd want them to think more broadly about what we class as religion too. There are people that dance round Stonehenge naked because the sun's up. Does that fall under the remit? Definitely it does of spirituality." (Teacher)

Parents, too, were broadly in agreement that the 'main religions' should be covered, but also supported the inclusion of informal forms:

> "Obviously you can't look at them all but I think it is important to look at how people have beliefs but they may not be within a formal religion." (Parent)

Half of the overall sample thought that a wider range of formal and informal beliefs should be studied, because that reflects the real world. This included broad consensus in this sample that non-religious worldviews should be included:

> "Giving some sense of the wonder of the variety of different beliefs and religions that there are throughout the world is quite important so children understand that there isn't a belief system that dominates but an enormous range of beliefs, including spiritual, and informal religion, 'spiritualism' is a very widespread outlook on life and important part of overall description of pattern of religious belief."

> (Employer)

> "People's beliefs are mixed, whatever religion they may or may not have been brought up in, there are all sorts of issues, beliefs such as vegetarianism, concern for the planet, these are all ways that people may want to manifest the importance to their lives. It's important that people are aware… the external impact is still the same... because you had a set of beliefs, whether is within a formal religion or a less formal belief system, you'll want to act in a certain way and people need to understand that your motivation is legitimate." (Employer)

Some employers took a different, more practical view, that "Ninety percent plus of the people they meet will be from the big six or none, that's where the focus should be" (Employer). Nevertheless, the overwhelming majority of respondents supported the inclusion of 'non-religion' in RE. Humanism and atheism were those most referred to.

The importance of learning about lived religion and belief in a diversity of manifestations was also stressed by teachers, who felt it crucial that students get beyond 'beliefs and practices', "grasping that that's not always how it plays out." (Teacher). Another said:

"You're not really doing RE unless you lift up the rug. If we teach them Christians are all kind people, then they'll get to history and hear about the crusades or slavery and go, 'what?'" (Teacher)

Likewise, across the cohorts the contemporary was prioritised. Students were interested in learning about the reality of religion in contemporary society.

"I think it's interesting when we look at the big disasters and the terrorists... then we look at why they did it, from their religion, what were their reasons, what we've done to them... I find that more interesting." (Student)

Parents also emphasised learning that engages with current affairs, including controversies around religion:

"White girls have converted for their boyfriends. So students have seen that and asked questions about it. So to me that's modern day religion." (Parent)

"Why some groups choose a path of violence. They need to know where that stems from." (Parent)

"There's a lot of ignorance around Muslims. People don't know the difference between being a devout Muslim and blowing people up." (Parent)

Employers valued this, too, emphasising pragmatic and practical content, focused on lived experiences and manifestations of religion and belief.

"To understand the controversies about religion in modern life is an important part of RE in school." (Employer)

Learning about beliefs and practices was also seen as important in relation to what they mean for workplace practices:

"It's important to learn the holy days and festivals and the implications for their lives. For example, it's important for non-Muslims to understand the importance of Ramadan for Muslims." (Employer)

"A very, very large number of beliefs are relevant to the workplace, e.g., if you work in education or health sector, understanding about religious beliefs in our society today is very important. The precise utility of religious knowledge will vary by occupation, activity and sector but there is no doubt that to a wide, wide range of sectors, knowledge about religion and belief is very important. And to put the contrary, not understanding about religious belief is a serious weakness." (Employer)

This was seen as particularly important in regards to outwardly focused public services:

"Our staff will be delivering services within the community, within homes and different places so…it's important people understand the rules, rituals and beliefs of those communities they're going in to." (NHS Employer)

5. Structure

While purpose and content are crucial and complex, the question of structure connects to the moment of practical application. This relates directly to structures of policy and how they frame the practices of RE itself, but critically also to the relationship between RE and school policy and wider policy relating to religion and belief. While schools continue to teach and socialise religion primarily 'in the Christian mode', policy on extremism, migration and welfare focuses instead on religious plurality and diversity, and the challenges of violence. This perversity of policy intentions frames and confuses the school environment in relation to religion and belief. The mix of schools with and without a religious character, faith schools, increasing local determination of curricula, and the continuing requirement for a daily act of collective worship and the right to withdraw are all

structural factors which produce a muddled public experience of religion and belief. So too does the allocation of study themes about religion and belief inside and outside the RE space: cohesion, prevention, ethics, practices and beliefs—where to learn what? This study reveals important questions about the boundaries between academic and instrumental learning, and about which should go where.

Almost all the teachers in the study felt that RE should be in something like a National Curriculum, though they also recognised that academies and free schools are in any case not subject to the National Curriculum. This presents a structural paradox. Nevertheless, of ninety teachers who expressed an opinion, 86% said it should be in the national curriculum, 4% said no and 10% were unsure. Reasons for this were about status and consistency:

> "I think that like the rest of the national curriculum these are essential bits of knowledge and skills that equip someone to live in our modern world." (Teacher)

> "It's very diverse, the youngsters' experiences can be very different from class to class, or from school to school. Therefore if there was a National Curriculum and there was a requirement for these skills to be covered and these topic areas to be covered, at least you would know that youngsters have that basic knowledge." (Teacher)

A third of parents were not aware that RE is not part of the National Curriculum, yet nearly all (94 per cent) thought it should be. The majority of the overall sample was also in favour of some degree of compulsory RE teaching and learning. Of those teachers who expressed an opinion, 99% favoured compulsory 'religious education' (of whom 11% specified to age 14, 72% to age 16 and a further 38% to age 18). Reasons given for compulsion were about the importance of religion and belief in the contemporary world:

> "The level of importance that it has around the planet means we should keep it" (Teacher)

They also focused on the transferable skills and attitudes RE engenders in pupils:

> "To the end of year 11 [aged 16] because it's important in terms of empathy and tolerance, and because people aren't naturally going to go away and explore a faith that is different to theirs. It forces you to do it in some ways but it raises awareness. It also gives you a global viewpoint of the world, beyond your own back yard." (Teacher)

Most employers too felt that the study of religion and belief should be a compulsory part of secondary education, although there were different views as to the age to which this should continue. Students themselves were also largely in favour of compulsory RE, although there was broad consensus that this could be non-examined and that the examined subject, GCSE Religious Studies, should be optional.

> "For example PE, you can take it as a GCSE and sit an exam in it but also you have to take it to keep fit. You could have to take RE but not sit an exam in it just so that you are socially capable." (Student)

Nevertheless, some students were glad it is compulsory, saying they felt RE lacks status and many would not have chosen the examined GCSE Religious Studies had it been optional, because it is not seen as 'counting':

> "While I really love RE, universities just see it as another GCSE...it's not necessarily one of the ones they are looking for... in reality to a person, RE doesn't just count as a GCSE." (Student)

At the same time, the Religious Studies GCSE was perceived by students as too narrow:

> "There is so much you could do in RE and then we're like restricted by these boundaries and I don't think we should be restricted." (Students)

Amongst teachers there was also support for retaining an optional, 'academic' Religious Studies GCSE, alongside a 'vocational', compulsory strand for everybody:

"You shouldn't have to take an exam at GCSE. A choice, academic version as well as an awareness, social version." (Teacher)

Many teachers in this study favoured teaching religion and belief themes in a distributed way in other subjects outside RE, especially Citizenship, and Personal, Social, Health and Economic education (PSHE), and in History. But most teachers thought that there should also be a distinct specific space for learning about religion and belief:

"The ethical and moral side of it should be fostered across the curriculum and then leave the actual teaching about [religion and belief] to RE." (Teacher)

Students were also critical of the confusion of RE with PSHE, Citizenship or careers education:

"We're supposed to be doing RE and then we're doing global warming." (Student)

There was broad agreement that wherever it is taught, RE should be taught by subject specialists wherever possible, and a widespread recognition that it very often is not. In this study, there was significant anxiety amongst non-specialist teachers of RE who said they felt ill-prepared and lacking in confidence:

"I think we shy away from it because we don't want to get it wrong. I get that." (Teacher)

"You have that nervousness about saying it in the wrong way: Am I being racist or stereotypical or prejudiced?" (Teacher)

Teachers said they think this both reflects and perpetuates the low status of RE. Many teachers suggested changing the name of RE, observing that 'Religious Education' and 'Religious Studies' carry baggage from a more 'confessional' era, have low status, and are off-putting to students:

"They've got a very negative attitude because it is named RS." (Teacher)

"Maybe it shouldn't even be called religion." (Teacher)

Some parents reinforced this:

"But what might help that is if they stopped calling it RE. Because for such a long time it was just Christianity and so people perceive it as that." (Parent)

Many employers also disliked the name, which they felt was discredited. One suggested a 'religious awareness' subject. Another suggested a 'religious literacy lesson' to run alongside a more distributed learning about religion and belief.

6. Reflections and Conclusions

The findings in this study suggest a broad commitment among teachers, students, parents and employers to the importance of compulsory learning about religion and belief in some way in all schools up to at least age 16. There is also recognition of religion and belief as muddled in schools, and an appetite for review and reform in relation to the purposes, content and structures of religion and belief learning, with the goal of producing clarity on each.

7. Summary of Findings

In relation to its purpose, students in the study saw RE as preparation for encounters with diversity, including avoiding causing offence and building cohesion. Parents agreed with the students that RE should be for the purpose of handling diversity, and for developing a 'spiritual but not religious' identity. Students also saw RE as the single most important space to achieve spiritual development, as well as seeing it as the basis of readiness for the workplace. Among teachers, too, there was broad consensus that RE should play a part in developing students' spirituality. At the same time, RE specialists emphasised the intrinsic academic value of RE and were troubled by the lack of clarity about purposes. They felt there is not time to do all that RE is asked to do. Non-specialists emphasised the role of RE in producing cohesion. Employers emphasised the purpose of

RE for practical encounters with diversity, and assumed that encounters will result in tolerance and respect.

Regarding content, students in the study wanted to learn about a wider range of religion and belief, including traditions, informal forms, and non-religion. They also emphasized a focus on lived religion and religion as a world/society issue, prioritising the contemporary over the historical. Teachers also wanted the inclusion of non-religions, naming humanism and atheism most, and the inclusion of learning about lived religion and internal diversity within religions and beliefs. They too emphasised real-world issues and controversies, and learning about the social roles and significance of religion and belief. But they balanced this with the reality of how to find the time, within which they thought that the traditions should be prioritized. Parents also emphasised the importance of teaching via real-world encounters and therefore real-world issues. They wanted the 'main' religions covered but thought that emerging forms are also important, though most could name neither. Employers want a pragmatic, practical engagement which prepares young people for workplace issues.

In terms of structures, students perceived a colonisation of the RE space with themes they thought properly belong elsewhere, especially to PSHE, Citizenship and careers education. Students, parents and employers also thought that RE should be compulsory, though there was consensus that the examined GCSE should be optional. Students also expressed dissatisfaction with the GCSE for being too narrow. Likewise, teachers favoured compulsory RE, though not just to age 16, but to 18. They would also like RE to be in something like a national curriculum, while recognising its diminishing traction in a context of increasing local determination. They suggested the delineation of religion and belief learning into an academic strand (in an optional GCSE Religious Studies), and instrumental or vocational elements which are compulsory for everybody. They insisted that RE should be taught by subject specialists wherever possible and noted a lack of confidence among non-specialist teachers of RE.

8. Implications

These findings imply a wholesale reconsideration of the context in which religion and belief learning takes place in schools in order to clarify the muddles, especially in the relationship between learning inside RE and outside it, in other subjects, and in the wider life of schools, where the daily act of collective worship and the right to withdraw confuse the educational, confessional and formational. In the sense that this reflects the muddle in wider society, it is likely that it also reproduces it, socialising young people to think in confused or unclear ways about religion and belief as they leave school, because they have themselves experienced uncertainty in their learning about the boundaries between different purposes and issues.

This makes it critical to clarify which issues are core to the academic study of religion and belief, which elements are social, or vocational, which are about the personal religious or non-religious formation of young people, and which overlap and/or are not really about religion or belief learning at all. These findings suggest at least three possible responses: a distinct, separately timetabled, religion and belief subject which broadly equips everyone to recognise and understand religion and belief roles, identities and practices (specific learning); the incorporation of instrumental, social and citizenship aspects of religion and belief learning into other subjects, especially PSHE, Citizenship and careers education (distributed learning); and an optional, examined academic subject for those wishing to specialise in the study of religion (specialist learning). The question of the name or names of these elements arose across this study, and this is an issue which is also in need of attention.

Wherever religion and belief learning occurs, based on these research findings, content should reflect the breadth of the real religious landscape, as revealed by cutting edge theory and data in the study of contemporary religion and belief. It should include: the study of a broad range of religions, beliefs and non-religion; exploration of religion, belief and non-belief as a category; exploration of the changing religion and belief landscape and its impacts on contemporary society; a focus on contemporary issues and the role of religion and belief in current affairs and controversies; a focus

on the relevance of religion and belief for workplaces and working life; and exploration of religion and belief as lived a identity as well as a tradition.

From the religious literacy perspective, this means that teaching and learning about religion and belief can be explored inside and outside the RE space, not solely or even primarily as an instrument for cohesion and citizenship, but concerned with preparing students for the practical task of engagement with the rich variety of religion and belief encounters in everyday, ordinary life outside of schools, whatever the challenge or opportunity at hand. It distinguishes between learning for a politically determined purpose (making cohesion) and learning for a task (encountering variety well), while recognising the importance of both. It seems important to model the distinctions through clarity of purpose, content and structure in schools with the goal of socialising young people to do likewise. This asks how to educate young people about religion and belief alongside the other school subjects and ethos in ordinary, un-anxious ways, enabling them to enter adulthood understanding the religion and belief in and around their lives, at home and at work; recognising the chain of memory in which they stand, most of the links of which were forged in the religious mode; and grasping the comings and goings of religion in time and place across the world.

Every subject has its quiet normativities, as recent reform of the teaching of History in England reveals (to make it more chronological and more 'British'). But the policy muddle and its implications, as revealed here, question whether RE bears too much of an instrumental responsibility, not only in England but across Western societies, where secular assumptions predominate but are largely only dimly thought through. The risk is that, by focusing on cohesion, extremism and personal spirituality, learning about religion and belief mainly reflects and reproduces individualistic understandings, alongside anxieties about religion and belief as forces for division, violence and oppression. At the same time, it risks failing to engage with the ordinary pervasiveness of lived religion and belief which evidence suggests looks nothing like these concerns. This raises the question of whether the responsibility for learning about extremism and cohesion should be concentrated in the RE slot at all. Clarification of religion and belief in RE and in the wider school environment may underpin clarification of the conversation about religion and belief more broadly, and as such getting it right in schools may be the basis of renewing religious literacy in wider society.

Author Contributions: Dinham designed the research and Dinham and Shaw performed and analysed the research. Dinham and Shaw wrote the paper together.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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