Friedrich Schweitzer, Reinhold Boschki (Eds.)

Researching Religious Education

Classroom Processes and Outcomes

Glaube – Wertebildung – Interreligiosität

Berufsorientierte Religionspädagogik

herausgegeben von

Reinhold Boschki

KIBOR – Katholisches Institut für
Berufsorientierte Religionspädagogik Tübingen

Michael Meyer-Blanck

bibor – Bonner evangelisches Institut für
berufsorientierte Religionspädagogik

Friedrich Schweitzer

EIBOR – Evangelisches Institut für
Berufsorientierte Religionspädagogik Tübingen

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Introduction

1. The focus on processes and outcomes in Religious Education

The question of how research on structures and outcomes in Religious Education can be carried out successfully is of current interest in many countries. Next to the more traditional historical, analytical and, more recently, international comparative approaches, empirical research in religious education has been able to establish itself as a major approach to this field (cf. Ziebertz 1994; Schreiner and Schweitzer 2014, Schweitzer 2006, 263–286; Schröder 2012, 281–362). Moreover, the contemporary discussion about comparative evaluation in schools like the PISA studies has raised a number of questions which also refer to Religious Education. What competences can pupils acquire in this subject? Does Religious Education really support the acquisition and development of the competences aspired? Are there differences in this respect between different forms of Religious Education or between different approaches to teaching? The research available so far does not really allow for answering such questions which, increasingly, is viewed as a serious disadvantage and as an impediment to needed improvements in teaching Religious Education (cf. Benner et al. 2011).

There are, of course, also the critical voices that caution us not to fall prey to current tendencies of only measuring abilities and achievements at the expense of a broader understanding of education which must include many other aspects which do not easily lend themselves to psychological measuring – like personal encounters and relationships and, ultimately, religious convictions and faith itself (cf. the discussions in Rothgangel and Fischer 2004; Sajak 2012; Möller, Sajak and Khorchide 2014). Although we consider it important not to exclude Religious Education from the over-all aim of all teaching which can only be to support children and youth in their development as autonomous and responsible persons and also not to exempt the subject from the obligation to prove its effectiveness, we also think that such critical voices should be taken seriously. Therefore it should be clear from the beginning that the present volume is not meant to establish a new methodological monopoly, neither in terms of its focus on processes and outcomes of Religious Education nor in terms of empirical research. Religious education as a discipline needs a variety of different methodologies, and empirical research is only one of them. Yet we are also convinced that there is no reason for not making use of the impressive advancements that have been achieved in the empirical study of teaching and learning processes and in educational psychology in recent years. Religious Education as a school subject as well as religious education as an academic discipline can greatly benefit from the insights and impulses of empirical research and of

interdisciplinary cooperation. Consequently, this volume aims at bringing together approaches and research experiences that try to follow this lead by gaining insights into the processes and outcomes of Religious Education in order to offer new and empirically based perspectives for the future improvement of teaching and learning in this school subject.

The focus on researching processes and outcomes of Religious Education follows the view that these topics have been widely neglected in earlier research although, for obvious reasons, they are vital for any school subject. To know what is really happening in the classroom and to have reliable insights into what is actually learned and achieved there – or what is in fact not learned – is a presupposition for any kind of serious theorizing about Religious Education, just like in the case of all other subjects. Theoretical perspectives without empirical grounding are in danger of becoming mere abstractions, just like in turn, empirical research without theoretical underpinnings would be blind and ultimately meaningless. Religious education clearly needs an interplay between empirical and theoretical perspectives which can only be reached where suitable empirical research is available. This is why the research available about Religious Education so far should definitely be expanded and broadened, in terms of research goals as well as in terms of approaches, research designs and methodologies. In many cases research in the field of Religious Education has been limited to questionnaires or interviews with pupils on the one hand and, more often, with teachers on the other hand. Teachers or pupils were asked how they view Religious Education, what they find interesting or stimulating and what they would like to change. In other words, it is the subjective perception of Religious Education which is studied in this case, be it from the perspective of the teachers or of the pupils. Such research remains important (and some interesting examples can be found in the present volume) – pupils and teachers are the first experts on Religious Education, to be consulted by whoever wants to know more about this subject and especially about its standing with pupils and teachers. Yet at the same time, additional insights are indispensable as well. First of all, this applies to studies which limit themselves to the subjective views of the teachers. Such views cannot be considered a sufficient basis for gaining a realistic and critical picture of Religious Education. Who would want to study, for example, the quality of preaching in church by only asking the ministers about its successes? Even most recent studies in religious education which are aimed at evaluating, for example, certain types of Religious Education, however, do not include the effects on the pupils but take the teachers' impressions concerning such effects their sole basis (cf. Gennerich and Mokrosch 2016, 100). Again, teachers are the first experts of their teaching. Yet it is well-known, for example, from the PISA studies that the teachers' views and the results gained from psychological tests are not always in agreement. This is why evaluations concerning the effectiveness of particular teaching approaches cannot reasonably be based on the teachers' views, at least not exclusively. It has become mandatory that they also include results concerning the competences actually acquired by the pupils.

Whoever is interested in improving the practice of Religious Education then, will not be able to bypass the question of researching processes and outcomes – an insight which also refers to a small but growing number of studies in this field which can be identified in several countries. Before we consider such developments in more detail it is helpful to have a broader look at the situation and meaning of research in the field of religious education as the wider background against which the contributions of this volume can be understood.

2. The wider background: religious education as a research discipline

In recent years, religious education has become a discipline that clearly sees its task not only in using research results from other fields, for example, from theology and religious studies or from general education and psychology that traditionally have been the most important partner disciplines for religious education (cf. Schweitzer 2011). Instead, religious education has more and more become willing and able to do its own research, in terms of historical, analytical and empirical research at different national and international levels. Special international research conferences as well as international associations like ISREV (International Seminar on Religious Education and Values) with their bi-annual meetings testify to this development. The academic discipline of religious education is obviously moving into the direction of establishing itself as a research-oriented and research-based enterprise, in distinction from its older versions which grew out of personal experiences in the classroom and of the ideas developed from there by seasoned practitioners. From our point of view this is a very promising development which should be supported by whoever is working in this field. It holds the potential of overcoming the traditional subordinate position of this discipline as application of insights and research results gained in other disciplines and of establishing it as a discipline in its own right. Given the criteria of today's academic world, this can only be achieved if religious education has to show its own research results.

At least in Europe, Religious Education as a school subject plays a core role for the discipline of religious education. The subject is available in most European countries, although organised in different ways, and in many countries the majority of the pupils attend religion classes (cf. the series Rothgangel, Jäggle and Schlag 2016; Rothgangel, Jackson and Jäggle 2014; Rothgangel, Skeie and Jäggle 2014). This explains why Religious Education at school has also received much attention in the respective research. This research started out in a number of characteristic directions which have remained influential until today. In many respects, survey studies and interviews with teachers have a long tradition (for a major example covering several European countries cf. Ziebertz and Riegel 2009). In Germany, for example, the studies carried out by Andreas Feige et al. (2000) have played an important role in this respect. Such interviews are not only interest-

ing because they allow for insights from those who are actually shaping Religious Education on an everyday basis. In addition to this, it is comparatively easy to do interview studies with teachers – teachers are adults so that no special permits are required, they have the professional competence of describing their own work, etc. Next to the research on the teachers' views and experiences, survey studies and interviews with pupils have also been a focus of interest (e. g. Bucher 2000). The largest project with a main emphasis on pupils' views of Religious Education so far was the REDCo Project that involved a number of European countries and emphasised, among others, the pupils' views of Religious Education and of its meaning for interreligious education (see Jackson et al. 2007 as the lead volume of the respective series). At the same time, however, research results on the reality of teaching Religious Education, for example, from observation studies carried out in the classroom have remained rare. This is even more true concerning the outcomes and effects of Religious Education which, speaking metaphorically, still represent something like an unknown territory, at least in terms of methodically controlled research (for interesting exceptions cf. Benner et al. 2011 concerning outcomes of Relgious Education; concerning processes cf., for example, Stachel 1976; Schweitzer et al. 1995; Knauth, Leutner-Ramme and Weiße 2000; ter Avest et al. 2009).

International assessment studies like the PISA studies have called new attention to the actual outcomes in terms of the competences acquired through teaching and learning at school, especially concerning mathematics, science and linguistic abilities. Religious Education has not been part of such studies but the question of outcomes has been posed for this field as well. Agencies like OFSTED (the UK's "Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills") have based their work on a catalogue of attainment targets to be achieved in Religious Education (cf. Religious Education Council 2013). In an academic context, competence models have been developed (cf. Rothgangel and Fischer 2004, Obst 2008, Sajak 2012). Most of these models, however, have never been tested empirically (for the most important exception concerning Religious Education see again Benner et al. 2011).

Beyond the PISA-type assessment studies with their concentration on outcomes measured as competences, the discussion in subject-related didactics has also raised the question about the empirical study of classroom processes, not only in a general or generic sense but in relationship to specific subjects. First studies of this kind in the field of Religious Education in Germany were undertaken in the 1970s and the 1980s, for example, by the Mainz research group (Stachel 1976) and the Tübingen research group (Schweitzer et al. 1995). After the year 2000, in the context of so-called cooperative and dialogical Religious Education, a small number of empirical studies were conducted, again at Tübingen (Schweitzer and Biesinger 2002; Schweitzer et al. 2006) as well as in a number of other places like Nijmegen (Sterkens 2001), Hamburg (Knauth, Leutner-Ramme and Weiße 2000), Würzburg (Ziebertz 2010) and Salzburg (Ritzer 2010). On an international level, the ENRECA and REDCO Networks have also played a pioneering role (cf. Heimbrock, Scheilke

and Schreiner 2001; ter Avest et al. 2009). These studies are of special interest in that they have shown that the effects of Religious Education can clearly differ from the intentions described by the teachers or prescribed in the curriculum. Moreover, they have shown how the interest in teaching and learning in Religious Education is connected to empirical research and how this research can help to advance respective discussions by providing a realistic basis for them.

In sum, empirical research on processes and outcomes of Religious Education can be called an emerging field. It is considered promising but it has not attained the level of an integrated or even loosely coordinated field of research, neither nationally nor internationally. Against this background, the aims of the present volume can be described.

3. Aims of the volume

The aim of this volume is to bring together experiences and results of empirical research in the field of Religious Education in different European countries. The focus is on two aspects:

– The reality of Religious Education as it can be grasped from processes to be observed in the classroom, with major emphasis on teaching and learning.
– The effects and the effectiveness of Religious Education as indicated by learning outcomes that can be described and possibly be measured empirically.

Contributions were invited on specific research projects carried out by the authors as well as overviews on pertinent research in their countries or religious traditions, depending on what the authors considered more helpful for advancing research on processes and outcomes in Religious Education. In some cases, most of all with Islamic Religious Education, it seemed most appropriate to develop a first map of the emerging field of research in this area as a presupposition of defining the place for research focused on the main questions of the present volume, and to encourage its future development.

The general aim presented to the authors of the chapters of this volume was to:

– consider the state of the art concerning research on Religious Education,
– to critically review existing research,
– to develop (methodological) criteria and perspectives for future research in this field,
– to bring together insights on teaching and learning that might be valid beyond particular countries.

The present volume can be considered one of the first international publications in the field of religious education with a clear focus on empirical research concerning classroom processes and outcomes of Religious Education. In this respect it can be viewed in continuation with earlier attempts of advancing research in reli-

gious education by documenting the state of the art. Concerning empirical research in religious education, several attempts have been made to map the terrain and offer respective overviews on existing studies, for example, in handbooks (Strommen 1971; Hyde 1990) or in volumes documenting summary discussions (Francis, Kay and Campbell 1996, Larsson and Gustavsson 2004; Jackson 2012; Schreiner and Schweitzer 2014). All of these earlier volumes have proven to be quite useful for shaping future work in religious education. The present volume can be seen as continuing this tradition by adding a new focus for a respective overview, i. e., the question about processes and outcomes of Religious Education.

At the same time, the present volume also reflects a particular research context at the University of Tübingen which may therefore be of interest to readers as well.

4. The institutional research context for religious education at the University of Tübingen

The University of Tübingen includes two centuries-old faculties of theology, Catholic and Protestant, as well as a center for Islamic Theology (founded less than 10 years ago). Religious education is a topic of training and research in all three contexts which allows for multiple cooperations (which, in some respects, have been broadened even more by also including the Heidelberg University for Jewish Studies which also has a chair of religious education).

Empirical research on Religious Education started comparatively early at Tübingen. More than 25 years ago, a first research project investigated the possible role of developmental factors and developmental psychology in teaching Religious Education (Schweitzer et al. 1995). Later, two major projects were carried out on so-called cooperative or dialogical Religious Education (Schweitzer and Biesinger 2002; Schweitzer et al. 2006) which, at that point, referred to cooperation between Catholic and Protestant Religious Education and, in the meantime, has come to mean cooperation with other forms of Religious Education, most of all with Islamic Religious Education but, where possible, also with Jewish Religious Education or with the Christian-Orthodox Religious Education which is emerging in Germany.

Currently, the University of Tübingen has two research institutes in the field of Religious Education, headed each by the chairs of Catholic and Protestant religious education who have cooperated very closely over the last 15 years, the Catholic and the Protestant *Institutes of Vocation-Oriented Religious Education* (EIBOR, directed by Friedrich Schweitzer, and KIBOR, first directed by Albert Biesinger and now by Reinhold Boschki). A core task of these institutes which are described in a brief article in this volume in more detail (cf. pp. 385–393) is empirical research on Religious Education, with a special emphasis on vocational contexts and schools (a type of secondary school not found in all European countries), with topics like interreligious education, values, interreligious competence for caregivers or for kindergarten

teachers, to mention just a few examples. The volume also includes a presentation of a number of empirical projects carried out at these two institutes.

5. How the volume developed

After the idea for the volume was born, a first step consisted in identifying possible authors and countries where respective research had become available. To start with the countries: Next to the German speaking countries (Austria, Germany, Switzerland) it is the Nordic countries (in this case Finland, Norway, Sweden) where empirical research on Religious Education has a longstanding tradition. Similarly, the Netherlands have produced empirical studies, among others, in connection with the approach of empirical theology (van der Ven 1990) but also in other contexts. In the United Kingdom, empirical research on religion also has a long tradition (Francis, Kay and Campbell 1996) but studies on processes and outcomes of Religious Education have nevertheless remained the exception. This explains why the recent study on "Does Religious Education work?" from the UK (Conroy et al. 2013) has attracted quite a bit of attention, not only in the country itself but also in many other places. Although not complete, this kind of overview shows that the interest in empirical research on Religious Education still appears not to be equally present in all parts of Europe. Especially southern and eastern European countries are missing on the list – a situation which is unfortunate and will hopefully change in the near future.

Concerning possible authors who could serve as experts in this case, our starting point naturally was the published work of colleagues from the countries mentioned above. In addition to this, we used contact persons in these countries who then referred us to the colleagues who ultimately became the authors of this volume.

Another important step on the way to this book consisted in an international symposium. This symposium was held at Tübingen in September 2016 – and we are grateful that the German Research Foundation (DFG) and the "Friends of the University of Tübingen" made this event possible with their financial support. However, it was also clear from the beginning that our plan should not be to publish some kind of conference proceedings. Instead the aim was a well-planned and well-composed book which could advance research in our field. Consequently, all contributions from the symposium had to be revised in correspondence with the aims of the book. Moreover, a number of additional chapters were invited in order to reach a more complete overview.

6. The breakdown of the book

Following the choice given to the authors described above to either describe a research project of their own or to give a report on respective research in their country or in connection with a certain religious tradition the volume includes different parts:

The contributions in *Part 1* are focused on individual research projects. While the authors share the interest in researching processes and outcomes of Religious Education, some of their reports describe and discuss other designs which, however, are also of interest in the present context.

Part 2 follows a different rationale. It brings together a number of projects from Tübingen which follow the same design and are therefore grouped together. The design shared by these projects is based on the model of so-called intervention studies which, in essence, work with a comparison between an experimental group and a control group. This design is often considered especially suitable for discerning the effects of teaching units or other educational programs. The articles also show that this design can be used in religious education in connection with different topics and concerning a variety of educational aims.

Part 3 includes research reports from selected countries. Moreover, it also holds a chapter on research on Islamic Religious Education which, concerning empirical research, must still be called a field in a rather early stage of development. All these reports take up the question of the attention that researching processes and outcomes of Religious Education has received so far in the particular country or tradition and how it could be given more attention in the future.

In *Part 4*, the editors of this volume offer a number of observations and conclusions. The perspective here is both, looking back at the results presented in the volume but also looking ahead to what aims research in Religious Education should pursue.

In the *Appendix*, there is a brief description of the two Tübingen research Institutes of Vocation-Oriented Religious Education. These institutions provided the institutional background for the Tübingen research presented in this volume and for the development of the volume itself.

Moreover, some questionnaires are documented which may be of interest for other projects as research tools. The first questionnaire refers to a project on inter-religious learning, the other to a project on interreligious competence in the training of future caregivers (both projects are described in Part 2 of the book).

7. Terminology

The research described in this volume is about *Religious Education* as a school subject. With its focus on methodology, the volume refers to *religious education* as an academic discipline. While it is not always possible to clearly discern the exact reference of the terms in their use in a text, we nevertheless tried to be as consistent

as possible by using upper and lower case spelling. However, readers should keep in mind that the contributions to this volume come not only from different countries but also are translations from different languages. No systematic international-comparative study on the terminology in this field has become available yet. It seems, however, that the respective terminology is quite telling and that it would be worthwhile to undertake such a study (for an example concerning Finland see the chapter by Antti Räsänen in this volume).

8. A note of thanks

Like most books of this kind the present volume is based on work which would not have been possible without the support from many people and institutions. In the first place this naturally applies to the authors of the book who were willing to make their chapters available and to carefully revise them. We are very grateful for this continued cooperation. The vital support from the German Research Foundation (DFG) and from the Association of the Friends of Tübingen University has already been mentioned above. Moreover, our student worker Julia Bayer was very helpful in organising the Tübingen meeting as well as with some of the translating.

The Tübingen researchers and students working at the two Institutes of Vocation-Oriented Religious Education also deserve special praise. Without their work this volume would not have been possible. The same applies to the sponsors of these institutes, be it the Ministries of Education and of Science in Baden-Württemberg or the Catholic and Protestant Churches that have been willing to support these institutes for many years.

All texts in the book have gone through an extensive process of language editing. We are grateful to Marianne Martin who, as a native speaker, was responsible for this sometimes quite demanding task.

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I Research Projects

James C. Conroy

Nested Identity and Religious Education

Some Methodological Considerations

1. Introduction

> Like everybody else, I bowed my head
> during the consecration of the bread and wine,
> lifted my eyes to the raised host and raised chalice,
> believed (whatever it means) that a change occurred.
> …
> There was never a scene
> when I had it out with myself or with an other.
> The loss of faith occurred off stage. Yet I cannot
> disrespect words like 'thanksgiving' or 'host'
> or even 'communion wafer.' They have an undying
> pallor and draw, like well water far down.
>
> (Seamus Heaney A Found Poem, 2005)

The Irish poet, Seamus Heaney's musing about his loss of religious faith highlights the complexity of 'religious attachment'; often cultural as well as theological, ecclesiological or soteriological. His indebtedness to the symbolic register of his 'native' Catholicism remain deep and, arguably, despite his loss of faith, maintains a vibrancy and claritas. Even in the claim to the quietly disappearing faith, we are never quite sure what it is a loss of faith in – the transcendental, the ethical, church order, the material efficacy of the symbolic. It is in the lack of surety about what it is that is referred to that we recognise the complex jostling of the religious in our personal and social being. Nowhere are the competing and jostling features more apparent than in Religious Education in British schools. To recognise this, one only has to consider momentarily the evolution of competing accounts of how religion might, – nay, should – be studied and taught in the second half of the twentieth century. From Smart's (1973) methodological agnosticism to Milbank's radical-orthodoxy (Milbank 1997), the lenses trained on religion are myriad and competing, enjoying no common discourse or register. Religion is, for sure, some kind of social practice – but how are we to talk about it? How are we to make sense of it? These and other questions appear to permanently circulate around the religious with increasingly shrill arguments in the public spaces. The conversation as to the nature, efficacy and importance of religion – its sources and resources, its ethical claims

and political aspirations, and its embrace of a range of phenomenological objects embedded within further claims to reveal, understand and explain the transcendent – make it a uniquely complex social practice. Take then such a social practice and place it within another complex social practice, where there also exists profound disagreement within and across traditions (liberal, secular and religious)[1]. Now try and understand the efficacy of this conjoined activity in a world ruled and shaped by performativity.

The project, 'Does RE Work?' (a three-year study funded by the Arts and Humanities and Economic and Social Research Councils in the UK, *AHRC/ESRC reference: AH/F009135/*1) represented a considered attempt to address this question in a more comprehensive form than is normally the case. For sure there are projects on pupils' beliefs and values, indeed considerable numbers of them. But a great many extant studies of attitudes amongst pupils and teachers concerning such matters depend upon a questionnaire, and the format of many of these attitudinal inventories draws upon various (Likert type) scales (Egan 1988; Greer and Francis 1990; Francis 2005). Methodologically, there is much that is unexceptionable in such work. Undoubtedly it sheds some light on attitudes at a given moment in time and, if replicated sufficiently often with similar groupings, offers some sense of pattern and predictability. But it is unlikely to offer any kind of insight into, what the poet Hopkins might have called, the 'inscape' or 'whorléd' interior of such complex *nested social practices* – a notion to which I will return momentarily. At a moment in history where the eschewal of expertise and the valorization of the common sense considerations of the common man has become commonplace this is of particular significance. The 'polymorphic consciousness' of human beings is not to be captured through the partial refraction of the ego. Reflecting on the expressed attitudes and self-representation of subjects of study will not yield the kind of 'insight' so carefully adumbrated by such as Lonergan, whose attempt to articulate a 'universal' point of view arise from neither a particular methodology nor indeed by abstraction but by the bringing together 'of experience, of insight, of judgment, and of polymorphic consciousness […] into a single dynamic structure' (Lonergan 1957, 568).

In order to excavate and map this interior dynamic, a multidisciplinary team from Glasgow University, King's College London and Queen's University, Belfast was brought together. One team member had a background in anthropological ethnography, another in qualitative educational research, yet another was a psychologist working on education in religiously divided communities. Three others were educationalists whose scholarly expertise included philosophy of education, religious education, theology, cultural studies in education, and teacher education. In attempting to address what we considered to be a significant lacuna in the existing literature,

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1 To see how complex this is across time one only has to compare within, say, the Catholic tradition the writings of St. John Chrysostom in the 4th century and the Congregation for Catholic Education in the Religious dimension of Education in the Catholic School to sense the very great differences in both tone and import.

we opted for a more comprehensive, albeit more tortuous and complicated, path than that so frequently followed. We set out to track the social practices that are Religious Education from its political framing and political aims, through its professional shaping (at both the macro and micro level), into its instantiation as pedagogical and cultural entailment, and thence to the attitudes and practices reproduced in the home.

2. The nature of the task

Before moving into the detail of the project it is necessary to understand what might be intended by *nested social practices*. – The life of the religious person or community is, so to say, a social practice entailing living a life refracted through complex sets of attachments, beliefs and correlated actions. These social practices establish certain forms and patterns of relationship between the individual and/or community to the political, cultural and social life of a polity as a whole. We can put it thus; Roman Catholics believe x and wish that this belief be considered (with the expectation of real influence) by legislators in shaping social policy. They do so in the belief that policy enactment leads to certain kinds of active possibilities. These actions themselves then become embedded in, engaged with, changed by and offer change to other kinds of social practices. Given the wide variety of relations within and across religious communities, this inevitably creates a very complex picture of the ways in which influence, policy and practice are transacted and performed in a polity (see for example Judge 2002). Heuristically it would be comforting to imagine that the relations are cyclically linear as in Figure 1.

However we soon realised that such a neat pattern would not take us much beyond our investigation of policy. The complicated relationships and trajectories of a bliz-
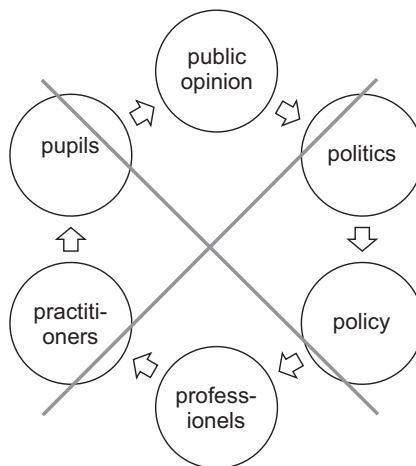

Figure 1

The Nested Identity of Religious Education

Social Life

Religion

Religion
Spiritual Beliefs

EDUCATION
Traditions / Expectations

Government   Parents   Religious Groupings
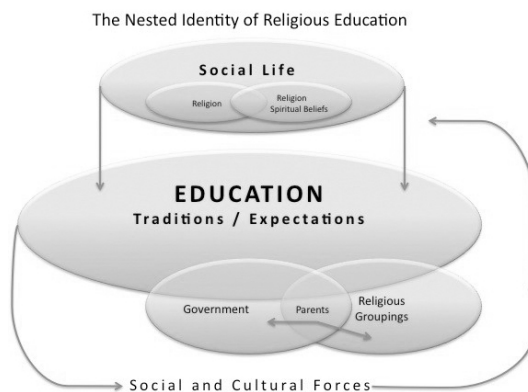
Social and Cultural Forces

Figure 2

zard of policy, pronouncements, positions and practices constantly churning with no obvious linear relationship is only approximately captured in Figure 2. Hence, we begin with an extraordinarily complex social practice, or more correctly social practices, that is religion. In turn it is nested within the similarly complex set of social practices that is education, which, in a recursive move, is heavily influenced, in the public domain by religious communities. Then subject the whole to a constantly swirling wind of social and cultural forces, not least of which is the contest to see secular humanism, and other non-religious worldviews placed on an equal footing with historic transcendental religions. We can then begin to understand how unearthing anything like a comprehensive understanding and assessment of the nature, functions, purposes and practices of Religious Education becomes extraordinarily challenging. Add to this list some recognition that the legislative environment and social functions of Religious Education differ across the several jurisdictions of a single polity, and attempt some assessment of the efficacy of the practice given the very different claims that are laid upon Religious Education, and the challenge is herculean. Nested is then no mere metaphor for suggesting that religion simply sits inside education; it is rather that as it is nested inside education it is itself changed by and changes its host.

This study began with two theoretical considerations. First, what might count as understanding religions and secondly, matching the complexity of its nested identity, how has policy evolved with regard to not so much what works but what forces and attitudes shape Religious Education, in addition to exploring the standard legislative moves and policy documents, in an interesting twist we examined a number of Hansard entries which disclosed the complex nested nature of Religious Education where, at various periods, parliamentarians and Ministers appeared to draw upon their own religious entanglements in determining the contribution of the subject to the moral sensibilities of the community (Conroy et al. 2014). What was of particular interest, from a research perspective, was the realisation that the ways in which this nesting works in political life found further iteration in subsequent streams of the project. The professional seminars and the ethnography both revealed the myriad
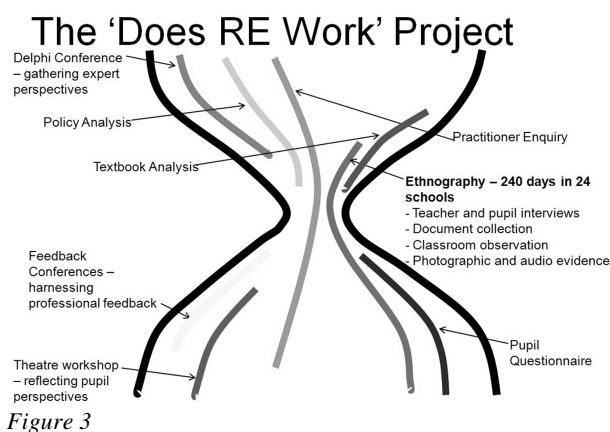
ways in which religion is nested in education, itself nested, at least partially, in the religio-moral impulses of legislators, policy makers and shapers of education. At its simplest, religion becomes transformed into a pedagogic and rhetorical device for securing certain kinds of behavioural and attitudinal goods on behalf of society – religion then shifts purpose and identity from a thing to be studied to a resource for the cultivation and/or modification of given dispositions and behaviours.

Methodologically this matters because normativity itself becomes central to the investigation and requires a yet more subtle recording of and accounting for particular moves beyond and inside the classroom. This is seen most especially in the somewhat murky space between education for some form of religious literacy and education for the moral entailments of citizenship and civic participation. Interestingly, there are strong structural parallels between the treatment of religion and that of citizenship in contemporary schooling. This is hardly surprising given that a number of thinkers, from the mid-twentieth century onwards, most notably Bellah (1970) considered that 'civil religion' (civics) would functionally replace religious traditions. One was merely a cipher for the other. Both embody certain kinds of social practice nested within another social practice. In a further complication, schooling in the UK, as across much of Europe has its origins in religious (largely Christian) communities, which frequently retain controlling interests in school assets and ethos. This has offered them a privileged position (warranted or otherwise) at the policy table on the shape and purposes of Religious Education. Hence Religious Education itself is nested in the interstices between state and religious community. Perhaps this and other complexities indicate why so many studies have relied so heavily on the statistical framing of attitudes towards the values and practices of Religious Education.

3. Methodological Overview

Our initial methodology was conceptualised as a 'hourglass' (see Figure 3), at the top of which are the 'blizzard' of policies, aims, interests and pedagogic models proposed by key stakeholders in the Religious Education field. The hourglass then narrows toward classroom enactment, which forms the ethnographic empirical core of our study, and widens again in considering the diverse impacts of Religious Education practice on pupils, their local communities, faith communities and educational and vocational aspirations. We had hoped that analysis at each stage would 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. This model, focused on textual analysis, traced the influence of national policies, through to Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education (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. It can also be seen in Figure 3 that a new investigation was introduced after the beginning of the project around this analysis, which, in turn, arose directly from the ethnography. Here our examination of the early data unexpectedly threw up the salience of the text as an actor in the spaces of the classroom. The maintenance of an open, fluid and dynamic approach kept open the possibility of such novel in-study additions and indeed for the post-hoc application of additional heuristic lenses. In one notable case, we were able to go back to the data and ask, what rendition of the teacher as a professional was evident in the data (Conroy 2016)?

The 'Does RE Work' Project

Delphi Conference – gathering expert perspectives

Policy Analysis

Textbook Analysis

Practitioner Enquiry

Ethnography – 240 days in 24 schools
- Teacher and pupil interviews
- Document collection
- Classroom observation
- Photographic and audio evidence

Feedback Conferences – harnessing professional feedback

Theatre workshop – reflecting pupil perspectives

Pupil Questionnaire

Figure 3

Our strategy met with some substantial challenges. Practically, the volume of material generated from this analysis proved difficult to manage. Due to frequent curricular changes, mapping the shifts in the curriculum 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 Standing Advisory Councils of Religous Education (SACRE) policy formation, there was scant documentary evidence of the key influences and processes of policy formation. Documents produced by SACREs varied considerably in their substance and import. Secondly, on a more fundamental level, the influence of the language of a number of para-legislative contexts 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.

The last objective, to establish some relationship between what was transacted in school and pupils' behaviours, attitudes, dispositions, and social and religious practices in their home (and neighbourhood) environment, proved demanding given the resources and time available. We were, however, able to 1. explore pupils' attitudes

to their studies in a comparative context and 2. tentatively trace interesting links between the discursive practices and teacher dispositions in particular schools and the degree of religiosity of the community using Voas' (2006) census studies.

Despite some resource, logistical and physical constraints we nevertheless believe that the rich and extensive data and the methods used to obtain and analyse it represent a significant step forward in studying Religious Education. In doing so we have attempted to frame these nested social practices using a vari-focal lens that holds within its scope the policy makers, the professionals who shape the discourse as well as those who provide the context, the professionals who attempt the enactment of the discourse and the context in which they operate, and, not least the pupils who are to be educationally and personally changed if not transformed by these attentions. Given the strong claims made by government agencies for its efficacy, it might be important to know what impact this provision has. For example, the strong normative claim that "[r]eligious education enables [pupils] to flourish individually within their communities and as citizens in a pluralistic society and global community" (Qualifications an Curriculum Authority 2004, 7) is at least worthy of serious study.

To begin, presumably the capacity to flourish as claimed depends on understanding the nature of religion and its functioning or else the claims may be construed as, at best, a tad vacuous. Hence we began our reflections with a philosophical excurses into policy, academic reflection and practice around understanding what would count as religious literacy. From there we proceeded to explore expert professional attitudes and engagements using a modified Delphi process, a multimodal ethnography (including analysis of texts, resources and so on, interviews, focus group discussions and pupil questionnaires) at each stage, to a greater or lesser extent, providing a platform for the next.

Let us turn then to the first of these subjects: policy. While it may have been possible to interview policy makers, we thought it more fruitful to look at policy across the varied constituencies of England, Scotland and Northern Ireland[2]. That in itself proved to be a challenge and offers immediate testimony to the very particular ways in which Religious Education is indeed nested in the very different legislative and social histories of each of the constituencies in question. One might think that the policy trajectory in constituent parts of what is, after all, a single polity would be limited to such perfunctory details as organisation of the curriculum. But of course – and precisely because it is nested in the way we have suggested above – the content, shape and import of Religious Education in Northern Ireland is dominated by catechetical concerns irrespective of whether or not the site was technically sponsored by a particular religious community. To understand policy we have to make sense

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2 There is no separate focus on Wales because, at the inception of the project, Religious Education in Wales was shaped by English legislation and practice. As the Welsh Assembly has evolved Religious Education in Wales, along with other features of education, it has begun to evolve a separate identity.

of the politics and the ways in which different communities exercise their power. Given that the religious politics across the UK vary so much there can be no coherent generalised account of policy-making, only very particular refractions. In Northern Ireland, Religious Education in the non-religious state school has an evangelical and catechetical thrust and import, that is much more potent than that experienced in many mainstream religiously sponsored schools in England, such as Anglican and some Catholic schools. There policy makers and their lieutenants, from normally quite adversarial backgrounds, make common cause against what they perceive to be the predations of secularisation, ironically embodied in some of the professional experts[3] who shape the discourse and practices of Religious Education. One reason is that many of the latter partake of a quite different discourse; one more closely aligned with the more mainstream, phenomenologically-informed educational discourse that dominates in other parts of Britain. Ironically, while Scotland enjoys an educational structure that is significantly more independent and discrete than that of Northern Ireland, its discourse on the nature of Religious Education is more universally aligned with the English phenomenological traditions.

The relationship between the national and the local is particularly complicated since, in England, legislation provides for locally determined, refractions of the national guidelines in what are designated as Agreed Syllabuses. Analysisng these syllabuses again proved complex as they offer little by way of common structure or detail and can vary in size from 4 or 5 pages to something in excess of 100. One node of investigation was the way in which shape, intention and import of these syllabuses is determined by a yet more complex concatenation of political, educational, community and religious interests. They also vary widely in the extent and nature of the advice on offer. Here again we could deploy our heuristic metaphor of 'nested identity' to understand the ways in which SACREs are intended to reflect the religious demography of the area they serve. Hence St. Helen's (with the highest population of Christians in the UK at 86 % ONS 2001) SACRE is comprised entirely of Christians while Tower Hamlets, with the lowest Christian population has much greater diversity in its membership[4]. Despite the recommendation of the national Non-Stautory framework (QCA 2004) that Religious Education should address non-religious life stances Humanists are not permitted to sit, as of Right, on Committee A (the main determining body of a SACRE) although they may be co-opted. While one might muse at some length on the labyrinthine relations surrounding, and the social expectations laid upon, Religious Education, suffice to say that

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3 Within the concept of senior professionals we have included university lecturers and advisers/improvement officers/inspectors within both education authorities and religious communities.

4 The St. Helen's SACRE comprises a membership as follows: 5 Church of England, 4 Roman Catholics and one representative of the Free churches; whereas Tower Hamlets has 7 Muslim representatives, 4 from the Church of England, 3 Roman Catholics, 1 representative of a black-majority Christian church, 1 Free churches representative, 1 Jewish, 1 Buddhist, 1 Hindu and 1 Sikh representative.