

Context, Complexity and Contestation: Birmingham's Agreed Syllabuses for Religious Education since the 1970s

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Abstract

This article offers an historical perspective on the 1975, 1995 and 2007 Birmingham Agreed Syllabuses for Religious Education (RE). It draws upon historical evidence uncovered as part of ‘The hidden history of curriculum change in Religious Education in English schools, 1969-1979’ project (*The British Academy*, Ref. SG-54151), and curriculum history theories, especially David Labaree's observations about the distance between the 'rhetorical' and 'received' curricula. We argue that, contrary to the existing historiography, curriculum change in RE has been evolutionary not revolutionary. Multiple reasons are posited to explain this, not least among which is the capacity and agency of teachers. Furthermore, we argue that ongoing debates about the nature and purpose of RE, as exemplified in the Birmingham context, reflect the multiple expectations that religious educators and other stakeholders had, and continue to have, of the curriculum subject. These debates contribute to the inertia evident in the implementation of RE curriculum reforms. A consciousness of the history of RE enables curriculum contestations to be contextualized and understood, and, thereby, provides important insights which can be applied to ongoing and future debates and developments.

Keywords: Religious Education, Agreed Syllabus, curriculum change.

Introduction

In this article, we pursue an argument made elsewhere concerning the necessity of historical inquiry in Religious Education (RE) research (Freathy and Parker, 2010) and develop this further by drawing upon curriculum history theories. Studies in curriculum history have examined the precedents of contemporary curricular issues, problems and solutions and the extent to which they embody physical (e.g. textbooks and architecture) and behavioural (e.g. attitudes and values) vestiges of the past (Marsden 1979, 28). They have demonstrated the complexity of the historical contexts in which curriculum pressure group activity and decision-making occur (Marsden 1979, 29), and thereby examined the multiple factors that advance and inhibit curriculum change (Musgrave 1988, 67-8). They have also shown how curricula arise, persist and change, and what political traditions, competing ideologies and other vested interests determine their social functions (McCulloch 1987, 45). Furthermore, they have highlighted how curriculum subjects represent professional communities sustained by networks of communication and apprenticeship, material interests and ideologies/missions that compete between and within themselves for resources, status and power (Goodson 1998, 96; McCulloch 1987, 47). Lastly, they have transformed as well as extended accounts of the curriculum, posed new questions and pointed towards fresh assumptions by engaging in critical analysis of the curriculum and the society of which it is part (McCulloch 1987, 54).

In the tradition of curriculum history studies, this article outlines an historical narrative connecting the successive Birmingham Agreed Syllabuses of RE (BAS) of 1975, 1995 and 2007, briefly describes the religious context in which they were defined, reveals some of the details of the complexities of syllabus construction, and highlights the contentiousness of the nature and purpose of RE.¹ For too long, change in RE has been viewed only in terms of its ideological context thereby virtually ignoring the non-ideological actualities to which particular curriculum developments sought to respond. The BAS of 1975, 1995 and 2007 need to be understood within their broader historical, religious, social, cultural, political and even economic contexts, and as developing within and cohering (or conflicting) with the prevalent educational conditions of

their time (see, for example, Parker and Freathy, in press). Furthermore, as this article shows, they also need to be understood in terms of the multi-level complexity of curriculum decision-making (e.g. national, local, school, department and classroom) including the tensions that can emerge between individual teachers (agency) and the multiplicity of social forces acting upon them (structure) (Musgrave 1988, 75).

What is problematised here are existing accounts of curriculum construction in RE since the 1970s which oversimplify the processes involved in Agreed Syllabus development, primarily by focusing on theological, philosophical or theoretical influences alone. Typically, the historical accounts imply that classroom RE from the 1970s onwards mirrored theoretical developments in the subject as enacted through Agreed Syllabuses by rejecting Christian confessionalism in favour of a multi-faith phenomenological approach (e.g. O'Grady 2005; Barnes and Wright 2006; Barnes 2009; Teece 2011). The simplicity of these accounts reflect the 'messianic yet widespread belief' of curriculum reformers in the 1960s and 1970s that past curriculum traditions could be transcended if only there was sufficient conviction, good management, planning and resources (Goodson 1998, 94; McCulloch 1987, 42). This conviction explains why terms such as 'innovation', 'revolutions', 'new movements' and 'new directions' (all phrases used in notable RE works of the time) were all-pervasive, and why there was scant attention paid by curriculum developers to the evolution and establishment of a tradition of practice (Goodson 1998, 94). By contrast, applying insights from curriculum history studies, this article seeks to demonstrate that the personal, social and political processes involved in constructing an RE curriculum are not so straightforward as existent accounts imply (see Sullivan, 2007, 127 and, for an example from another curricular area, Mutch, 2004). Rather, the successful implementation of new curricula is dependent upon historical, structural and contextual factors, including the professional realities of teacher capacity and agency, and that because of these complexities, contexts and constraints it is often not possible to generalize, institutionalize and sustain RE curriculum reform (McCulloch 1987, 44; Goodson 1998, 94). All this is exemplified by the situation in Birmingham described below.

The National Legal Framework

Local Agreed syllabuses are a peculiarity of the English (and Welsh) education system, originating from the historic need for consensus amongst the Protestant Christian denominations, the Local Education Authorities (LEAs), and the teaching profession concerning what was to be taught in RE. As a model of statutory curriculum development, they are distinctive both in terms of RE internationally, and in terms of the development of curriculum-subjects within the UK. As a recurrent, local and statutory process, involving designated stakeholders, the review and development of Agreed Syllabuses make explicit the complexities and contestations that are in play in the development of other curriculum-subjects, but which are more usually hidden from view. The details of the legal framework governing this process are summarised below.

From 1944 until 1988, Religious Instruction (RI) (later called RE) was the only curriculum subject that schools were legally required to teach. It was a product of the national wartime consensus about the importance of the subject to post-war national life (Freathy, 2007 and Parker, in press). This was a view supported by religious educators internationally (see, for example, from the American context Fisher, 1942 and Knapp, 1943). The 1944 Education Act required LEAs either to produce their own Agreed Syllabuses for RI, adopt one from another LEA, or combine elements from several other examples (Section 29). This had to be defined by a ‘Conference’ consisting of four committees representing (i) such religious denominations as the LEA thought appropriate (having regard for the circumstances of the area); (ii) the Church of England (not applicable in Wales or Monmouthshire); (iii) teacher associations chosen by the LEA (having regard for the circumstances of the area); and (iv) the LEA (Section 29:2). In order for an Agreed Syllabus to be accepted, all four committees had to agree unanimously (Section 29:5). In accordance with the Cowper-Temple clause, Agreed Syllabuses could not include any catechism or formulary which was distinctive of any particular religious denomination (Section 26). The 1944 Education Act did not specify which religion was to be taught, and although (non-denominational) Christianity was assumed, the usage of ‘religious’

recognised the presence of Jews among the British population (Section 25:7). Where the 1944 Act permitted LEAs to have a Standing Advisory Council for Religious Education (SACRE), to advise and support schools in matters to do with RE and worship, the 1988 Education Act required the establishment of SACRE by law. It was within this legal framework, and by these local processes, that BAS 1975, 1995 and 2007 were developed. It is important to note that though the 1944 legislation could not have anticipated the changing religious make-up of British society post-war, the result of earlier disputes about which form of Christianity was to be taught in schools led to the creation of a legal framework for RE opposed to religious or denominational particularity and determinedly inclusive.

Religious diversity and Religious Education in Birmingham

That Birmingham should be a site of contestation and innovation in RE is unsurprising given Birmingham's historic status as a transnational city, the significance of religion to which is longstanding. As one of the city's official historians, Asa Briggs (1952, 2 and 4), pointed out with regard to the city's Victorian and Edwardian eras, 'the leaders of local dissent worked with all their accumulated energies to build up a city which would be worthy of their faith and calling', and that 'in the communal life of Birmingham Christianity has always acted as a leaven', not least in the education of the young. Though significantly influenced by the leaders of one arm of Christianity, namely non-conformist dissent, in the shape of such political family dynasties as the famous Chamberlains (Unitarian) and Cadburys (Quaker), the city has always been denominationally diverse. From the 1930s, as a result of local economic growth, migrants came to settle in the city from around the UK changing the denominational make-up of Birmingham still further, and, from the 1950s, the emerging post-colonial setting made the city a multi-religious one (Sutcliffe and Smith 1974, 202-214). Latterly, since the 1990s, Birmingham has become one of Europe's super-diverse cities (Vertovec, 2007), home to an even richer array of peoples and faiths as result of further immigration. At various stages in the city's comparatively brief history, particular religious groups and key individuals have been of great influence in shaping its politics and culture, and sometimes this has led to particular disputes over the

education of young people, not least their religious and moral education. The more recent history of RE, therefore, needs to be seen against a wider religious history in which negotiations over the religious education of young people have been perennial and are ongoing.

Since the 1960s, the city of Birmingham has approved three Agreed Syllabuses for use in its schools, two of which were divergent to other locally Agreed Syllabuses of the time (BAS 1975 and 2007) and one which was akin to other extant syllabuses (BAS 1995). They represent the outcome of complex curriculum development activities hidden within the structures and processes of committees that are sometimes only revealed years later through archival sources, such as the minutes of meetings and drafted paperwork (where available). From a scrutiny of these previously hidden processes, it is clear that some voices and agenda were more dominant than others; some got silenced or excluded; some were prevalent and won-out; and some lost and faded away. It is also clear that differences in power, whether determined by force of argument, status, charisma or weight of numbers, played a part within the creation of apparent compromise. In this sense, the Agreed Syllabuses are representative of highly politicised processes, the products of which took on lives of their own in having a force to determine the shape RE in schools: whether they did so, and in what ways, is another matter entirely. It is claimed, for instance, that the BAS of 1975 represented a ‘total revolution of subject matter’ bringing about ‘a totally new orthodoxy’ in RE (Priestley 2006, 1012). In contrast, the BAS 1995 appeared unremarkable, typical of Agreed Syllabuses of the time, and, consequently, is invisible in the historiography of RE (e.g. Copley 2008). Meanwhile, the BAS 2007, like its 1975 predecessor, has been described as departing ‘from received wisdom in statutory religious education’ (Barnes 2008, 79). What unites these syllabuses is that they all sought to respond to religious pluralism in the context of RE, amidst wider educational, religious and political debates about the subject. Each was the result of a complex set of creative proceedings in a particular context, and each represented a response to immediate contestations arising during these local processes, as well as to broader debates in the spheres of RE, education, religion

and politics nationally. The following sections offer some brief remarks about the context within which each syllabus was formed, what each represented and what effects they may have had.

BAS 1975

By the end of the 1960s, the time was ripe for consideration of the existing 1962 Birmingham Agreed Syllabus. One major impetus for doing so was the presence of significant numbers of children from non-Christian backgrounds, the perceived need to assimilate these into British (Christian) society, and the belief that RE could be instrumental in doing so (Parker and Freathy, in press). Keen to avoid the ‘Death of the Subject’ gloomily predicted by Oxford University’s Harold Loukes, the majority of Birmingham’s SACRE supported the need to revise the seemingly outmoded biblically-based earlier syllabus, much of which had originated from the 1950s.² The subsequent BAS 1975 was an attempt to respond to the emerging social and educational situation, which it was perceived demanded a more ‘open’ approach to the religiously plural situation emerging in many of the city’s schools.

BAS 1975 was the outcome of over five years’ committee work, with the philosopher and theologian John Hick as chair. It was Hick’s involvement in local racial politics (through the organisation *All Faiths for One Race*, and as chair of the Religious and Cultural Panel of the local Community Relations Committee) that led him to first interact with city’s Education Committee over the provision of supplementary religious education for the city’s non-Christian children.³ Following this, Hick was invited to become chair of the Co-ordinating Working Party of the Agreed Syllabus Conference (ASC), and from this position he was consulted about nominations of local non-Christian religious communities to the ASC.⁴ That representatives from some non-Christian religions were invited to join the working parties of the ASC was a major innovation of the BAS 1975 (to their chagrin the Baha’i and local Serbian Orthodox communities were not invited to attend). This invitation resulted from a reinterpretation of the structure of Agreed Syllabus committees, as determined by the 1944 Education Act, which had already been less ambitiously trialled by the Inner London Education

Authority. In tandem with his involvement with the BAS 1975, Hick was in the process of revising his own theological position with regard to existence of non-Christian religions which he published in *God and the Universe of Faiths* (1973) (although he had aired his ideas much earlier, notably at Carrs Lane Church, Birmingham in 1972, see Parker and Freathy, in press).

As well as the primary need to provide a form of RE to meet the needs of a religiously diverse city, it was recognised by some on the city's SACRE that the vigorous lobbying by the British Humanist Association for Humanist representation on the ASC should be heeded. In response, the SACRE agreed to co-opt Dr Harry Stopes-Roe, a University of Birmingham academic and university-friend of John Hick, to the ASC's coordinating working party. The bombastic and critical Stopes-Roe was a vocal and influential member of the ASC.

What resulted from the considerable efforts of the drafting committees was a detailed non-statutory handbook of suggestions for teachers, *Living Together*, accompanying a slim volume of statutory guidance. The inclusion of Communism and Humanism as options in the non-statutory suggestions for teachers was attacked in the local and national press, and in a volume of irate correspondence addressed to the Kenneth Brooksbank, Birmingham's Chief Education Officer, and its SACRE. The proposed syllabus was debated in Parliament and even became the subject (in 1976) of a campaign to 'Save RE', instigated by Mary Whitehouse. Controversies delayed ratification and publication of the syllabus until May 1975, when it had satisfactorily been revised by downplaying mention of non-religious 'stances for living' and heightening its attention to religion (Stopes-Roe 1976, 134). Even so, these revisions did not prevent the local Conservative administration from requesting that head teachers return the pages referring to Communism and Humanism to the Education Office in June 1976 (Hull 1984, 112). According to Hick, the storm about the inclusion of Communism acted as a 'lightning conductor' channelling attention away from the most significant innovation of the syllabus, which was its thoroughly multi-faith content.⁵ John Hull, who had been involved

in the syllabus's development, was highly influential in the dissemination of the burgeoning multi-faith approach both personally on local, national and international stages (e.g. as the co-founder of the International Seminar for Religious Education and Values (ISREV), est. 1977), and through his editorial influence over the journal *Learning for Living* (e.g. the special edition of the journal on the BAS 1975 *Learning for Living*, 15(4). 1976).

Assessing the effects

Adrian Bell (1985, 177) argues that Agreed Syllabuses 'constitute an historical record of views on [RI/RE] teaching of considerable clarity and temporal precision'. Furthermore, based on an analysis of just nine Agreed Syllabuses published between 1944 and 1982, he identifies three distinct styles of syllabus that 'correspond, with very little overlap, to three sharply defined periods: 1944 to 1965 [confessional and Bible-based]; 1966 to 1974 [child-centred and seeking 'relevance']; 1975 to 1982 [multi-faith and phenomenological]'. In a later history of Agreed Syllabuses, Priestley (2006, 1007) also argues that it is 'possible to discern three fairly clearly demarcated stages of change and development' and that 'change has often come from one initiative within one particular authority'. Within these frameworks, BAS 1975 is viewed as representing a clear shift of emphasis from one type of RE to another. For our purposes, it is interesting to note that both writers claim that there have been definite points of transition in the history of Agreed Syllabuses, suggestive of revolutionary, rather than evolutionary, change at a structural level. Furthermore, both accounts refer to transitions in the aims, methods and content of RI/RE as defined by Agreed Syllabuses, rather than as taught in classrooms. The writers do not discuss in detail the extent to which the pedagogy and curriculum of RI/RE teachers in schools mirrored the styles and stages of Agreed Syllabus development. As will be seen below, both Bell's and Priestley's frameworks inadequately describe classroom implementation, because they assume too much about the actual effects syllabuses have over practice. Without understanding how syllabuses were received, interpreted and translated into resources, schemes of work and lessons, such conclusions are somewhat presumptuous.

Did the BAS 1975 actually have the impact claimed for it? Was it revolutionary to classroom practice? Was it of local practical influence, as well of national and general theoretical influence? One way of gauging the extent to which the syllabus impacted upon classrooms is by examining previously unutilised historical evidence. In 1980, Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) surveyed RE in Birmingham and their twenty-eight page report is illuminating. The aim of the inspection was specifically 'to assess the quality of the teaching in religious education in selected schools maintained by the Birmingham LEA five years after the introduction of a new agreed syllabus and the accompanying teachers' handbook' (Section 1.1).⁶ The HMI surveyed twenty schools in the city, nine of which were Secondary (11-16 years), ten Primary (5-8 years) and one Middle (8-13 years). The Inspectors found that it was the perception of teachers that the new syllabus simply arrived in school, and that it was only when a specialist RE adviser was appointed, shortly after the syllabus was published, that in-service training on the syllabus began to happen (1.4). In the eighteen months prior to the inspection of Birmingham RE, a significant amount of in-service training of RE teachers occurred, including: the preparation of teaching resources to teach Christianity; approaches to non-religious stances and African-Caribbean experiences of religion; courses on different world faiths and on RE in special schools; and even a visit of 39 RE teachers to Israel, with a resultant exhibition and resources for use in schools. Teachers were encouraged to attend courses sponsored by the Christian Education Movement, the Shap working party on world religions and Birmingham University (1.5). One may conclude from this that professional development in RE in Birmingham was vibrant and well resourced.

Notwithstanding the good training offered, or the sample of schools surveyed (all selected on the basis of identified good practice, augmented by other schools in the same geographical area), HMI found that in several Primary schools a large proportion of teachers were avoiding teaching RE at all, and in no Primary school was it possible to classify more than two teachers as competent and confident in handling the syllabus material (3.2). In most of the Primary schools, more than half the teachers described themselves lacking in

confidence or competence in teaching the syllabus, especially the explicitly religious content, and admitted to teaching an occasional Bible story or a ‘famous life’ instead (3.2). In five of the nine Primary schools inspected, RE did not appear on the timetable at all, and while it appeared in another three, it was not often taught (3.4). In most, RE was equated with what went on in the assembly, but was often not followed up in lessons (3.4). In the Primary schools inspected, many teachers did not understand what an Agreed Syllabus was, and those that knew of it had received little guidance in how to interpret it (3.7). A ‘surprising number’ of teachers excused their inactivity in teaching the subject because they believed it had confessional aims, and they themselves were uncertain regarding religion (3.7). Only six of the one hundred and twenty-five teachers inspected were able to comment in any detail on the content of *Living Together*, and in several schools a photocopy of the syllabus was included in folders of schemes of work, but with no suggestion about how it might be taught or how teaching might be resourced (3.7). HMI found that in one school a ‘myth’ existed that the syllabus required RE to be entirely implicit and deal with matters of social and moral concern, and thus the syllabus was being used as an excuse not to teach RE at all (3.10).

The picture in Secondary schools was similarly mixed, if somewhat more encouraging, partly because some teachers had come to the city because of its ‘world-faiths’ approach (4.9). In one school, where the subject was observed to be taught well, inspectors observed work on ‘Birmingham as a cosmopolitan city: the sounds, sights, smells and habits of various groups within the community’ using videotape, slides and visitors (4.4). However, in the nine Secondary schools inspected, fourteen of the thirty teachers who taught RE had no qualifications to do so, and four of the schools only taught examinable RE in the fourth and fifth years (4.3). Despite a broad sympathy with the approach taken by the syllabus to world religions, four of the schools still clearly focused upon a chronological treatment of the Bible and on Christianity. In one school, world religions were ‘taught briefly and without conviction’ (5.2). In others, some experienced staff were resistant to change (4.13). In only one school were Communism and Humanism mentioned in schemes of work and this was for students in the oldest year group (5.3). Importantly, what HMI found was that for most

teachers the syllabus did not initiate new directions in the subject, rather it ‘confirmed’ their existing ‘philosophy’ of RE (4.12). Overall, the HMI concluded that only the appointment and leadership of an LEA advisory teacher, RE co-ordinators in Primary schools and qualified heads of RE departments in Secondary schools, alongside more in-service training, could properly ensure the implementation of the RE curriculum (8). Clearly, the mere existence of the ‘revolutionary’ and ‘unorthodox’ BAS 1975, even though supported by vibrant and well-resourced in-service training, had not produced significant curriculum change in Birmingham’s schools within the five years after its publication. Indeed, the impact of the BAS 1975 could be interpreted at best as uneven and patchy, and at worst as non-existent. But how are we to understand the gap between the curriculum rhetoric and the classroom reality?

Curriculum rhetoric and reality

According to the curriculum historian, David Labaree (1999), there are four layers of curriculum: (i) the rhetorical curriculum, such as that proposed by policy-makers and professors and described in speeches, reports and textbooks; (ii) the formal curriculum, such as that demonstrated by school policy documents and schemes of work; (iii) the curriculum-in-use, which is the content teachers actually deliver; and finally, (iv) the received curriculum, which is the content that students actually learn. For a variety of reasons, according to Labaree, writing of the American educational system in the 20th century, many curriculum reforms do not lead to real change in classrooms because these different layers of curriculum and the interactions between them is not understood. The reasons offered by Labaree are outlined and explained in the table below, which we have adapted to include related questions pertaining to the history of RE curriculum development. Though historical in focus, some of these questions are of contemporary relevance.

Reason	Explanation	Example questions pertaining to RE
Conflicting Goals	A lack of coherent agreement about the purposes of education reflected in different curriculum reforms and resulting in compromises and pendulum swings between alternative conceptions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who has set the goals for RE? • How have disputes about the nature and purpose of RE been resolved? • How involved were teachers in curriculum developments in RE?

Credentialing Over Learning	A greater focus upon grades and assessment than upon what is to be learned, and a focus on curriculum ends rather than knowledge and processes.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Did RE lack the status and resourcing of those subjects which were deemed to confer the highest value qualifications? • Did increases in the knowledge and skills included in the RE curriculum undermine teacher confidence and capacity?
A Curriculum That Works	A resistance to change when something works for the benefit of those who hold influence.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What or who has driven change in RE and where has resistance been exhibited? • Where has power/influence resided?
Preserving the Curriculum of a Real School	Fixed cultural conceptions of what the curriculum of a 'real school' is and an in-built desire to conserve this.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To what extent have public, political, religious, professional or parental presuppositions inhibited or driven change in RE?
Preserving Real Teaching	An apprenticeship model of teaching in which those new to the profession are encouraged to emulate their senior peers rather than divert from established processes and practices.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How have RE teachers been trained and developed? • What subject or professional qualifications have they obtained? • What pedagogies have emerged in RE and what shaped their development?
Organizational Convenience	Organizational convenience of the traditional curriculum content and methods, and the avoidance of any dependency on teacher agency and special capacities.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How far has the RE curriculum been constrained by school organization, staffing, timetabling, resourcing, student setting/streaming, and so forth?
Loose Coupling of School Systems	Policy-makers and administrators have remarkably little control over the actual process of instruction, conferring considerable autonomy upon teachers.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Would the quality of teaching and learning in RE have been enhanced had the subject been of a higher priority in inspections? • Would a national curriculum for RE have increased accountability and led to improvements in quality?
Adaptability of the School System	The ability of schools and teachers to assimilate curriculum reforms by adopting the language without altering their practice or by adding reforms to an already fragmented curriculum.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To what extent have practitioners been 'on board' in RE reforms? • How have RE teachers interpreted/subverted curriculum endeavour? • Have teachers recognised the potentially contradictory aims, methods and contents of the reforms they have adopted?
Weak Link Between Teaching and Learning	Students choose to learn what they want to learn or resist learning altogether.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To what extent did earlier curriculum reforms in RE resolve the problem of personal relevance for pupils? • Is RE any more relevant now than it was then and, if so, to whom and

		why? • How far has the received curriculum of RE ever been thoroughly evaluated?
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It is interesting that in an environment where RE and BAS 1975 were compulsory, schools and teachers were still found not to be implementing the subject in the ways prescribed. This could be because, as HMI observed, and Labaree articulates generally about curriculum change, teachers were often ill equipped to do so, selecting not to teach RE because it presented too great a challenge. Moreover, as oral history is beginning to reveal, Birmingham's teachers were both beginning to implement a form of multi-religious education prior to publication of BAS 1975, and contrary to this, some teachers resisted implementing the BAS 1975 because it was inimical to their own faith stance.⁷ Claims for the revolutionary impact of BAS 1975 may thus have been exaggerated. Progression, regression, subversion, avoidance and compromise would be characteristic features of a more nuanced history of RE. The importance of micro-political factors associated with schools, departments and teachers in RE curriculum development should not be underestimated.

BAS 1995 and conflicting goals

At least as late as 1980, the BAS 1975 was having little effect upon practice. The differences between the rhetorical curriculum and the curriculum-in-use were marked. Whether the realities of the situation changed as the 1980s progressed is difficult to say, what is clear, however, is that disputes at the rhetorical level of the curriculum, certainly did not disappear, as accounts below demonstrate.

As we have noted, the BAS 1995 is missing from the historiography of RE. Perhaps this is simply explainable because it is uncontentious and representative of mainstream RE of the time. It is not yet possible to engage in historical documentary analysis of SACRE or ASC papers to be able to report upon the complexities and dynamics of the syllabus's construction. Essentially, what is readily available for ease of

analysis is the product of the ASC's deliberations, the syllabus. This syllabus was what had become 'standard' in the tradition of its forerunner, being a loose-leaf document separating out statutory statements and guidance for teachers (supplemented by additional detailed advice in 1996 and further advice on assessment in 2002). It was produced over two years, with a view to being implemented gradually in phases. A local politician chaired the ASC and the major religions of the city had representation as was ratified by 1995. The resultant document utilised the still relatively new language of Attainment Targets (*learning about religion* and *learning from religion*, introduced by the Schools Curriculum and Assessment Authority (SCAA) in 1994),⁸ and considerable space in the handbook was given over to explaining how these might operate in RE. Particular attention was given to the link between the two attainment targets and the ways in which children might develop an understanding of what religion means to believers by studying its external manifestations. Here one might argue that the phenomenological approach was now well embedded in the Agreed Syllabus, and that a pedagogical approach, missing from BAS 1975, was now included to support it. The syllabus was also concerned to ensure 'informed reflection' amongst children, so that children might make a personal response to the claims of religion, though it was clear that the attainment targets for RE did not require pupils to articulate their opinions, nor was it about whether pupils beliefs were right or wrong (BAS 1995, 10). Impartiality and objectivity in the study of religion was encouraged as an approach, juxtaposed with the aim of helping children to 'clarify who they are and what they believe in' (BAS 1995, 4).

Between BAS 1975 and 1995 (and beyond) discordant voices, doubtful about the approaches being taken to multi-faith RE, began to become more vociferous (Thompson 2004). Echoing qualms expressed by the *National Association for Teachers of Religious Knowledge* from the 1960s about the removal of scriptural knowledge from the curriculum,⁹ and Mary Whitehouse's 'Save RE' campaign of the 1970s, ongoing contestation about the nature and purpose of RE in the 1980s exercised politicians as senior as Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. Even if such political contributions to the discourse 'had very little to do with the realities of the classroom but chiefly concerned the politics of national identity' they demonstrated that

‘RE [was] the battleground on which the fate of British Christianity supposedly hinged’ (Filby 2010, 197). The culmination of these contestations about, using Labaree’s term, preserving the curriculum of the ‘real school’, were the debates around the 1988 Education Reform Act, which characterised multi-faith RE as ‘mish-mash’, lead to the insistence in the Act that RE be predominantly Christian (Bates 1996).

Amongst RE academics, subsequent debates have been played out in the pages of the main journals for the subject, and in publications emanating from those who are uneasy about the apparent consensus over the nature and purpose of the subject which has emerged. These academic debates have centred upon (i) the concern that teaching other religions alongside Christianity relativises truth claims (Christian ones in particular) (Barnes and Wright 2006); (ii) the confusion that an apparently objective presentation of a range of religions inculcates in children (Smith and Kay 2000; Thompson 2004); (iii) debates about how accurately teachers present world religions to children, including acknowledging their internal diversity and lived realities (Geaves 1998; Watson 2007); (iv) the extent to which the priority given to multi-faith RE, and the social purposes underpinning it, undermines and marginalises other legitimate aims for the subject, particularly that of religious nurture in the faith of the home (Thiessen 2007); (v) whether RE does, in fact, result in tolerance of religious pluralism in society (Felderhof 2007, 87-97); and (vi) the extent to which the influential phenomenological approach has secularised RE and society (Copley 2005) leading to calls for the revival of the teaching of Christianity and the reversal of the trends in world religions teaching begun in the 1960s (Thompson 2004). Using Labaree’s categories, it was clearly the case that the curriculum remained highly contested at the rhetorical level throughout the 1970s, ‘80s and ‘90s, and that RE was subject to a significant range of ‘conflicting goals’, at least in the minds of policy-makers and RE academics. All of their articulated fears about the state of RE by the end of the 1990s may be directed at the kind of RE promoted by BAS 1995. One might ask what chance do curriculum developers have of successfully influencing the curriculum-in-use and received curriculum when policy-makers and academics cannot agree on RE

curriculum goals? Moreover, how do practitioners interpret and negotiate their way through these persistent and ongoing disputes?

BAS 2007

Work on BAS 2007 began within this climate and just one year after the publication of the *Non-statutory National Framework for Religious Education* (QCA 2004), which seemed like a precursor to a national syllabus for RE (Copley 2008, 193). Asserting the authority of the existing legal position, and embodying some of the disquiet concerning the phenomenological approach of BAS 1975 and 1995, BAS 2007 was developed in opposition to some aspects of the ‘ruling model’ of RE (Barnes 2009). In accordance with its aims that children should have ‘their feelings deepened’ (BAS 2007, 4) and that they should be required to develop particular dispositions, BAS 2007 reversed and re-worded the attainments targets used by BAS 1995, which had been affirmed in a revised form in the National Framework, so that they now read *learning from faith* and *learning about religious traditions*. BAS 2007 had a different approach to any existing syllabus and was heralded as a ‘breakthrough in statutory religious education’ (Barnes 2008, 75). It seemed to be breaking the mould of both BAS 1975 and 1995, as well as of other Agreed Syllabuses developed over the preceding thirty years. Certainly, the strong linkage between children’s moral education and their religious education, which had often been deliberately disassociated from the 1960s onwards, and the aim of fostering the conative, dispositional domain, marked BAS 2007 out as distinctive and divergent from existing trends. Drawing upon what BAS 2007 called ‘the treasury of faith’, the syllabus required the ‘development of pupil dispositions, using and deploying the resources found within Christianity and the traditions of other religions’ (BAS 2007, 78). Significantly, in contrast to BAS 1975, BAS 2007 did not mention the possibility that children might learn their values from non-religious stances for living. Thus, although BAS 2007 sought to represent agreed notions of what is true across religious traditions, unlike BAS 1975 and the *Non-statutory National Framework for Religious Education*, it did not consider secular worldviews as a valuable focus for learning.

Philip Barnes (2008, 77), in his assessment of BAS 2007, points out that the syllabus is evidence of ‘local democracy’ and of ‘community and religious leaders alongside educators and educational administrators reaching agreement at the local level on the content of religious education to be taught in schools’. That may be the case, but in this regard it is interesting to note similarities between BAS 1975 and 2007. The former benefited from the weighty intellectual influences of John Hick, Harry Stopes-Roe and John Hull. Their influence is evident in the selection of ASC members, contribution to meetings and drafting of documents, as well as in the ability of John Hull to disseminate widely the BAS 1975 approach through his personal charisma, editorial role with *Learning for Living* and founding role in ISREV. Similarly, BAS 2007 bears the intellectual marks of another Birmingham University academic, the drafting secretary of the ASC, Marius Felderhof. Like Hick, Felderhof is a philosopher of religion, but he has long been involved in RE as a university tutor in RE, and by his involvement as a member of Birmingham’s SACRE, participating in the development of both the BAS 1995 and 2007. In the case of the latter syllabus, however, his intellectual influence, as one who has expressed disquiet about a number of trends in English RE is clear (Felderhof 2005; 2007; 2010). BAS 2007 is more determinedly nurturing, or in its own terms ‘cultivating’, than any Agreed Syllabus for some time. At face value, what BAS 2007 requires of RE by way of shaping the pupils’ moral outlooks, given the limited curriculum time and resources for the subject, appears highly ambitious. Is this not a function of schools rather than of individual curriculum subjects?

What has been, and will be, the effect of BAS 2007? One can only really tell by undertaking a thorough survey of how it has been interpreted and received by teachers and students, such as that undertaken by the HMIs above with regard to the BAS 1975 or by Wedell (2010) with regard to the Hampshire Agreed Syllabus of 2006. However, given the time and resources expended in constructing Agreed Syllabuses, it is surely desirable to evaluate their effectiveness and impact.

Conclusion

This article has briefly summarised empirical research regarding the BAS 1975 which we have reported in more detail elsewhere (Parker and Freathy, in press), but it has also drawn attention to new primary sources (e.g. the 1980 HMI report) which further challenge the existing historiographical record. In addition, while the existing historiography has not drawn upon theoretical frameworks from contemporary or historical studies of the whole curriculum, or of specific subjects within it, this article has used one simple example to evidence the insights that can be gleaned from doing so. On this basis, and to prevent RE curriculum studies from being isolated from comparable studies of other curriculum areas, we argue that further applications of such theoretical frameworks should be undertaken in the future.

This article has also contextualised our previous work by drawing attention to longer-term changes within RE in Birmingham. Collectively, the Birmingham Agreed Syllabuses are artefacts in the history of RE. If they do not necessarily represent immediate revolutionary change, they do demonstrate trends in RE, including changes of emphasis, language and approach, and exemplify many of the themes previously highlighted by curriculum historians. Given the evidence from the HMI report on Birmingham RE in 1980, and David Labaree's analysis of curriculum change, one wonders if teachers are better placed thirty years on to implement BAS 2007 (or indeed any Agreed Syllabus)? What can be done across the domains of influence in RE, ranging from political rhetoric to children's learning, to facilitate greater coherence with regard to the subject's goals? Whether this coherence is better generated and maintained by local or national determination remains an open question. Equally, whether the numerous expectations with which the subject is laden can be reduced, or whether it is possible to mollify the contests surrounding the subject's nature and purpose to achieve greater unity on this is a moot point (Teece 2011). In either case, it is clear that there will be some gains and some losses to those involved and, in Labaree's terms, the 'organisational convenience' of the present situation may well have to be disrupted. Such disruption might lead to public debates, drawing upon the political power of organized religion, which politicians and policy-makers are usually eager to avoid.

Curriculum developments (not least in RE) are complex, contested and significantly influenced by the context in which they are formed and implemented. A proper understanding of curriculum history must take this into account and draw upon the full range of sources available, not just formal documents, such as Agreed Syllabuses. This in turn reminds present-day curriculum developers to consider in detail the complexity, contestation and contexts that their endeavours need to address. Simplistic renditions of the past feed simplistic understandings of the present and of the future. Historical research in RE challenges persistent assumptions about the subject's past, moderates against prevailing one-dimensional historiographies and offers an additional basis for informed future planning.

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¹ The themes of context, complexity and contestation are drawn from Mutch (2004), and her work on syllabus construction on social studies in the New Zealand curriculum and are parallel to our observations of aspects of curriculum development in RE.

² The title of an article by Harold Loukes, the *Times Educational Supplement*, 12 April, 1968, and which is to be found in the SACRE papers. Birmingham Central Library, City of Birmingham Education Committee, Standing Advisory Council for Religious Education, 50, 4, 1, A12, 1965-1967.

³ Birmingham Central Library, City of Birmingham Education Committee, Revision of the Agreed Syllabus of Religious Instruction, Box 37, File 2. Letter from John Hick as Chair of the Religious Education Panel of the Birmingham Community Relations Committee to Chief Education Officer, 15 October, 1969.

⁴ Birmingham Central Library, City of Birmingham Education Committee, Revision of the Agreed Syllabus of Religious Instruction, Box 37, File 2. Letter from 28 April, 1969. Letter from Christopher Tipple (administrator) to Kenneth Brooksbank, Chief Education Officer.

⁵ Interview with John Hick, 7th November 2008.

⁶ National Archives, ED272_32_2. DES. HMI. RE in Birmingham. 1973-1980.

⁷ Anonymous interviews with a teacher heavily involved in the formation of BAS 1975, and a teacher who taught in Birmingham schools from the 1960s onwards.

⁸ The Schools Curriculum and Assessment Authority attainment target *learning from religions* became *learning from religion* in the *Non-statutory National Framework for Religious Education*.

⁹ The organisation continued to lobby well into the 1970s, organising public meetings, writing letters to the press and RE organisations to elicit support for its work.