What makes an effective SACRE? Or, why SACREs are important

Claire Clinton

In some recent discussions the place of SACREs in RE has often featured, with opinions ranging from 'abolish them' to 'give them more powers'. Here a vastly experienced RE adviser and SACRE member shares her wisdom with us about what makes SACREs work well.

Introduction

SACREs have been part of the legal landscape of education for the last 20 years. I became a teacher 24 years ago, so I am almost as old as SACREs! Assembly, and have been part of three SACREs, and they have been part of my growth and learning.

SACREs, although a creature before RE, were made compulsory with the 1988 Education Reform Act. SACREs have been a vehicle for religious education in their community schools that brought more than just one religion. They were, importantly, made up of teachers, parents, representatives, and councillors, all being included (on volunteers) to help the LEA create a suitable syllabus for students in their area. I am one of the many people who have experienced good SACREs throughout my career - they have been places that have helped me learn more about different religions and worldviews, as well as giving me a guiding light to the experience of writing schemes of work for RE with more experienced teachers.

SACREs and current reports on RE

We have seen important reports published recently - notably by the Commission for RE (CORE) and Claire Clinton and Linda Woolhead's RE New Settlement for RE (RE 2020) - and these are producing thoughtful consideration within the RE community, but more importantly at Parliament and government and within the Department for Education (DfE). The current state of RE, inclusively and inclusively. Is there proof of the evidence we have, and change is needed to provide supportive structures to ensure high-quality RE in our schools. The map of education has changed a lot since I was a student, and it needed to make SACREs fit for purpose in the twenty-first century.

Over the last four years, it has been argued that because some SACRES do not reflect local or national religious language, they should be discarded. This is a weak and poorly thought-out argument. I agree with Claire and Woolhead (2020) when they say the time is ripe for reform of SACREs. Such a change will be a catalyst for change to be fit for purpose. Their strengths should be celebrated and their good practice shared by government.

What makes a SACRE work well?

The reports published in the last six months both have a number of recommendations and some of them impact the system of SACREs, which has made the last 20 years what we needed to protect in a new system. Recently, I led a workshop on getting the most out of your SACRE at the 2020 conference in Craven. Putting the workshop together, along with reading and discussing these reports, has given me the what makes an effective SACRE.

Checks and balances

Ensure that the right checks and balances are in place. SACREs are unique and are made up of different committees so that plans and ideas are filtered through different lenses to ensure the best outcomes. They include members as well as members of education and schools, and this is a strength - if the new local authority networks that CORE calls for are to be robust and improve what we are doing, they need to include all stakeholders. At present, the best support for the CORE report includes all voices - a list of which should be expanded upon, which might be part of this group. I believe the list needs to be amended to include outsiders as well. I like the idea that people are now councillors who are elected by the community one part of SACREs - it gives the group more public accountability and places democracy in decision-making process. I know that sometimes getting councillors to SACRE meetings can be difficult, but if these meetings are purposeful, and councillors are interested in their purpose then, I am sure others would find what many of us have that they are helpful supporters in ensuring high quality RE for all pupils in all schools.

Claire Clinton is the National RE adviser and a member of the National Association of SACRES (NASCORE) Executive. claire.clinton@emilers.co.uk
Managing diverse views
SACRE members bring a range of diverse views to their work. It is not always easy to have diverse views from within one religious tradition, but across a number of different religions and world views, along with practical teachers and LA contacts. That is what SACREs have tried to ensure for 20 years. Having a range of diverse views that are open to discussion and exchange can be beneficial to such a body. In this way, it is hoped that, most if not all, schools and SACREs will continue to learn from one another.

Being in touch with schools’ needs
SACREs do the job that schools need. Each SACRE is a body that helps to ensure that schools have the resources and support they need to improve their practice. SACREs need to be mindful of the importance of involving school leaders and teachers in the development of their work. It is important that SACREs have regular meetings with school leaders and teachers to discuss the issues that matter to them. SACREs should also ensure that schools have access to the resources and support they need to improve their practice.

Newham SACRE also asks all its members to visit a school (at least once a year), and we write letters after visits to thank schools for hosting us. This helps SACRE members to become more actively knowledgeable about RE and CW in schools, but also brings the work of schools to the centre of all that the SACRE discusses and does.

Openness to learning
SACREs must maintain an open mind about all that is being taught in RE and CW. SACRE members must be open to new ideas and new ways of teaching and learning. SACRE members must also be open to different views and perspectives. SACREs must be open to new challenges and opportunities. SACREs must be open to new ways of working and new ways of thinking. SACREs must be open to new ways of learning.

Conclusion
Writing this has helped me formulate and focus my ideas. I hope that the ideas that we are sharing in our RE and CW do not simply remain on paper, but take shape, develop and become part of our daily work. It is only when our ideas and actions become part of our daily work that we can truly change the world we live in. We can only make a difference if we are willing to take the time to think about the issues, to listen to the voices of those who are affected by our work, and to act on what we learn. Whether it be in schools, in communities, or in our own lives, we must be open to learning and open to change.

Reference

Visit a Place of Worship 2018-19
Members of Neasden SACRE with Shabnam Rani, Neasden’s elected mayor.

Clarke and Woodhead say, ‘We believe that many local authorities will go much more actively to the extent that developing SACREs could be a way of bringing faith into the centre of our community cohesion work and would be ready to fund that’ (2015, p. 30). SACREs need to know how religious systems work within LA, Multi Academy Trusts (MATs) and local government to build a case for and to fund the work they need to do with schools.

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