Sea of Faith in Oxford Day Conference
EDUCATION – IN GOOD FAITH?

Saturday 10th November 2012 Friends Meeting House 43 St Giles, Oxford

REPORT

25 people attended – 15 already had some connection with the Sea of Faith Network, and most were involved in some way with education.

David Paterson introduced the day with a few words about the Network and the reason for choosing the subject of education for this annual Oxford day conference.

The theme for Sea of Faith in Oxford's annual day conference this year had been chosen in the belief that there are many far-reaching changes taking place in the educational policies of this country, and that there should be as much open debate as possible. He said that the issues include the proliferation of faith schools, the establishment of free schools and academies, the emphasis on frequent testing, the reduction of local accountability, and the increasing power of central government. He hoped that the conference would generate open debate, but also that we might decide on some plans for concerted action.

Our first speaker, Richy Thompson, the Faith Schools Campaigner for the British Humanist Association, spoke on the theme "**Should we fund 'faith' schools?"** He spoke mainly to the complex history of education in this country, summed up in a hand-out: **Types of school with a religious character,** which is available on http://www.humanism.org.uk/_uploads/documents/schools-with-a-religious-character.pdf

He asked "Why is the present government (and the previous one) promoting the creation of more faith schools? Should local circumstances influence the RE syllabus? RE should play an important part in education, but should the teaching – **as fact –** of any one faith be financed by the state?

Allan Hayes is an active humanist and secularist, a Trustee of the Sea of Faith Network, and a member of his local (Leicester) SACRE. The title of his talk was   "**One humanity – building the future together".** He spoke of the importance of relationships between the faiths in a secular context, especially in diverse cities like Leicester with a high proportion of Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs. We are one humanity – building a future together. Segregation of children on the grounds of their parents' religion is not conducive to this aim. Christianity and the other faiths can be relevant and significant influences within a genuinely secular society.

Richard Pring was Director of the Department of Educational Studies in the University of Oxford for 14 years, Lead Director of the Nuffield Review of Education and Training, and the author of 'The Life and Death of Secondary Education for All' (2012). He asked **"What counts as an educated person in this age?"**
Drawing on the extensive research in his latest book, and on Giles Taylor 'The Secular Age, Michael Oakshott, John Dewey, Lord Nuffield and many others, he explored the idea that education is a conversation with the **voices** of the humanities, arts and sciences. Religion plays a part in helping children explore themselves, each other, humanity and the world. Education is not merely for qualifications, and the present fad for testing is absurd. The language of 'delivering education' is deeply flawed.
The educated person is one prepared for living in community. The aim is not competition but co-operation. Before the present policies, education was not 'state education' but locally accountable. Centralisation and privatisation are demoralising.

From these talks, and the questions following them, we drew up four questions for the afternoon group session. Each group was asked to concentrate first on their own question (question 1 in group 1…..), but to consider the others as well. They reported back in a plenary with a panel of the three speakers.

1. **What role is there for ethos in schools, including those that are not 'faith schools'?**
   Two of our speakers chose to join this group throughout.(they had both wanted the question to be asked)
   Allan Hayes wrote afterwards
   The message that I would like to get across is that we must help children to be rounded human beings, with an appreciation of where we come from, what our cultures and history have contributed, and how the future lies with us - to have a well-formed picture of what humanity is and what being a human being is - to be proud of being a human being;
   and I think that the present state of RE provided the opening for replacing it with such a course.

Richy Thompson *gave the report for group 1 on the day*

I posed this question because it is something I have been thinking about a fair bit lately and want to devote even more time to. I think I have come up with some answers to this question, but wanted to lead a group through a discussion of the topic and see what conclusions they reach – and whether they match mine. The Sea of Faith Conference presented me with the opportunity to do this.

The first issue with this question, obviously, is what we mean by "ethos". A school commonly defines its "ethos" in terms of certain values, such as respect, responsibility, community and honesty. Some of these values, such as supporting a faith or building character may be controversial. In my talk, I'd discussed how some religious groups which claim to have a better ethos nonetheless have troubling relationships towards issues around lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender rights, and women's rights. I cited the incident earlier this year where the Catholic Church urged pupils in its secondary schools to sign a petition against same sex marriage, and evidence from Stonewall that homophobic bullying is worse in religious schools.

But what is an ethos? The group immediately settled on the definition of what an ethos is as "How children, staff, parents and other stakeholders relate to each other." This matches my definition. The group also mentioned how ethos is often embodied in a mission statement, and highlighted respect/tolerance as the most prominent value in a school's ethos.

We moved on to examining how different schools manifest their ethos differently, and have different environments. One person gave an example of their local schools, and said the Church school wasn't better, but it certainly was different, and was more nurturing. Another person said they had two local schools – a community and a CofE. Both were good schools, but the community school was more professional.

A third person contributed that one community school's measure of success was whether someone got a scholarship at Oxbridge – otherwise, the pupil failed. A teacher shared that her experience in a community school found many parents behaving negatively towards the school, perhaps having failed at education themselves and so not seeing the point in their children trying. A final point of view criticised a grammar school for telling a pupil that she couldn't be a nurse, because nursing is not a profession, and so was not seen as good enough by the school for that pupil.

I then asked the group whether they thought Community schools think enough about ethos – are religious schools more consistent in tackling this issue? The examples above suggest that religious groups can have more systematic issues towards ethos, while some Community schools fail to address the issue at all. The response was that the quality and ethos of a school really depends upon its leadership: "A ship is as good as its leadership." However, "The Church is a buffer to bad captains" – providing a safety net that other schools do not have.

This naturally moved us on to Academisation, and whether Community schools might be losing what safety net they have. The related issue of introducing competition into the schools network was raised, as we are currently seeing happen. One person felt that competition would lead to commodification and, in fact, drive schools to think about brand image, as a proxy to ethos. Might this lead them to think seriously about ethos as well? If so, Academisation might cause trends both ways.

Getting back on track, we'd established that each category of school has different problems: some types of religious school have systematic issues, while *some* Community schools do not think about ethos. But do Community schools also have a brand problem – do they not collectively stand up for their ethos enough at a national level? The answer was yes – because "They don't have a Church behind them."

So how can we get Community schools to more consistently have a good ethos, and how can we get Community schools to stand up better for their ethos?

I suggested UNICEF's [Rights Respecting Schools programme](#), and Hampshire County Council's [Rights, Respect and Responsibility](#). Here, schools build a charter every year between children, staff and parents, setting out how different parties treat each other, with the various rules each referred back to something in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. All parties know that this document then represents a higher authority within the school than any of them, ensuring that they treat each other in a fair manner that is acceptable to all. And [the research](#) shows that it works.

This proposal met with general approval, with people liking the idea and the clever link to the UNCRC which ensured an equality and human rights grounding. Although some questions remained. One person compared it to the [Home-school agreement](#) initiative [mandated by statute](#) since 1998, and complained that that caused endless headaches trying to get every single parent to sign up to it. This would not be an issue with RRR, where there is no such mandate. However, a follow-on question was how to overcome parental apathy. RRR might help, by improving the school, but does it address the issue directly enough?

The final contribution was a person sharing his experience that the most unifying thing schools do, with highest attendance from parents, is the annual nativity play!

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2. What would a course on humanity be like? What role would religions have in it?
Group 2's report:

Our group was blessed with two complementary characteristics that made for rich and lively discussion. Firstly, two of the five people in the group were conference speakers with much to contribute from well-considered standpoints on this topic. Secondly we had some diversity of background perspectives. This made us explicitly explore assumptions that would have gone unnoticed in a more homogeneous group. One person raised the question of 'superiority' or 'suitability' of one perspective over another, such as Darwinist over Creationist. Another questioned the assumption that either of these (or even a third alternative) needed to be taught as absolute 'Truth'. Unfortunately there was not time to explore this any more deeply but it ably modelled the challenge for course designers of what would be considered appropriate content and crucial context for Step 3, the narrative of consensus in modern Britain. What is 'Our Story' is a question for on-going exploration, however I would like to add that current RE, at its best, provides a skilled toolkit for dealing with respectful but critical enquiry of divergent models of belief (religious and otherwise). This would be invaluable in developing Step 3.

What came through our differing perspectives as a group was the need to see humanity as more than cultural identity both within and between individuals.

Thus we were able to specify a broader **Syllabus** and **Framework.**

Syllabus

Step 1: Foundation: Self validation:
- To learn how to handle emotions
- To learn a personal vocabulary for self-expression
- Tools to access their OWN narrative, tell their own story
- To learn that their views count, their contribution matters

Step 2: Mechanics of Relationship:
- To learn how to handle others' emotions
- To learn a moral vocabulary: Honesty, Empathy, Generosity
- To begin to witness/respect and interact with other narratives, hear others' stories
- To learn how to conflict, co-operate & negotiate

Step 3: Cultural Membership:
- Access to Arts & Literature which express Humanity
- To learn a cultural vocabulary of shared values and references
- Skills & confidence to express and explore their **own** culture/faith and **other** cultures/faiths
- Syllabus to include suggestions of diverse Texts that explore Humanity
    i. Classics (including **Religious** Texts) incorporating diverse ancient insights on being Human
    ii. Popular Contemporary content to explore how we view and experience Humanity today

Step 4: Well-Being Investment
- Importance of seeing the purpose of this course as a long-term investment more than a short-term qualification deliverer.
- To realise that this course is the beginning of life-long ongoing exploration & self-development
- Teaching would need to be high calibre with high capability, specifically-trained teachers

Framework

It would be expected for all four steps to be covered in every year of education. As the children mature, each aspect would be progressively developed to support potential for increasing complexity and sophistication.

Results

Rather than a grade, this course would be looking for on-going creative expression of rich learning **outcomes** which could continue to be layered and consciously developed throughout and beyond formal education.

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3. **What counts as an educated person in this age?   Group 3's report**

We spent much of our time on asking: *what counts as an education*, and on its corollary: *what should we do about it*?

We took these questions to be invitations to try to become a little clearer on these questions for ourselves - we were rather daunted by the second part of the question - interpreting it to mean what we could do as individuals rather than make proposals for what 'they' should do.

Perhaps we made the mistake of not distinguishing clearly enough about the appropriateness of education at particular ages or stages of development, though we did touch on the idea of 'readiness'. In our discussion, we found ourselves using terms like compassion, respect, confidence, imagination, kindness, morals and morale.

Continuing the conversation in a subsequent SoF meeting, we recorded expressions both of hope and also something more akin to despair. We heard from one member about the procedures for education in Finland, together with some details of the different status accorded to teachers in that country - significantly contrasting with the situation in UK.

Much credence was given to the idea that educated people would be at home in their own culture and yet able to question it, would be able to live alongside those who had had different life experience and alongside those from different cultures. One mark of education would be a continuing and active curiosity. There were those among us who welcomed Richard Pring's enthusiasm and hopefulness, but were at a loss to explain it.

We briefly considered the view that insofar as teaching was a profession and insofar as it had failed significantly to challenge several governments in respect of the anti-educational values and practices which had been foisted on the nation's educational provision, then education might be said to have been corrupted. We looked to the teachers' professional bodies together with research and training institutions to develop their pedagogical knowledge and practices and promote them in similar ways to those of the presently more recognised professions.

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4. What can/might/should we do about the present problems? Summary of Group 4

- Starting with the Rights of the Child, encourage schools to build a school ethos based on them.
- Tackle admission policies in faith schools, etc. This is what segregates children.
- Develop some sort of leadership to challenge what Gove and cronies are attempting to impose without discussion.
- Tackle the failure of our society to have a clear vision of itself. A society needs a common narrative (the Olympic and Paralympic games this year briefly supplied that). How can we develop a vision and a common narrative? What part might schools play?
- First steps: start thinking and discussing these deeper thoughts about the nature and purpose of education.
- Action from this conference: send this report to as wide as possible a range off interested groups: our speakers, the attenders;
  Plus DP's list: The NASACRE network, Oxfordshire SACRE, the Bishop of Oxford, Oxford Diocesan Board of Education; British Humanist Association, National Secular Society, the Secretary of State for Education; Accord, Sea of Faith Network, Sea of Faith in Oxford blogsite; Church Times, Reform, the Friend, Methodist Recorder, The Tablet;…………………………
- ***Who might be added to this list?***

David Paterson summed up the day by saying that he felt that the first aim of the conference had been thoroughly well met – to help open up an important and urgent discussion of present policies; and that the second aim – plans for concerted action – would have to start with publicising the report of the conference.

David Belcher thanked the members of Sea of Faith in Oxford for an excellent conference and wonderful food.

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Appendix 1 to the conference report

Sushma Sahajpal, one of the attenders, emailed Richard Pring *after the conference.*

   I enjoyed reading your paper very much and was also struck by the resonance with 'our' Humanity Course, in particular the thinking of what I've called Steps 1 and 2. Wonderful if this could inform a redesign of Primary Curriculum & Syllabus.

   I am intrigued by where your paper leaves off too... It is something we did not get to explore in the conference, but came up for me on that day when someone mentioned that mere 'tolerance' is not sufficient and 'respect' was a more desirable level of relationship with other. I believe that we as a society can no longer settle even for respect but need to go further. Respect, in many ways is often no more than a 'kinder' or more negotiated form of tolerance, a peaceful co-existence. I think by settling for respect we miss the vibrant growth opportunity of going up one more level to 'Genuine Engagement' with different others. This is a quality of experience of 'other' which a civilised or 'educated' person ought to be skilled in and indeed **welcome** with all its potential for resonance and dissonance, aiming not just for compromise (i.e. handling threat) but potential learning and even collaboration at points of conflict.

   Although Aristotle had an educated mind as one that can hold a thought without accepting it, I think in 2012, an educated mind needs to be equipped further to be able to hear, and constructively respond with new thoughts to a thought even when not accepting it!! I think this is where Interfaith discourse will need to go too.

Richard:

   Thank you for your long response. You make a very interesting point – 'engagement' going beyond 'respect'. This is really what Dewey was arguing for in the advocacy of the common school (at a time when people of different ethnic and religious backgrounds were entering the US especially through Ellis Island). How to learn from each other, thereby enhancing one's own development.

Appendix 2. Flyer for

The Life and Death of Secondary Education for All   *Richard Pring*

Routledge   September 2012   208PP

*Pb:978-0-415-53636-3 **£24.99**   H/b:978-0-415-53635-6 **£90.00***

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We are presently seeing the most revolutionary changes in English schools and colleges for 70 years. But are these changes not killing the very aspirations which then prevailed?

S*econdary education for all* was embodied in the 1944 Education Act. There would be greater social mobility, greater sense of community, wider access to the cultural riches previously limited to a few, and equal respect whatever the social background or ability.

But was that but a dream? For some, 'more means worse'. Critics point to the dilution of culture, disengagement from learning, low standards, poor preparation for work or higher education.

In response, new solutions are advanced: vocational opportunities for the 'less academic'; focus on targets; accountability through national testing; parental choice; freedom from local responsibility; creation of 'free schools' and academies (contracted to the now all powerful Secretary of State); growth of sponsors (some for-profit) to bring 'business efficiency'.

Permeating all has been a massive shift in language: curriculum is *delivered; targets* are hit; *performance indicators* established; *audits* carried out, *efficiency gains* pursued, *customers* satisfied through *choices* in an educational *market.* Such language, drawn from 'performance management', would have been risible only a few decades ago.

The book builds on *Education for All,* based on the Nuffield Review into 14-19 education and training. It transcends the particularities of England and Wales and digs more deeply into those issues which are at the heart of educational controversy over policy and practice. These issues (concerning the aims of education, standards of performance, the consequent vision of learning, professional role of teachers, progression to further and higher education and into work, provision and control of education) are by no means confined to the UK, or to this day and age. Pring identifies similar problems in other countries, especially the USA in a kind of Atlantic Alliance.

It is a critical time. Old patterns of education are less and less suitable for facing the 21st century. Modes of communication have changed radically and those changes are quickening in pace. The economic context is transformed, affecting knowledge and skills needed for employment. The social world of young people raises fresh demands, hope and fears. Global recession has affected young people disproportionately making quality of life and self-fulfilment more difficult to attain.

The book argues for a wider vision of learning and a reformed pattern of provision. Old structures must give way to new.

The way forward

Think about the aims of education
Start with the question: *'What counts as an educated person in this day and age?'*

Have a wider vision of learning
Aims must be relevant to all young people: practical as well as academic, drawing on the 'different voices' within sciences, arts and humanities, building on the informal learning acquired outside school, nurturing 'moral seriousness, developing a sense of community, and ensuring respect for oneself and for each other.

Get rid of high-stakes testing
Such learning is killed by an assessment regime which tests only what is measurable, narrows learning to passing tests, marks out many as failures, leads to disengagement.

Stop blaming the schools for the ills of society
Social conditions (poverty, family breakdown, generational unemployment) provide the backcloth to teachers' attempts to bring a better life to young people. Education can 'compensate for society', but only with the direction of resources to those most in need.

Respect the teachers
'No curriculum development without teacher development'. Value teachers and their expertise. Expertise is nurtured through teacher-led professional development.

Ensure progression
Progression routes into FE, HE, apprenticeships and employment are essential. Hence, the importance of independent Information, Advice and Guidance.

Create local partnerships and collaboration - not competition
No school can go it alone. Local collaborative partnerships are needed to bring together schools, colleges, employers, HE, youth workers, voluntary bodies and local community.

Public service, not private gain
Education is a public service for the benefit of all, not a private service for the benefit of some. There must be a return to the tradition of public service and its values.

Government: know your limitations
Education is too important and the appropriate educational provision too complicated to be left in the hands (and at the whim) of one person – especially as he or she will not be around very long. It is necessary to restore local responsibility, parliamentary accountability, professional expertise and community involvement.

Secondary education for all was a dream. But it could come true.