

SHARING THE PURPOSE OF SECONDARY RE IN THE SCHOOL



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The National Institute for Christian Education Research

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This project is being funded by Templeton World Charity Foundation as part of a wider scheme of research titled Big Questions in Classrooms.

Although studies have explored school pupils' attitudes concerning science and religion, there has been little research on beginning teachers' experiences in their development and formation and not much is known about how big questions are framed in classrooms or the extent of teachers' experiences of the science/religion encounter. This project addresses the gap, develops informed responses for teacher education and finds some preliminary understandings of the impact of the use of that knowledge in teacher education programmes.

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TEMPLETON WORLD
CHARITY FOUNDATION



BIG QUESTIONS
in CLASSROOMS

SHARING THE PURPOSE OF SECONDARY RE IN THE SCHOOL?

Science Religion Encounters Toolkit 3

INTRODUCTION

Religious Education as a school subject has suffered a decline in status over recent years. An analysis from the National Association of Teachers of Religious Education in 2019 showed significant decline in RE in secondary schools with almost 40% of community schools and 50% of 'Academy schools without a religious character' not meeting 'their legal or contractual requirements for the subject' (NATRE, 2019, p.2).

It is therefore important to consider how RE is portrayed as a subject across your school community. The online survey results below, from a survey completed by 949 teachers, gives some sense of the issues involved.

Religious Education teachers come from a wide background of first degrees' covering different disciplines. These different disciplines approach knowledge-building differently with different purposes.

Student teachers can bring in quite different assumptions about the purposes of the subject, based on their background study or their prior experience. Religious Education as a subject might be able to help these diversities but RE itself is in a fragile condition.

TASK 1



Research Insights

Read through the next two slides. What is your first reaction to these findings? One of surprise or one of recognition? Think about the schools you have been in contact with. What has been the relationship, if any, between the RE and science departments? Why might that be?

- These findings are based on an online survey with early career teachers of science (n=76) and RE (n=86)
- Teachers of science and RE hold quite different perspectives on the purpose of RE on the school curriculum
- The majority of early career RE teachers prioritise 3 purposes for the subject: **values education, critical thinking and knowledge of religions and worldviews**
- Early career science teachers were more unified in prioritising values education as the primary purpose of RE
- The percentage of science teachers who prioritise the purpose of RE as **'to develop skills of questioning, critical education and tools for debate'** is less than half the proportion of RE teachers who prioritise this purpose.

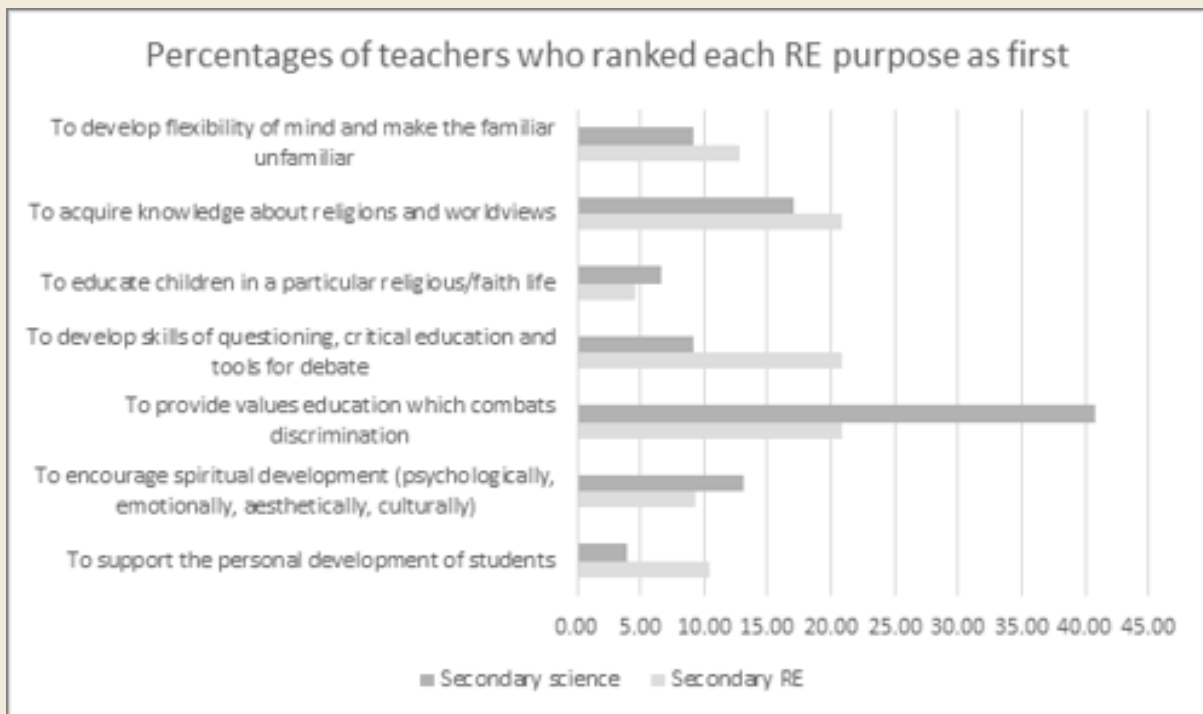
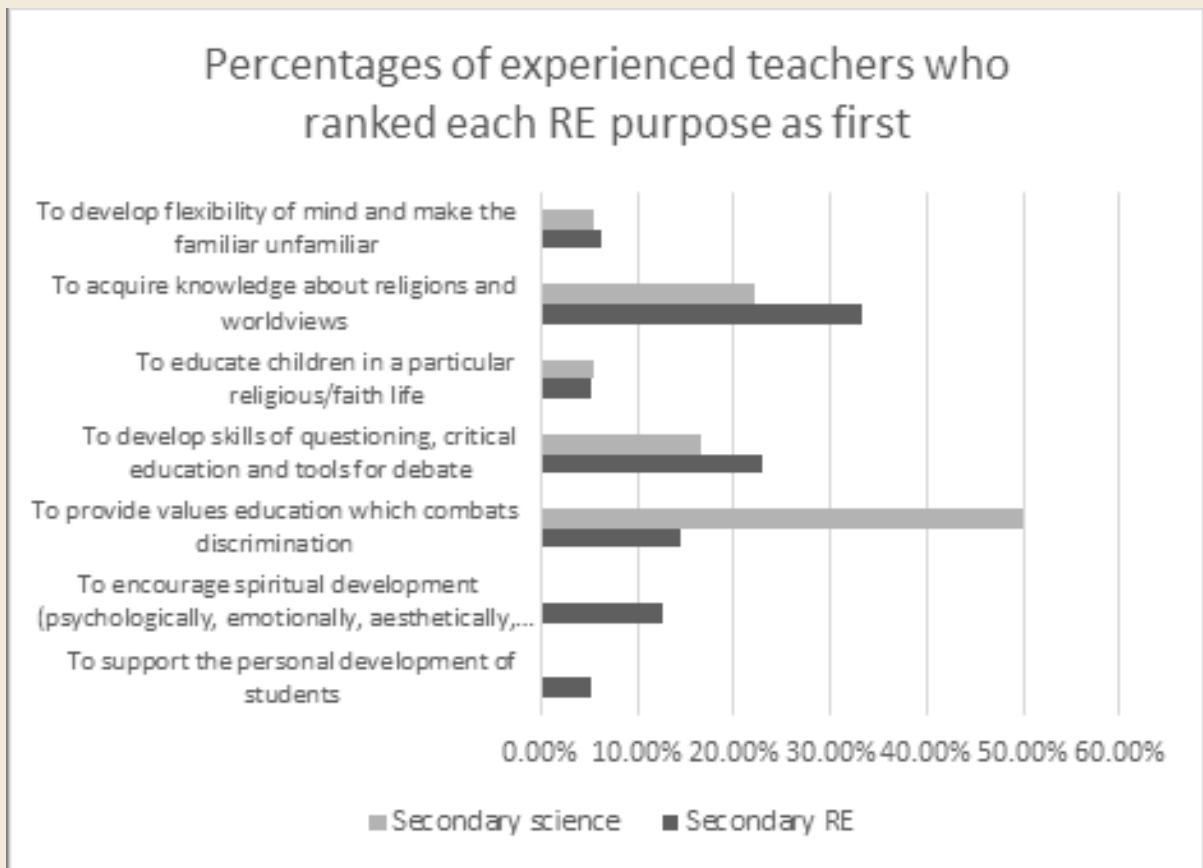


Figure 1: Percentage of early career teachers who ranked each purpose of RE first

Figure 2: Percentage of experienced teachers who ranked each purpose of RE first



- These findings are based on an online survey with experienced teachers of science (n=18) and RE (n=96)
- For the limited sample of more experienced teachers, the differences are more stark.
- Values education proves more important for science teachers than RE teachers as a primary purpose of RE (50% > 15%)
- More RE teachers than science teachers prioritise **'to acquire knowledge about religions and worldviews'** (33% > 22%)
- The data has limitations as only 18 experienced secondary science teachers completed the survey, compared with 96 experienced RE teachers.
- Discrepancies in understanding the purpose of RE could, however, be seen to continue as teachers become more experienced, rather than to dissipate as teachers spend more time in schools.

Survey Tool

These are the main four questions used in our online survey to collect data on teachers' perspectives on the purpose of RE. You may wish to use our list to collect data of your own in your PGCE group, department or MAT. Or you may wish to adapt our approach to suit your own research purposes.

We would like you to choose the top three purposes of RE in schools that are most important to you from the list below. Write a number from 1 (most important) to 3 (least important) to rank only the three most important purposes in your opinion.

- To support the personal development of students
- To encourage spiritual development (psychologically, emotionally, aesthetically, culturally)
- To provide values education which combats discrimination
- To develop skills of questioning, critical education and tools for debate
- To educate children in a particular religious/faith life
- To acquire knowledge about religions and worldviews
- To develop flexibility of mind and make the familiar unfamiliar

Ranking can have its own limitations as a survey tool. You might prefer a more qualitative approach to collecting data:

There can be a range of views among educators on how to define the purpose of a subject.

- We would like you to summarise what you think is the purpose of RE in schools.
- Why do you think it is important that RE is given time on the school curriculum?

TASK 2



Produce a statement of purpose for RE that suits your department

- Take turns to explain to one another what you consider to be the purpose of RE on the school curriculum. (One should take notes while the other speaks)
- Compare what you have said so far. Do you come at the subject from different perspectives, or are you quite agreed?
- If you have different perspectives on the purpose of the subject, why might that be? Is there room for more than one purpose within the way the subject is taught in your school? Would pupils be aware of each purpose you wish to prioritise?
- If you have similar perspectives on the purpose of the subject, look at Research Insight II. Are there any other purposes of the subject that you would like to bring more to the fore?
- Work together to create a purpose statement for RE in your school. It should be no longer than 50 words. Which purpose will you prioritise? Why? Take a look at Research Insight I, II and III for some inspiration.
- Now, for the purpose statements you have created, talk about where such a purpose comes through in the current schemes of work in your department. Are there schemes of work where the purpose is not clear? Are there purposes that you would like to focus more on across your planning? How might you achieve that?

RESEARCH SUMMARY

17 focus groups were held with 75 student teachers from 6 different universities. A semi-structured online survey, with over 70 items, was shared with ITE providers across England between late March 2021 and early June 2021. It was also disseminated to practising teachers through alumnae networks and social media. The survey was aimed at early career teachers of science and RE, defined as either in pre-service training or in their first two years post-qualification. 949 teachers accessed the survey. 486 early career teachers completed over 50% the survey (324 primary; 76 secondary science; 86 secondary RE).

An extract from Woolley, M.C., Bowie, R. et al. (in review 2022) Science and RE teachers' perspectives on the purpose of RE on the secondary school curriculum in England

In describing the purpose of RE teaching, the science teachers did not mention teaching about religions. This is in stark contrast with the findings for student RE teachers presented above. The student science teachers described RE as a subject for teaching values, sharing debates and opinions; a place for discussion of controversial or sensitive issues. Despite the small numbers of science teachers in the focus groups, teaching for tolerance was mentioned far more by science teachers than RE teachers as a purpose of RE. This student science teacher believed it was important for RE to focus on such fundamental values:

I think it's really important for teaching those kind of like key fundamental values of like tolerance and being able to listen to others and being able to make appropriate debate, kind of thing, about different concepts and different ideas.

Several of the student science teachers did not appear to have a precise language or knowledge to describe what happens in the RE classroom, perhaps confusing the purpose of the subject with Citizenship or showing the knowledge of 'Fundamental British Values' they may have received in teacher training:

Well I think that for me, for RE it's maybe instilling... the British values about respecting culture ... upholding of the law and stuff like that. For me, I suppose RE is teaching aspects of that... about morality and stuff.

There were several examples of science teachers admitting they were not sure what happened in RE lessons or referring back to their experience of RE when they were at school:

And when I think back to when I was at school and I had RS lessons, it was more about what are people's views about abortion for example. Or animal testing or a load of those sorts of things.

I'm not particularly knowledgeable myself of religion apart from the RE education that I had at school...at my school that I went to, the kind of RE was taught in a very debated manner so we did a lot of kind of for and against of different ideas and stuff like that.

One science student teacher was able to draw an effective contrast between the two subjects, having observed an RE lesson in school, knowing he was going to take part in the focus group:

But it mainly it's about providing knowledge... And the one lesson that I kind of stepped into for RE, it's very much more of a "What do you think?" as the core component of gaining that knowledge.

This quotation is revealing for several reasons. First, in terms of the way knowledge is compared between the two subjects. There is an underestimation here of the substantive knowledge that can be included in religious education lessons (Ofsted, 2021; Kueh, 2017) and the validity of knowledge construction within RE. Although many religions may view values as having eternal significance, the responses from science teachers do not seem to suggest this definition of values education. Rather, values in these focus groups were associated with 'Fundamental British Values' such as tolerance and respect for others' opinions. It is possible that the limited conception of the other subject prevented the student teachers seeing where powerful connections might have been made between science and RE. Several of the science teachers were explicit that their subject was about facts and laws, but one contrasted this with RE which, to him, was about 'creatively making an argument'.

REFERENCES

Kueh, R. (2017) Religious Education and the 'knowledge problem' in Chater, M. and Castelli, M. (eds) *We Need to Talk about Religious Education* London: JessicaKingsleyPublishers

Ofsted, 2021 Ofsted Research review series: religious education, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/research-review-series-religious-education/research-review-series-religious-education#fn:76> Published 12 May 2021, London: Crown (Accessed 14 March 2022)

TASK 3



Questioning, critical education and tools for debate

1. The research summary shows a particular focus on developing 'skills of questioning, critical education and tools for debate' as a purpose of RE for teachers of RE. However, this research suggests this perspective of RE is unlikely to be shared by the science department.
2. What evidence could you bring together from your department schemes of work to demonstrate that RE is about questioning, criticality and debate?
3. Explore the work of the OARS research team for more ideas on developing interdisciplinary collaboration related to argumentation. **The Oxford 'Argumentation in Religion and Science' research project (OARS)**¹ aimed to understand how the teaching and learning of argumentation can be supported in science and religious education. The project website includes both **academic papers**² related to the project and **example activities**³ for the classroom.
 - 1 - <https://oarseducation.com>
 - 2 - <https://oarseducation.com/publications/>
 - 3 - <https://oarseducation.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Trial-Activity-A-Zoo-at-Blenheim-Palace.pdf>

TASK 4



Towards a shared understanding of RE throughout the school

Constructive dialogue and pupils' experience of the curriculum

- If the RE department and the science department in your school had a shared understanding of the purpose of RE, how might that change your relationship with the science department?
- Would there be more opportunity for constructive dialogue?
- How might that improve your pupils' experience of the curriculum?
- What are the dangers of other teaching staff in your school not understanding the purpose of RE?
- Have a look at Biesta et al. (2018) for an argument that religious literacy should be the responsibility of teachers across the curriculum, not just RE teachers. What plans would you need to put in place to work towards this goal?

Religious Literacy : Biesta, G., Aldridge, D., Hannam, P. and Whittle, S. (2018) Religious Literacy: A Way Forward for Religious Education? Culham St Gabriel's Trust.

<https://www.reonline.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Religious-Literacy-Biesta-Aldridge-Hannam-Whittle-June-2019.pdf>

In this report the authors make a case for religious literacy being a whole-school responsibility. Our research suggests many science teachers tend to think of RE in terms of values and tolerance, rather than knowledge of religions. This perspective would stand in the way of teachers of subjects outside RE promoting religious literacy. It is just one reason why RE teachers need to be explicit about the purpose and content of their subject across the school.

TASK 5



Guided conversation: purpose of RE beyond department

Who do you need to share that statement with in your school? What is be the best way of sharing it? Consider corridor displays, open evenings, conversations with senior leaders, presentations at INSET days. Find time for conversation with teachers of other subjects. What are their perspectives on the purpose of RE as a school subject? How does that perspective differ from yours or that of your department? How might research on argumentation or religious literacy influence how you plan to collaborate in the future?

1. Take the item from our online survey and share it with some colleagues from other departments. Do they share your view on the purpose of RE?
2. Ask a colleague or two to explain the purpose of their own subject on the curriculum and then compare with their views on the purpose of RE.
3. Are colleagues aware of changes to RE specifications in recent years, for example more focus on knowledge of religions and ways of knowing?
4. What, from your colleague's perspective, are the possible links that might be made between RE and their own subject?
5. Talk to your colleague about how argumentation works in RE, how you teach it and how progress is charted across year groups. How does this compare with their experience of teaching argumentation? It could be useful to share resources from the OARS project.

READ MORE

Renewed interest in curriculum in English schooling over the past decade has emanated from a particular focus on the place and role of knowledge in the classroom. Significant changes in policy and examination specifications have led to changes in religious education (RE).

However, little is known about teachers' perspectives on the purpose of RE. We asked teachers of science and RE what they understood as the purpose of RE on the school curriculum. Data from 10 focus groups and a survey with 276 secondary teachers demonstrated that many secondary teachers of science have a different understanding to RE teachers of the purpose of RE on the school curriculum.

Findings also show a lack of consensus from RE teachers on the purpose of RE, suggesting the impact of the knowledge turn in RE is not as strong as the Ofsted Research Review implies. Findings are significant as little is known about how knowledge works across disciplinary boundaries in schools.

If pupils are to come to a full understanding of how knowledge works, teachers need to have some understanding of how knowledge is being constructed and utilised in other curriculum subjects. Knowledge of the intended purpose of RE is important for respectful co-existence of subjects on the curriculum and essential when RE is declining as a subject in secondary schools.

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CHRISTIAN EDUCATION RESEARCH**
Canterbury Christ Church University
nicer@canterbury.ac.uk
www.nicer.org.uk

