

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF RE ON THE SCHOOL CURRICULUM?



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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
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BIG QUESTIONS
in CLASSROOMS

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF RE ON THE SCHOOL CURRICULUM?

Science Religion Encounters Toolkit 2

INTRODUCTION

Secondary teachers of RE have a variety of different views on the purposes of RE. Purpose matters because it affects all the classroom and curriculum decisions. Being able to articulate purpose matters because a teacher is required to be able to explain the intentions of their subject to different audiences. Having a joint department view matters for a coherent curriculum experience.

We conducted focus groups with 7 groups of student RE teachers from 6 different universities. An online survey was accessed by 949 teachers and student teachers. Literature, methods and findings are shared here to support those interested in better articulating their thoughts on the purpose of RE.

TASK 1



What do student RE teachers say when asked about the purpose of RE? (Focus group findings)

Summary of Findings

- Broad range of responses
- No obvious consensus
- A significant proportion put the emphasis on knowledge of religions
- The term 'religious literacy' was often used
- Some chose to delineate knowledge of religions from knowledge of people and belief

Supporting Quotes

In the timeframe that we have every week...I want to tell the children about religion...because I feel very passionately about pupils and children understanding religion in that hour.
(student RE teacher)

Religious literacy I think primarily for me would be the important thing... I echo the thoughts about diversity and inclusion and it's raising that awareness about other faiths and no faiths.
(student RE teacher)

I feel like being a Religious Studies teacher doesn't necessarily mean you're teaching about religion, and whilst it's a big part of it I feel like more often than not you're teaching about people and lived experience and belief and faith.
(student RE teacher)

Summary of Findings

- A small number focused on pupils' spiritual development through the subject of RE
- For some a focus on intellectual enquiry and critical debate came to the fore

Supporting Quotes

I think the purpose of RE is definitely for the students' spiritual development as well as the academic side...to sort of understand their own views and beliefs and why they do things and help them to grow spiritually.
(Student RE teacher)

I think that fundamentally it's religious education so half of it is learning about religions. But I think, for me, more important is developing the self and teaching pupils how to critically engage with their own beliefs and material... giving them the tools for proper intellectual enquiry...

So critical thinking, sort of looking at premises, looking at evidence, looking at how a logical argument is formed and how the premises interlink. What is sufficient evidence. What isn't.

(Student RE teacher)

Online survey results

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

	Secondary RE (n=86)
To support the personal development of students	10.47%
To encourage spiritual development (psychologically, emotionally, aesthetically, culturally)	9.30%
To provide values education which combats discrimination	20.93%
To develop skills of questioning, critical education and tools for debate	20.93%
To educate children in a particular religious/faith life	4.65%
To acquire knowledge about religions and worldviews	20.93%
To develop flexibility of mind and make the familiar unfamiliar	12.79%

TASK 2



Guided conversation for teachers, student teachers, RE departments

- Take turns to explain to one another what you consider to be the purpose of RE on the school curriculum. You might use our research findings as stimulus material for this conversation.
- Compare what you've 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 our online survey findings. 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. Aim for around 50 words. Which purpose will you prioritise? Why?
- 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 isn't clear? Are there purposes that you would like to focus more on across your planning? How might you achieve that?
- Does the purpose of RE change across the school as pupils move from KS3 to GCSE and A-level (or non-examined RE courses?) If so, how might you ensure that your KS3 curriculum retains a breadth of purpose?

TASK 3



Finding out about pupils' perspectives on the purpose of RE

What do your pupils consider the purpose of RE?

Could you ask a few of them, or introduce a department survey as a more structured piece of research?

How might your pupils' understanding of the purpose of RE affect their attitude towards the subject and their decisions about taking RE for GCSE or A level?

Your pupils may have the option to select, or drop, RE at GCSE and A level. Having a better understanding of what the subject sets out to achieve may help increase uptake at these levels.

You could adapt our survey item or focus group protocol to ask a larger group of your students to report their perspectives on the purpose of RE.

TASK 4



Where is purpose made explicit in the unit of work?

- Think about why this scheme of work is taught and how it fits with the overarching curriculum intentions and purpose of the subject for the department.
- Think about when the purpose of the unit is shared with pupils. Should it be straight from the start, is it something that emerges, or something you might want to reinforce at the end of the unit? 'What have we learnt, why have we learnt it?'
- How will you know whether all pupils understand the purpose of learning the particular unit of work? Is it something that could be written down or added into an end of unit assessment?

TASK 5

Consistency in school documentation

- Work out your agreed statement of purpose for RE (see task 1)
- Have a look at internal documents, for example, your department handbook, assessment sheets in pupils' books, GCSE and A level options booklets. Are they consistent in their message about the purpose of the subject? Should they be consistent?
- What is on the school website about the purpose of RE in the school?
- What about school reports? Would that be a good place for messages to get to parents about the purpose of the subject?
- Does your school or department use social media to share the work of the department? Would that be the right place for such a statement to be shared?

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).

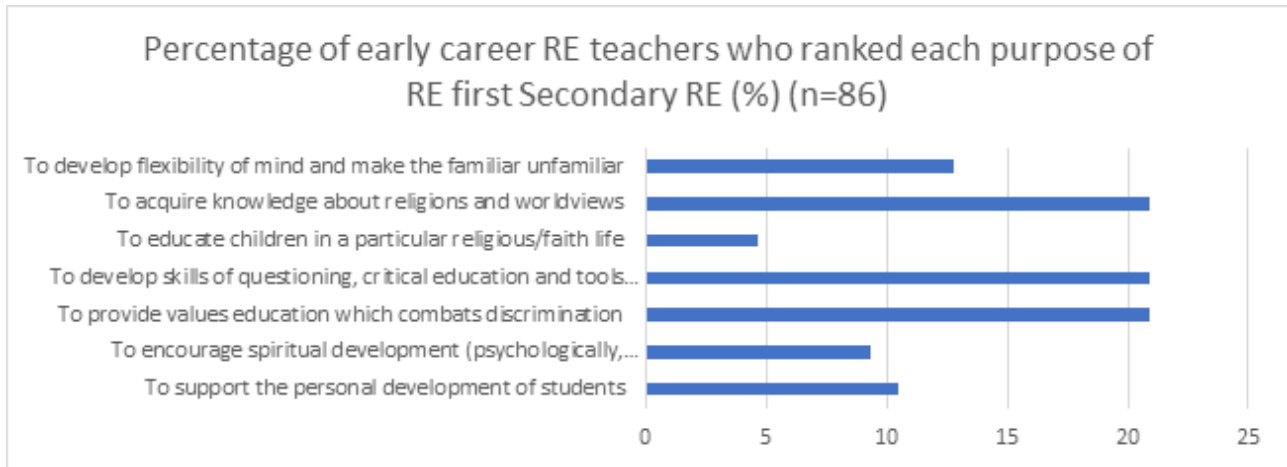
The tables and figures below reveal the relative importance of each defined purpose of RE for the secondary RE teachers. We can reach similar conclusions looking at the percentage of respondents who ranked each purpose first or looking at the average points gained by each purpose after transforming the first three ranks from each teacher into a points system.

Exploring first the prioritisation results shown in Table 1 and Figure 1, the majority of early career RE teachers (63%) prioritise three different purposes for the subject: values education, critical thinking and knowledge of religions and worldviews. The remaining RE teachers prioritised a second set of three purposes: personal development, spiritual development and flexibility of mind. The education of children in a particular faith/religion is given the least importance among this cohort, but those that prioritise it may work in faith schools.

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

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To acquire knowledge about religions and worldviews	20.93
To develop flexibility of mind and make the familiar unfamiliar	12.79

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

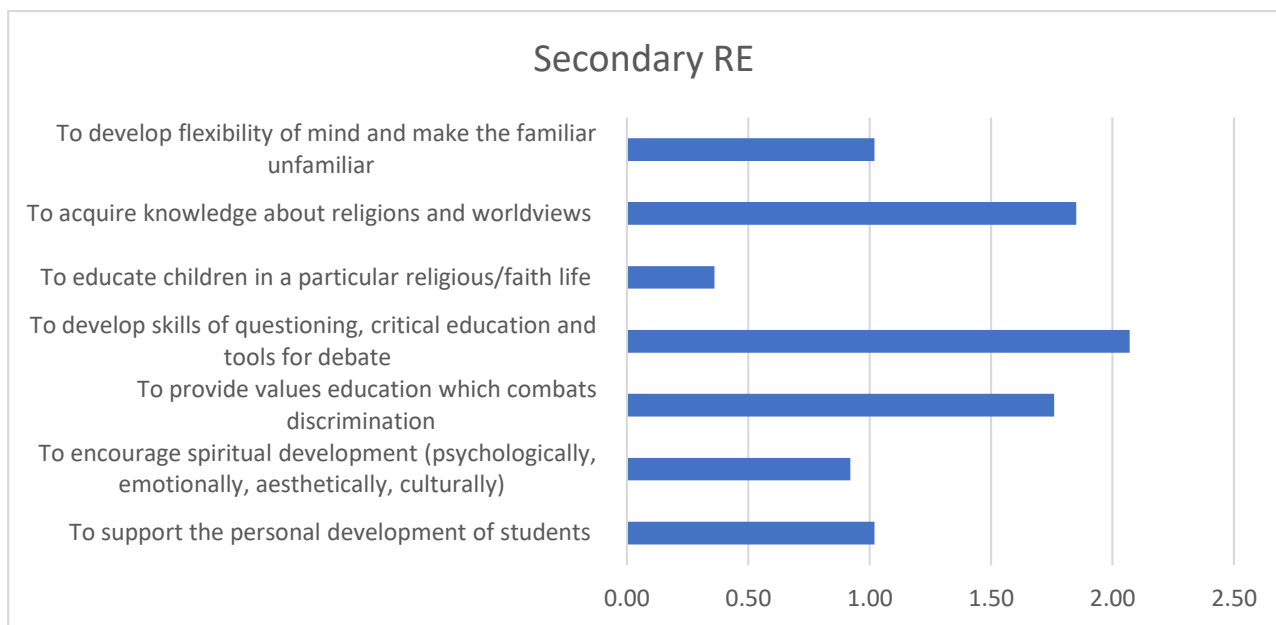


As RE is a complex subject, covering several disciplines, considering only the first-ranking purpose could give misleading results. The top three purposes given by the two sets of subject teachers were therefore also ranked. The results (set out in Table 2 and Figure 2) are, however, reassuringly similar to the first set of results. With this calculation, 'to develop skills of questioning, critical education and tools for debate' (2.07) draws ahead of 'knowledge about religions and worldviews' (1.85) and provision of 'values education which combats discrimination' (1.76) as a primary purpose of religious education.

Table 2: Early career teachers' views on purpose of RE with top three purposes ranked by points system (5 for first, 3 for second, 1 for third)

	Secondary RE (n= 86)
To support the personal development of students	1.02
To encourage spiritual development (psychologically, emotionally, aesthetically, culturally)	0.92
To provide values education which combats discrimination	1.76
To develop skills of questioning, critical education and tools for debate	2.07
To educate children in a particular religious/faith life	0.36
To acquire knowledge about religions and worldviews	1.85
To develop flexibility of mind and make the familiar unfamiliar	1.02

Figure 2: Early career teachers' views on purpose of RE with top three purposes ranked by points system (5 for first, 3 for second, 1 for third)



Data for more experienced teachers shows a few differences. Table 3 shows that more experienced teachers of religious education are more likely to prioritise acquiring 'knowledge about religion and worldviews' when asked to rank a single highest purpose. However, Table 4 shows, similarly to Table 2, that for more experienced teachers of religious education, taking the top three ranks brings 'to develop skills of questioning, critical education and tools for debate' out on top (2.38), with acquiring 'knowledge about religion and worldviews' in close second place (2.31). For experienced teachers of religious education, these two purposes are ranked far more often than any other purpose for the subject.

Table 3: Percentage of experienced teachers who ranked each purpose of RE first

	Secondary RE (%) (n=96)
To support the personal development of students	5.21
To encourage spiritual development (psychologically, emotionally, aesthetically, culturally)	12.50
To provide values education which combats discrimination	14.58
To develop skills of questioning, critical education and tools for debate	22.92
To educate children in a particular religious/faith life	5.21
To acquire knowledge about religions and worldviews	33.33
To develop flexibility of mind and make the familiar unfamiliar	6.25

Figure 3: Percentage of experienced teachers who ranked each purpose of RE first

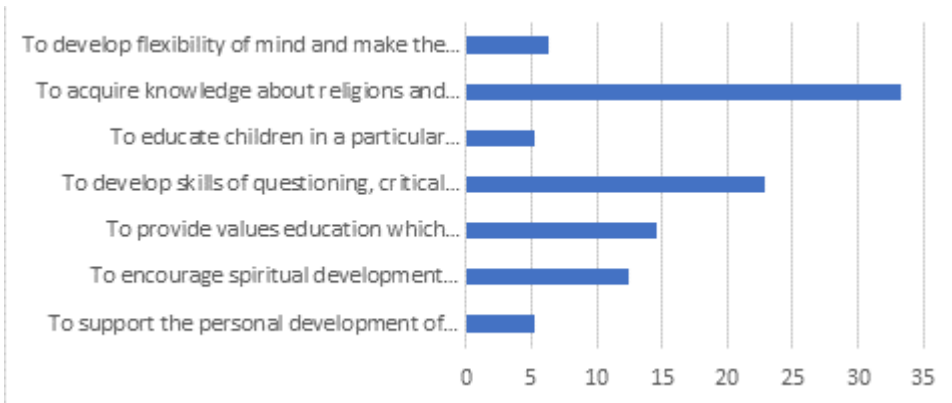
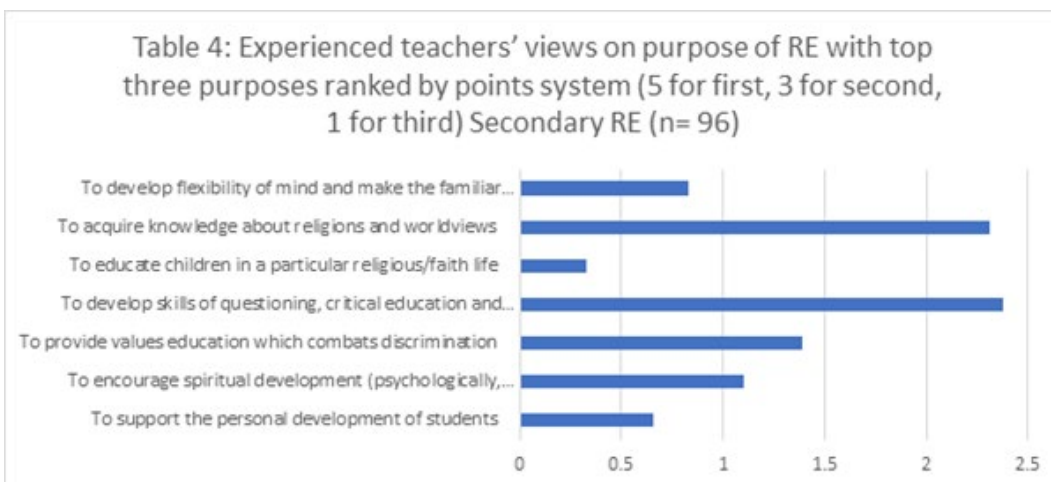


Table 4: Experienced teachers' views on purpose of RE with top three purposes ranked by points system (5 for first, 3 for second, 1 for third)

	Secondary RE (n= 96)
To support the personal development of students	0.66
To encourage spiritual development (psychologically, emotionally, aesthetically, culturally)	1.10
To provide values education which combats discrimination	1.39
To develop skills of questioning, critical education and tools for debate	2.38
To educate children in a particular religious/faith life	0.33
To acquire knowledge about religions and worldviews	2.31
To develop flexibility of mind and make the familiar unfamiliar	0.83

Figure 4: Experienced teachers' views on purpose of RE with top three purposes ranked by points system (5 for first, 3 for second, 1 for third)



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?

FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL: SECONDARY

Focus group lead: Thank you for taking the time to be with us today. We are exploring beginning teachers' attitudes to the teaching of science and religion and we would like to hear your views about that.

Key Question 1: What experience have you had to date of Religious Education?

Prompts: How many weeks of placement; Any prior experience as TA, cover supervisor, teaching abroad etc? What sort of schools? Church schools or otherwise...?

Key Question 2: What would you say is the purpose of Religious Education in your classroom? And from what you know about science education, what would you say is the purpose of science education?

Do you think the two disciplines have anything in common? Subject knowledge? What about processes? How knowledge is formed?

FURTHER READING ON THE PURPOSE OF RE

The purpose of RE has long been contested. It is a subject tasked with multiple expectations (Parker and Freathy, 2011), serving many extrinsic purposes (Conroy et al., 2013). It is clear, however, that debates over the purpose of RE in England have changed and evolved over time from a starting point of Christian confessionalism. From the 1970s there was a steady move towards a multi-faith phenomenological approach to the subject (Parker and Freathy, 2011; Engebretson, 2004).

Various pedagogical approaches to RE over the last thirty years reveal a subject underpinned by a complex set of purposes. Grimmit introduced a new pedagogical approach in the 1970s focused on 'learning about and learning from religion' (Grimmit, 1987), restated in 2004 in the *Non-Statutory National Framework for RE*. A sense of moral or personal improvement underpinned this pedagogical approach. Wright (2007) among others, offered an approach to RE which used the idea of 'religious literacy' as part of his argument for 'critical religious education.' He argued for a rigorous academic grounding for the subject but proposed 'the search for ultimate truth' as the key driver, or purpose, behind this.

There are competing definitions of religious literacy, but for Wright, a combination of knowledge about beliefs, practices and traditions, alongside an awareness of diversity within traditions and a critical awareness, mean that 'a religiously literate person is able to engage in sophisticated conversations about religion and with religious believers' (cited in Biesta et al., 2019, p.26).

RE has frequently been expressed as having a moral aim, particularly in government documentation on the purpose of the subject. The Second World War gave RE a purpose as a source for resistance against the threat of fascism and communism, as a carrier of national values (Copley, 1997). The connection with national values returned most explicitly in the government Home Office funded 2009-2011 *REsilience*, project which was devised to use RE as a vehicle to minimise violent extremism, promoting community cohesion and respect for difference and addressing controversial issues (Miller, 2013).

The importance of academic excellence at the centre of RE teaching was highlighted (Clarke and Woodhead, 2018) alongside the need for 'religious literacy' as an appropriate ambition 'for all education, rather than being held as the main task for religious education' (Biesta et al., 2019, p.30).

A national plan for RE was launched in 2018 with 11 recommendations including a national entitlement for all pupils in publicly funded schools and use of the term 'religion and worldviews' as a possible way of reframing the content of the subject. This emphasis on reform in the subject, alongside changes to external examination specifications, resulted in shifts in the way the purpose of RE is portrayed and articulated in policy documents. Less, however, is known about how far such shifts in policy intentions have affected practice in the classroom.

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