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Exploring religious education teachers' perspectives on character development and moral virtues, in state-funded, non-faith schools in England

Jason Metcalfe ^a, K. Kristjánsson^b and A. Peterson^b

^aSchool of Education, University of Birmingham, Birmingham, UK; ^bJubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, School of Education, University of Birmingham, Birmingham, UK

ABSTRACT

This article details the findings of a qualitative interview study with 30 Religious Education [RE] teachers, working in state-funded, non-faith secondary schools in England. Salient findings included participants' almost unanimous agreement about the role of RE in developing character, virtue literacy, and moral, intellectual and performance virtues. Whilst there was general agreement that RE contributes to educating moral virtues, participants differed concerning whether moral virtues were a) both a subject aim and a taught element, b) either of these respective positions, or c) an implicit by-product of RE lessons. There was no indication of this disagreement being due to participants' personal characteristics, suggesting that further guidance is necessary to clarify the role of RE vis-à-vis moral development. These findings mark a distinctive contribution to the literature on the role of RE, at a time when Ofsted is considering character education amongst the requirements of schools that are judged as good or outstanding.

PLAIN LANGUAGE SUMMARY

This article provides a better understanding of how RE teachers think their subject contributes to pupils' character development, in non-faith, state-funded schools in England. The article does this through initially establishing that there has been a close historical connection between the teaching of religions and the teaching of morality in the English education system. This ongoing connection provides the groundwork for a study, consisting of an interview schedule, with 30 RE teachers who work in non-faith, state-funded secondary schools in England. The analysis revealed that almost all the RE teachers thought RE could contribute to pupils' character development and virtue literacy, in addition to moral, intellectual and performance virtues. When asked specifically whether RE could contribute to the development of pupils' moral virtues, the teachers mostly agreed but were divided as to how it did so. These findings are interesting because they provide

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CONTACT Jason Metcalfe  JMM469@student.bham.ac.uk  School of Education, University of Birmingham, Birmingham, UK

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a richer insight into how RE teachers, who work in non-faith, state-funded secondary schools, perceive their role as character educators. The findings are most relevant to teachers and policymakers, interested into how RE can contribute to pupils' character development, at a time when Ofsted has an increased focus on character education in schools. The authors suggest that further non-statutory guidance would be helpful to clarify the role of RE to pupils' character and moral development.

Introduction

In England, Religious Education [RE] provision is diminishing across all school types (REC 2018), despite retaining a multitude of subject expectations (Teece 2011). This has led to a variety of competing scholarly arguments about how RE can safeguard its place on the curriculum (Chater and Castelli 2018), including debates about whether a paradigm shift towards a religion-and-worldviews curriculum is necessary (Contrast Cooling 2020; Barnes 2021).

Bound up with these scholarly arguments and debates is the subject expectation that RE can, and might, play a role in promoting pupils' moral development (see Barnes 2014, 2021; Stern 2018; Metcalfe and Moulin-Stožek 2020). Pupils' moral development is considered both part of the wider, interlinked and often overlapping, elements of pupils' Spiritual, Moral, Cultural and Social [SMSC] development (Ofsted 2004) and part of pupils' character development, respectively (Peterson and Seligman 2004; JCCV 2017).

There are a variety of character education frameworks, developed from different definitions of 'character' (Contrast Kristjánsson 2015 with Jerome and Kisby 2019). The Ancient Greek philosophers originally defined character as an individual's composition of virtues and vices (Aristotle 1999); this contained their idea of character's moral worth (Kristjánsson 2015). The term 'virtue' has more recently been substituted with similar terms such as 'character strength', 'disposition', 'trait' or even just 'value' in the academic literature (Thompson and Metcalfe 2020). These terms, however, import different connotations; hence this article will use the term 'virtue' to mark a consistently and positively valued character trait.

In the context of educational research within non-faith, state-funded schools in England, the link between RE and pupils' moral development, as well as character education, has received little attention. The following background section establishes that, in this context, the teaching of religions has historically been closely and continually intertwined with pupils' moral development, despite both domains transforming in aims and expectations between the 19th century and present-day.

Only by establishing the close and consistent intertwining of these educational fields can we justify the aim of this article. Its specific aim is to examine RE teachers' perspectives in non-faith, state-funded schools, about whether moral character virtues are to be considered an overall aim, or a specific taught element of RE. The background section informs the chosen materials and methods, which consecutively inform the findings, discussion and conclusion, provided in their respective sections. Our

overarching aim is to contribute to the discourse on the role of RE as a subject that has, for a long-while, been considered as suffering from an existential crisis.

Background

Historically, religious groups have been closely connected with educational matters in England (Bastide 1987). In the early 19th century, the duty of education fell largely on the charitable efforts of religious groups (Rich 1970, 25). This is best demonstrated by the *Treasury Minute of 1833*, which detailed that state grants for the construction of schools could only be issued to The National Society for Promoting the Education of the Poor in the Principles of the Established Church [NS] or the British and Foreign School Society [BFSS] (reprinted in Arnold 1910).

The NS was managed by the Church of England, wherein the teaching of religion was encompassed through catechism, Bible and prayer book reading (Gates 2005), whilst the BFSS was managed by nonconformist Christian groups (Bastide 2000), who preferred a non-denominational approach to the teaching of religion through the teaching of Scripture and general Christian principles (Gates 2005). From 1846 onwards, state grants were extended to other nonconformist groups, including Baptist, Congregationalist, Wesleyan Methodist and Roman Catholics (Gates 2005).

It was widely believed in the 19th Century that education should have a moral and religious basis (Sutherland 1973) and, moreover, that a modicum of religious instruction could positively affect a person's character and conduct (Murphy 1971). These beliefs were commonly held by the various Christian groups. For instance, the Anglican Churches regarded education as a form of enhancing the moral tone of society; nonconformist Christians viewed their schools as means to strengthen the moral fibre of the nation, whereas Roman Catholics considered religious and moral training as indistinguishable (Sacks 1961).

The *Elementary Education Act 1870* introduced school boards, eligible for state grants for elementary schools without the management of religious groups. This Act marked the state taking a partial responsibility for elementary education, transitioning into a complete responsibility by the following decade (HMSO 1880; Dent 1970). The *Elementary Education Act 1870* allowed the teaching of religions, officially referred to as Religious Instruction [RI], to be included or excluded at the discretion of the school boards – it was not obligatory (Contra Lundie 2017). The *Elementary Education Act 1870* was largely restrictive in how RI should be taught in schools, implicitly presuming that many school boards would opt to incorporate the subject (HMSO 1870). For instance, if school boards chose to include RI, then they had to include a parental right to withdraw pupils from the subject, and moreover, 'no religious catechism or religious formulary which is distinctive of any particular denomination . . . [could] be taught in the school' (HMSO 1870, §14.2).

Despite the freedom of school boards to exclude RI, only a minority chose to do so. A parliamentary return detailed that 49 school boards, eleven in England and 38 in Wales, of 1,851 school boards, opted to exclude RI and religious observances (Parliamentary Papers 1879). Over the course of a decade, this would change to 57 school boards, seven in England and 50 in Wales, of 2,225 school boards, which chose to completely exclude RI or religious observances (HMSO 1888).

Cruickshank noted that many school boards adopted the wording of the London School Board [LSB] syllabus (1963), specifically that ‘in the schools provided by the Board the Bible shall be read, and there shall be given such explanations, and such instruction therefrom, in the principles of morality and religion, as are suited to the capacities of the children’ (Reprinted in Parliamentary Papers 1879, 82). This is clearly evidenced in the previously mentioned parliamentary return, which documented 156 school boards utilising either precisely or comparable phrasing within their byelaws, with a further nine school boards simply stating they had adopted the same regulations as the LSB (Parliamentary Papers 1879).

In 1888, 23 Commissioners sought to inquire into the workings of the elementary education in England and Wales. They were, however, divided upon their recommendations, leading to the production of majority and minority reports (HMSO 1888). Neither the majority nor minority reports excluded the potential contribution of RI to pupils’ moral development. In the majority report, backed by 15 of the commissioners, moral and religious training were presented as indistinguishable, with the ‘School Boards bear[ing] unmistakable testimony to the determination of the people that their children’s education should be Religious and Moral’ (HMSO 1888, 113).

The majority report also confirmed that many school boards continued to adhere to the example of the LSB (HMSO 1888, 113) and that ‘any separation of the teacher from the religious teaching of the school would be injurious to the moral and secular training of the scholars’ (HMSO 1888, 213). The minority reports, produced by eight commissioners, regarded moral training as linked to RI to a great extent, but suggested that moral training was not solely dependent on RI and could also occur through secular subjects (HMSO 1888).

The *Education Act 1902* introduced state-funded secondary schools in England and the abolition of school boards, whose elementary schools were absorbed into the Local Education Authorities [LEAs] (HMSO 1902). Whilst RI remained non-compulsory, the LEAs generally included the subject, making brief syllabuses in the early 20th Century (Musgrave 1978). Despite these educational changes, the close link between RI and the teaching of morality appeared unaffected. Some 327 LEAs provided responses to a parliamentary return in 1906, which asked [amongst other questions] for the new LEAs to detail their regulations, syllabus or resolutions for RI in their council schools (Parliamentary Papers 1906a, 1906b). Whilst 30 LEAs simply responded that they yet had no council schools, 176 of the remaining 297 LEAs explicitly linked RI to pupils’ development of: morality (n = 124), virtues (n = 97) or character formation (n = 19) (Parliamentary Papers 1906a, 1906b).

Whilst a link between RI and the teaching of morality may seem tentative based on only two thirds of the LEAs explicitly connecting these two educational fields in some manner, we should consider two matters. Firstly, there was no legal obligation for LEAs to include regulations, syllabuses, or resolutions on RI in their council schools, which is undoubtedly why many responses in the return are brief. Secondly, there is the possibility that the connection between the teaching of religion and morality was still widely accepted and required no explanation. Writing at the time, Sadler remarked about the ‘power of the religious lessons to inspire a high moral ideal and touch the springs of conduct’ (1908, xlvi).

The relationship between RI and the teaching of morality continued to be emphasised within non-statutory guidance (Board of Education 1926), wherein ideas of character development were implicitly emphasised through commending the West Riding of Yorkshire *Syllabus of Religious Instruction* and the *Cambridgeshire Syllabus of Religious Teaching for Schools*. The *Syllabus of Religious Instruction* advocates the religious and moral value of the Bible, before a careful discussion of the character of God and others within the Bible, arguing that ‘what may in itself be almost destitute of spiritual or moral significance may yet be indispensable for the structure as a whole’ (Education Department: County Council of the West Riding of Yorkshire 1922, 6).

Musgrave remarked that the Cambridgeshire syllabuses held moral implications through selected passages (1978) but overlooked the explicit link to moral development through reference to pupils’ character development. Whilst earlier editions emphasised Christian character (1924, 1926, 1929), the revised edition expanded onto individual character development (1939).

This was significant because, by the end of 1934, the Cambridgeshire syllabuses were implemented in 91 of the 315 LEAs (Council of Christian Education 1934) and had inspired a national movement to create similar syllabuses (Hull 1975). This resulted in 140 LEAs implementing over 40 similar syllabuses, which paid ‘regard to the principles of child nurture, mental and moral’ (Council of Christian Education 1934, 5). The impact of the syllabuses was evident in later non-statutory guidance, which would plainly link RI to both pupils’ moral development and character development in secondary schools (Board of Education 1938).

The *Education Act 1944* officially marked the introduction of Religious Education [RE] in legislation and the subject was now obligatory in all state-funded school settings, with the expectation that all LEAs must utilise an agreed syllabus. The approach to RE remained confessional, however, as shown through the retention of RI within the definition of RE in the Act (HMSO 1944).

Pupils’ moral development remained closely linked to RE. The 1943 white paper, *Educational Reconstruction*, was intended for subsequent release with the *Education Act 1944* but the latter was delayed due to the Second World War (Butler 1971). *Educational Reconstruction* details that ‘religious education should be given a more defined place in . . . schools, springing from the desire to revive the spiritual and personal values in our society and in our national tradition’ (Board of Education 1943, 9). Hand remarked that this wording suggested a link between RE and the teaching of moral virtue (2004). The inclusion of the term ‘spiritual’, whilst a political compromise, originated from the perceived need for a revived focus on moral development in England (Moulin-Stožek 2020).

From the late 1960s onwards, RE began transforming into a multi-faith study of world religions (Bastide 2000). One of the most widely influential works was *Schools Working Paper 36*, which was regarded as heralding the end of Christian confessionalism in state-maintained schools in England (Barnes 2002). Some authors have stressed that *Schools Working Paper 36* was also influential in disassociating or uncoupling pupils’ moral education from RE (Barnes 2014; Hand 2004).

Hand interpreted *Schools Working Paper 36* as explicitly rejecting RE as a vehicle for moral education, yet was unable to reconcile his interpretation with the ‘odd concession’ (Hand 2004, 155), that ‘the RE teacher has a special contribution to make to moral

education, showing the links between moral problems, and moral concepts, and religious belief' (Schools Council 1971, 70).

We suggest an alternative interpretation: namely, that the *Schools Working Paper 36* holds multi-faith RE as one, but not the sole, means to provide moral education. Our interpretation is supported by the statement that 'moral knowledge is autonomous: it is perfectly possible to have moral education without reference to religious sanctions or presuppositions' (Schools Council 1971, 70); yet it accounts for the remark that RE and moral education are said to 'complement' one another (Schools Council 1971, 69). Furthermore, RE is said to be regarded as a 'fount of virtue' (Schools Council 1971, 70) with the authors concluding comment that regardless 'whether in autonomous religious studies or in a course of integrated studies, the RE teacher has a special contribution to make to moral education' (Schools Council 1971, 70). This interpretation would seem to be supported by the many agreed RE syllabuses, which continued to assert how multi-faith RE could contribute towards moral education, between 1971 and 1988 (contra Hand 2004).

The *Education Reform Act 1988* formally marked the transition of RE into a multi-faith examination of the principal religions in Great Britain. The Act reaffirmed an earlier whole-school duty of providing moral and spiritual development, affixing these with cultural development (HMSO 1988). These three forms of development would be shortly conjoined with social development, forming the acronym SMSC development (HMSO 1994; DfE 1994).

Non-statutory guidance still emphasised that moral development was itself a hypernym, with elements including: knowledge of social codes and conventions of conduct, understanding of criteria for making responsible judgements on moral issues and the will to behave morally (SCAA 1995). Schools were also expected to uphold value systems which contained moral absolutes, citing examples alluding to honesty, commitment, respect, consideration of others, compassion, responsibility and self-discipline amongst others (SCAA 1995). Moral development would later be linked to agreed codes, agreed values and moral virtues (Ofsted 2004) and the Fundamental British Values [FBV] (DfE 2014).

The significance of RE *vis-à-vis* pupils' moral development has continued to be emphasised between 1988 and the present. Shortly after the *Education Reform Act 1988*, non-statutory guidance asserted there was a widespread expectation that RE would be a vehicle for pupils' moral development (Ofsted 1994), and that RE had an important, though not exclusive, role in promoting SMSC development (NCC 1993; DfE 1994; SCAA 1995). Whilst non-statutory guidance has continued stating that pupils' SMSC development can pervade all educational activities in schools (DfE 2014), the relevance of RE remains recognised (DCSF 2010; Ofsted 2019). Non-statutory guidance has stated RE can contribute towards pupils' moral virtues, which may be considered part of moral development, such as respect, empathy, justice and honesty, but also intellectual virtues of critical enquiry, independence, reflection and perspective (Compare SCAA 1994; QCA 2000, 2004; Ofsted 2010, 2013).

The contribution of RE to pupils' moral virtue formation can be considered both part of the wider educational drives for SMSC and for character education. The latter has undergone a recent revival in government guidance, being included in the *School Inspection Handbook* alongside SMSC development, as part of the personal development

remit and necessary for a state-funded school to receive a good or outstanding judgement (Ofsted 2019).

Previous research

Despite the historical educational literature demonstrating a connection between the teaching of religions and the teaching of morality and character virtues, in non-faith, state-funded schools in England, there has been little attention paid in educational research to consider whether this link is reflected in the present-day teaching of RE lessons in such settings.

Arthur et al. surveyed 314 RE teachers, working across different school types, finding that the majority agreed that RE contributes towards pupils' character development and that RE teachers should model good character to pupils (2019). In the same project, an interview study of 30 RE teachers, working across different school types, unanimously agreed that RE contributed to character development, narrating examples of character virtues in passing from all categories of the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues [JCCV] *Framework for Character Education in Schools*, with moral virtues being most cited, followed by the intellectual, performance, civic categories, and wisdom (Metcalf and Moulin-Stožek 2020). Moreover, a theme was identified according to which RE could contribute towards virtue literacy.

The concept of virtue literacy was refined in the *Framework for Character Education* (2017). It consists of three inter-related components. The first component is virtue perception, which is an awareness of situations which involve or require virtues (JCCV 2017). The second component is virtue knowledge and understanding, which is where we understand what is meant by a virtue and recognise its importance, both for us as individuals and as part of the flourishing life (JCCV 2017). The third component is virtue reasoning, which is comprehending when virtues collide or conflict in a situation and where reasoning and judgement are required before action (JCCV 2017). Virtue literacy is the component of overall virtue which has been typically been the object of character education interventions within school settings (Arthur et al. 2014), simply because virtuous behaviour is more difficult to impact upon and evaluate and requires longitudinal studies using objective performance measures (Wright, Warren, and Snow 2021). Despite the widespread agreement that RE contributes to pupils' character development, participants in non-faith, state-funded schools in England, tended to speak in a broad or technical manner about how RE makes this contribution, with little concrete reference to specific virtues (Metcalf and Moulin-Stožek 2020).

To summarise, this background has established a perceived ongoing link between the teaching of religion and moral development in non-faith, state-funded schools in England. This section has, moreover, established that while the teaching of religions in these settings has transformed over time from a confessional to a multi-faith endeavour, so too has the teaching of morality transformed from being synonymous with Christian values to an endeavour focussed on pupils' character virtue development.

Materials and methods

The present study focusses on the perspectives of RE teachers, working in non-faith, state-funded secondary schools in this study, regarding moral character virtues. This focus was selected primarily as non-faith, state-funded schools represent the majority of secondary schools in the English education system, yet have received the least attention in terms of academic research surrounding RE in conjunction with moral education or character education, respectively. It is, moreover, a problematic area which has been highlighted as requiring further amelioration (Metcalf and Moulin-Stožek 2020). On this basis, the following exploratory research question underpinned the research reported in this paper: *what are the perspectives of RE teachers in non-faith, state-funded, schools on moral character virtues as an overall aim or a specific taught element of RE?*

To address the research question, a total of 30 semi-structured interviews were conducted with RE teachers, focussing on their perspectives about RE. For the interviews, only RE teachers working in non-faith, state-funded, schools in England were invited for this study, through email and social media, which were supported by RE stakeholder groups. This was determined through asking interested RE teachers to relay their school name and location, so that the researcher could then verify, between 2 October 2020, and 21 June 2021, on the *Get Information About Schools* and the *Find and Compare Schools in England* websites that their school was both state-funded and had no religious foundation or ethos recorded. The Headteacher's/Principal's permission was obtained for any, and all, of the stages in this study.

Prior to the interviews, participants were asked to respond to a series of demographic questions, which ascertained their name, school, gender, age, ethnicity, post A-Level qualifications, entry route to teaching, Qualified Teacher Status [QTS], length of time teaching [including and excluding their training period] and length of time they had specifically taught RE. Within the interviews, participants were asked for their name, date of birth, and to confirm that they understood and had themselves completed both the consent form and demographic questions. The main interview consisted of two sections. The first section contained nine background questions, whilst the second section asked 16 questions about RE and character education.

The first section asked participants to describe: the school they currently work in, whether their school has a religious foundation or ethos, the school types they have worked in previously, and the length of time that they had spent in each school. Following this, participants were given the Commission on Religious Education definition for a 'worldview' and asked to narrate their worldview and how they put this into action (REC 2018, 4). Participants were also asked about the extent to which they thought 'worldview' was a useful term, before being also asked about the extent that they have or practise a religion.

The second section asked participants for their perspectives about the purpose or overall aim of RE, how they thought their views about RE had changed over the course of their life and their teaching career, the extent to which their personal worldviews impact their professional approach to RE, and to define 'character' and 'virtues'. Participants were then given the JCCV definitions for both 'character' and 'virtues' (JCCV 2017, 2), before being asked how their school contributes to character development, which aspect of the school provided the greatest opportunity for character development, the extent

that RE contributes to pupils' character development, and which virtues they perceive it making a contribution towards.

The participants were then asked three questions related to each inter-related strand of the 'virtue literacy' concept, as discussed in the background section of this article. As the above literature review suggests, alongside cited research studies, that RE teachers believe RE contributes specifically to moral virtues (Metcalf and Moulin-Stožek 2020), a question was included to ascertain the extent to which the participants perceived moral virtues as an overall aim or specific taught element of RE lessons. Finally, the teachers were also asked which virtues they thought were the most important, and if/how a belief in these virtues being important impacts their RE teaching.

The study was given ethical approval by the University of Birmingham Ethics Committee [Approval Number ERN_19-1899], ensuring that participants provided their fully informed consent and were informed of their rights to withdrawal and confidentiality. This article has been written carefully so that participants cannot be identified from the presented data.

After the piloting of an initial interview, the interviews were then administered from November 2020 to June 2021. The length of these 30 interviews was estimated to take approximately 40 minutes to complete; however, some participants wished to provide further information, hence interviews ranged between 28 and 94 minutes.

All interviews took place online, over audio/video-calling software programmes, but were only audio-recorded. The audio recordings were then transcribed and uploaded to NVivo Software, to identify themes through Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis approach (2006). This process includes gaining familiarity with the data, selecting initial codes, exploring for themes, reviewing these themes through the examination of further data, before naming and identifying these themes for publication (Braun and Clarke 2006).

Participants

Participants were aged between 28 and 56 years, averaging 37.43 years. In terms of self-reported gender, participants identified as female (n=19), male (n=10) and other (n=1). In terms of self-reported ethnicity, participants were: White: British (n = 17), White: English (n = 4), White: Welsh (n = 3), Asian British: Indian (n = 2), Asian British: Bangladeshi (n = 1), Asian British: Pakistani (n = 1), Asian: East African Asian (n = 1) and Mixed/Multiple Ethnic Groups: Anglo-Japanese (n = 1). Participants worked in academy converters (n = 20), community schools (n = 6), free schools (n = 3) and a foundation school (n = 1), based in 20 local authority areas across England; eight of the participants worked in the same school with one other participant in the interview study.

The participants had been in teaching between 5 and 34 years, averaging 14.10 years with their training period, or 12.93 years excluding their training period. In terms of specifically teaching RE, teachers reported working between 5 and 34 years, with a slightly lower average of 12.67 years (including training periods). All RE teachers reported having QTS, with participants entering via different routes: Postgraduate Certificates in Education [PGCE] (n = 23), Postgraduate Diplomas in Education [PGDipEd] (n = 3), Graduate Teaching Programme [GTP] routes (n = 2), Teach First (n = 1), and a Bachelor of Education Degree [BEd] (n = 1).

At undergraduate level, most participants had studied Religious Studies, Philosophy or Theology, or a joint degree involving at least one of these disciplines ($n = 25$). A smaller group studied a degree related to sociology ($n = 3$), and another two studied degrees in Culture, Mind and Modernity; and Secondary Education and Physical Education, respectively. During the interview, these latter participants both narrated undertaking RE booster courses. Whilst the criteria for RE subject specialism has been scrutinised (Lloyd 2013, 19), at least 28 participants held a relevant post A-Level qualification which could make them considered specialist RE teachers.

In the interview, participants held a range of worldviews which can be sorted into three categories: 1) non-religious ($n = 19$), 2) religious ($n = 8$) and 3) those who identified as neither religious nor non-religious ($n = 3$).

Limitations

As the participants volunteered for this study; they may be more enthusiastic to contribute and not representative of the RE teacher population. Another limitation is that data collection occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic, which may have altered participants' perspectives. All data collection occurred through audio/video-calling software programmes, which could have impacted their interaction and communication.

Results

This section overviews the salient themes that were identified in the dataset. To recap, the primary objective of this interview schedule was to examine RE teachers' perspectives in non-faith, state-funded, schools about whether RE contributed towards pupils' moral character virtues, as an overall aim or a specific taught element of the subject. Participants were directly asked about this association and the themes are addressed in the section titled "Perspectives on RE and moral virtues".

Another secondary objective of the interview schedule was to ascertain the extent to which participants thought RE could contribute towards virtue literacy, which is explored in the section titled "Perspectives on virtue literacy". Finally, in response to questions posed generally about how RE contributes to character and virtues, participants unanimously affirmed that RE does contribute to pupils' character development and narrated that RE contributes towards a range of virtues, which are outlined in the section titled "Cited virtues".

Aside from one finding about performance virtues, detailed in the section titled "Cited virtues", a key finding was that there were no discernible differences in the following themes between participants of different ages, ethnicities, genders, qualifications, school-types, working in local authorities, religious worldviews or years of work experience.

Perspectives on RE and moral virtues

Participants were asked about the extent to which moral virtues, defined using the JCCV framework as the 'character traits that enable us to act well in situations that require an ethical response', are an overall aim or specific taught element of RE lessons (2017, 5). Nearly all participants agreed that moral virtues were present in RE ($n = 29$); however,

the responses were varied and can be grouped into four themes. Just over a third of the participants thought that moral virtues were present in RE as either a ‘by-product or implicit element’, meaning that regardless of what they taught, the moral virtues would emerge in some manner without any explicit emphasis being placed upon them (n = 11). The below example illustrates this case:

I don’t think they should be an explicit aim. I think they’re an inevitable by-product, because if you’re going to look at these issues, ideas of faith, commitment, duty and so on, you’re going to get what you want going to end up with discussion of, and reflection on, virtues. . . . I’m kind of gonna go back to that fairly simple view of the subject, which is we’re trying to build up knowledge of different faiths or perhaps areas of philosophical inquiry.

Participant D

A third of respondents stated that moral virtues were ‘both an overall aim and a specific taught element’ within their lessons (n = 10). The below example illustrates this matter:

I think yeah, quite strongly . . . it’s that focus that RE has on the moral aspect. I don’t think it’s possible to separate out RE from the moral aspect. . . . I think that the very nature of religion is that it gives us moral rules. And the whole point of RE is to help evaluate whether those rules are fit for purpose, or you, society or virtue in general, whether you can pick and choose for each one. So, I think it’s really, really central. . . . Definitely both.

Participant U

A fifth of the sample thought that the moral virtues were an ‘overall aim’ in RE, but not a taught element, whilst another two respondents thought that the moral virtues were a ‘taught element’ of their RE lessons. The one remaining participant said he was unsure but did not explicitly rule out the possibility that RE contributes to moral virtues.

Perspectives on virtue literacy

The participants were asked three questions related to virtue literacy. The first question asked about the extent to which RE provides opportunities for pupils to identify/perceive ethical topics which involve, or require, virtues for resolution.

In response to this question, all participants narrated that RE does provide opportunities for pupils to perceive ethical topics. A variety of ethical topics, which pupils can examine through RE, were narrated by all participants. This is best described by Participant C:

We have a large, varied diet of ethical topics . . . For example, at GCSE we’ve got marriage in the family, which is: issues of sex, contraception, divorce, marriage, blended families and all that. We have topics about abortion, euthanasia, we look at capital punishment. We’ve just done a lesson on telling lies. We do ethical dilemmas in the sense of a lot of investigation into whether God exists, which I think is the impact of evil or moral anatomy in the world. Definitely always discussed business ethics, sexual ethics and A-Level – bigger topics. Going on to sexuality, Homosexuality, LGBTQ+, etcetera., any ethical debate is up for discussion really, we’re creating a climate for a discussion around virtues and how they would help develop persons to make more informed decisions about those big ethical topics.

Participant C

Despite the variety of ethical topics, a theme of ‘medical ethics’ was identified from the majority of the sample (n = 20), with the most commonly narrated ethical topics being abortion (n = 15) and euthanasia (n = 13). Another theme about ‘conflict’ was identified from just under half the sample (n = 13), with the most common ethical topics being terrorism (n = 5) and war (n = 4). An additional theme was identified from a third of the sample (n = 10) of ‘theological ethical topics’, with the most commonly narrated example being about the nature of the covenants in Christianity (n = 4).

The second question related to virtue literacy asked about whether RE provides opportunities for pupils to engage with a language of virtues. In response to this question, 28 participants narrated that RE does contribute to a language of virtues. A theme was identified from twelve participants of using ‘planned activities’ to cultivate pupils’ virtue language. Most participants (n = 18) referred to pre-planned units or topics of work, which would give opportunities for pupils to develop their virtue literacy. The following example illustrates this:

The role models of religions. Some of the Guru’s in Sikhism and their life stories. Their kind of bravery, autonomy, courage, honesty, commitment to truth comes up, living with injustice, this kind of thing, or Mohammed’s commitment to his beliefs in the formation of Islam.
Participant R

A third of participants used pre-planned structured discussions to enable pupils to develop their virtue literacy. In the below example, the participant narrates how they help pupils to understand the meaning of the word ‘justice’, in order to access a better understanding of Divine Command Theory and the Euthyphro Dilemma.

Yes. So, there. Before we even study the idea of virtues, we have to discuss what the virtues are. So even things like, what is justice? . . . As RE teachers, . . . before you delve into these concepts, we must do the ‘meta-’, in these concepts, in terms of what they are. . . . We then look at things like Divine Command Theory, the Euthyphro dilemma, that kind of stuff. It’s about defining the key terms, for sure. I think before you look at any of these virtue concepts. It’s about defining what the virtues are and who has a right to define them. So, I think it that’s a very important part of it and we do that.
Participant X

The third question, related to virtue literacy, asked about the extent to which RE provides opportunities for pupils to use their reasoning about situations where virtues might collide or conflict. In response to this question, all participants narrated that RE provides opportunities for the development of pupils’ reasoning in such situations. A theme was identified from the data of using ‘ethical topics’ to develop pupils’ reasoning (n = 17), as demonstrated in the below example:

I’ll give you an example. Life and death issues. One virtue is to protect people that are vulnerable, and the weak and the other is not to fight. So, we’ve got two virtues one of pacifism and one of protection, which are in conflict with each other, or abortion . . . We constantly . . . put them into these moral dilemmas, where there is no clear answer. And where there are conflicting virtues, that’s what we do.
Participant Y

Cited virtues

Throughout the entirety of the interviews, participants narrated that RE could contribute towards the development of virtues. When applying the *Framework for Character*

Education in Schools to the data-set, as has been done so in previous studies on RE and character virtues (Metcalf and Moulin-Stožek 2020), it was clear that the most commonly cited were moral virtues, with 28 participants citing a minimum of two virtues from the category. Participants cited a range of 22 moral virtues. In sequence, the most commonly cited moral virtues were respect (n = 15), empathy (n = 13), tolerance (n = 13), kindness (n = 9), compassion (n = 8) and honesty (n = 8).

However, many participants also cited intellectual virtues, with 27 participants narrating at least one virtue from this category. Participants narrated a range of 16 intellectual virtues. In order, the most commonly mentioned intellectual virtues were perspective (n = 11), critical thinking (n = 9), openness (n = 8), curiosity (n = 7) and reflection (n = 7).

The third highest mentioned category were performance virtues, with 20 participants narrating a range of twelve performance virtues. The most commonly narrated virtues were resilience (n = 9) and determination (n = 4). The majority of male participants cited such examples (n = 9).

The fourth most frequently mentioned category were the civic virtues, with ten participants narrated a range of six civic virtues. In order, the most commonly narrated civic virtues were charity (n = 3), co-operation (n = 3), friendliness (n = 2) and service (n = 2).

Finally, there were mentions of wisdom (n = 3), typically considered a meta-virtue, each given by a respective participant. All the above counts of virtues include only one mention of each virtue per participant.

Discussion

While the findings of the present study essentially complement earlier research findings, such as the widespread agreement of RE teachers that their subject does contribute to pupils' character development and virtue literacy (Arthur et al. 2019; Metcalf and Moulin-Stožek 2020), some novel insights emerged.

One unexpected finding was the lack of any discernible patterns amongst participants concerning how RE could contribute towards different categories of virtues (aside from male participants mostly citing RE contributions towards performance virtues), the three inter-related components of virtue literacy, and the place of moral virtues as a subject aim, taught element or implicit element of the RE classroom. More specifically, there were no apparent differences between participants of different ages, ethnicities, genders, qualifications, school-types, working across different local authorities, religious world-views or years of work experience. The only consistency between participants was their role as an RE teacher in a non-faith, state-funded school in England.

In an earlier study, it was suggested that RE teachers may be influenced more so by institutional than personal factors (Metcalf and Moulin-Stožek 2020) and this could be further evidence to suggest this is the case, with the nature of the schools in which they worked being the relevant institutional factor. This would have to be further evidenced, however, by replicating the study with teachers from other school types.

Participants almost unanimously agreed that RE contributes to each of the three inter-related components of virtue literacy, thus corresponding to earlier findings (Metcalf and Moulin-Stožek 2020). In previous studies, however, participants in non-faith school settings tended not to narrate a language of virtues in their responses unless prompted,

indicating that this may be an area for further development (Metcalf and Moulin-Stožek 2020). Yet the present study unexpectedly found less hesitancy in this regard, with nearly two thirds of participants narrating that they deliberately pre-plan units or topics of work with virtues in mind and another third mentioning that they plan for structured discussion time. This might be because the language of virtues is becoming more mainstream in educational discourse, motivated by Ofsted's recent explicit turn towards character development. Further attention is required, however, to what is actually occurring in practice, for example by observing actual lessons [and such a project is already underway by the first author].

Another noteworthy finding was that the majority of participants claimed that RE contributes to the moral ($n = 28$), intellectual ($n = 27$) and performance ($n = 20$) virtue categories. Participants nevertheless placed the greater emphasis on the moral virtues, citing a combined total of 105 moral virtues, compared to totals of 52 citations for intellectual virtues and 31 citations for performance virtues. The finding that most RE teachers, working in non-faith, state-funded schools in England, perceive that their subject contributes towards intellectual and performance virtues was surprising and has not been previously recognised. Whilst the prominence of the moral and intellectual virtues can be explained by their presence in the surrounding non-statutory guidance, it was surprising to see performance virtues cited so highly. One possibility for this finding is because of the prominence of performance virtues, such as resilience, within the recent *School Inspection Handbook*.

Yet another unanticipated finding was participants' general agreement that RE does contribute towards moral virtues, coupled with widespread disagreement about how RE makes this contribution: with one third perceiving this to be both a subject aim and a taught element, just under a third thinking it was either of these two categories, and just over a third disagreeing with either possibility, perceiving RE as implicitly contributing towards moral virtues without any needed explicit emphasis in lessons. One possibility is that the eclectic range of non-statutory guidance from the past two centuries, as discussed in the background section of this article, has led to this divergence of views about how moral virtues should be implemented through RE.

The most narrated virtues in this present study, across all of the categories, were virtues of respect, empathy and tolerance. Whilst it could be argued that empathy is not a virtue and merely a psychological skill of perspective-taking, it is important to note that the RE teachers conceptualised it as a virtue in this study. The finding was particularly surprising, as these virtues have not been identified so prominently in previous research studies on RE teachers (Metcalf and Moulin-Stožek 2020), although this could be due to the increased number of questions in the present study. Ofsted noted in *Religious Education: Realising the Potential* that RE promotes the 'virtues of respect and empathy', which could also be one possible reason behind this finding (2013, 1). Whilst it is unclear how Ofsted reached that conclusion, this present study provides empirical evidence for the claim that RE teachers, in non-faith, state-funded schools in England, do hold the perspective that RE contributes to character education in general and particularly to respect, tolerance and empathy (2013).

Another possibility for why respect and tolerance may be cited so highly is the explicit inclusion of these virtues within the PREVENT strategy, part of the counter-terrorism strategy CONTEST (HMSO 2011). Respect and tolerance were later

incorporated into ‘mutual respect and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs’, one of the FBV which was promoted as part of SMSC development (DfE 2014, 5). The repeated affirmation that RE can make a contribution to moral development and SMSC broadly, with the latter explicitly connected to the FBVs, could be the reason why the participants cited the virtues of respect and tolerance so highly, as distinct from other virtues.

Conclusion

This article has presented the partial results from 30 semi-structured interviews with RE teachers working in non-faith, state-funded schools in England. All of the participants responded positively when asked whether they believe RE contributes to character education, referring to all four JCCV categories of character, and also the meta-virtue of wisdom (JCCV 2017). Of these categories, moral virtues were narrated the most often, and respect, empathy and tolerance were narrated as virtues which RE primarily contributes towards, reinforcing official claims that RE contributes to respect and empathy (Ofsted 2013).

This study also provides fresh insight into how RE in non-faith, state-funded schools in England can contribute towards pupils’ moral virtues. There was no consensus, however, about whether moral virtues are a subject aim and taught element, or simply an implicit aspect of the RE classroom, somehow caught through ongoing osmosis and assimilation of ideas. Further non-statutory guidance could help clarify the role of RE in pupils’ SMSC, character and moral development. Otherwise, an understanding of this role will continue to rely on personal intuitions of RE teachers.

It should be noted that as these findings only constitute the self-reported perspectives of 30 RE teachers, we are cautious not to generalise from these alone that RE is – as a matter of fact – positively developing pupils’ character or moral virtues or that the majority of RE teachers across England would endorse these findings. It may be that the interviewed participants perceive their work incorrectly or are desiring to present their subject in a positive light. Future studies, including observational ones, will need to further illuminate these issues.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributors

Jason Metcalfe MA (QTS) FHEA FRSA MCCT is a Doctoral Student at the School of Education, University of Birmingham. Jason works as an Equality and Diversity Champion, and Subject Leader of the Religious Education and Personal, Social, Health, Relationships and Economic Education departments, at Waverley Studio College, Birmingham. Jason also works as a Visiting Lecturer of Religious Education at Birmingham City University.

K. Kristjánsson is Professor of Character Education and Virtue Ethics, Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, University of Birmingham.

A. Peterson is Professor of Character and Citizenship Education, Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, University of Birmingham.

ORCID

Jason Metcalfe  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3702-0326>

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