

# Insights from a report into subject teachers' visions for RE and character education

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Insights from the Religious Education Report into Subject Teachers' Visions for  
Religious Education and Character Education.

The theme for this issue of *RE Today* is 'visions' and this complements the first key finding in a recently published report on RE teachers (Arthur *et al.*, 2019). This report, freely available online from the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues at the University of Birmingham, is entitled *Religious Education Teachers and Character: Personal Beliefs and Professional Approaches*. The findings of the report, detailed within this article, were based on interviews with 30 RE teachers and a survey of 314 RE teacher respondents.

The first key finding of the report details that RE teachers' personal worldviews informed their *vision* for the subject of RE, in turn underpinning their classroom approaches and motivation to teach. This finding was consistent for participants who identified with a wide range of worldviews, irrespective as to whether they worked in faith or non-faith schools.

Two examples cited from the interviews in the RE report demonstrate this. The first is from Richard, an atheist who explained how his love of punk music advanced his passion for issues of justice. In Richard's interview, he did not describe any religious beliefs or practices, but narrated an enduring set of moral principles, such as abstinence and veganism. Richard hoped that RE would improve the world around him, allowing the next generation to 'think better' about important moral or political issues.

The second example is from Kirsty, an Anglican who had a Catholic upbringing and a period of not practising her faith during adolescence. Kirsty ultimately identified with the Anglican Church following a religious experience. From then, Kirsty chose to teach in Church schools, which confirmed to her the importance of Christianity. She explains that her faith gives inspiration and meaning for her role as an RE teacher.

However, despite these different visions of the subject, RE teachers held some shared beliefs about RE. Notably, the research found RE teachers to have fair and tolerant approaches to religious diversity, irrespective of whether they work in faith and non-faith schools, or themselves were with or without religious faith. The findings of the report do suggest however that RE teachers with a religious faith were more open to learning from other religions and interreligious dialogue.

A second similarity was the perspectives of RE teachers on character education. There was strong agreement amongst RE teachers that the subject contributes to pupils' character development. From a smaller sample of 219 teachers, the research report shows that 97.7% of RE teachers strongly agreed or agreed that RE contributes to pupils' character development, and 94.5% strongly agreed or agreed that RE teachers should model good character for their pupils.

There were some other differences. RE teachers reporting a religious faith were more likely to think that religious traditions are a source of good role models and religions themselves promote good character. They were also more likely to care about how they impact pupils' religious beliefs and more likely to believe pupils emulate their religious views.

One example of this was from Charlotte, a Catholic working in a Catholic girls' independent school, who stated that 'religions give ethical direction'. Charlotte perceived confessional RE and moral education as complementary, and stated that RE became less focussed on real life issues when it was separated from character education.

A contrasting opinion was given by Emily, an Atheist who had come from a strong Christian family background and was formerly a practising Christian. Emily believed that RE makes a difference to pupils' lives through promoting understanding of others, and also

promotes character. Although she did not believe that being religious meant that you necessarily held a good character.

### Suggestions for Further Practice:

So what implications does this have for RE? On the basis that personal worldviews underpin RE teachers' motivation and classroom approaches, questions are raised as to whether an impartial teacher is something that is achievable or desirable. Perhaps more opportunities should be made available for RE teachers to reflect on their own worldviews, allowing them to consider the effect of those worldviews on their vision and motivation for their teaching practice. This could be carried out whilst teachers are in training or as part of their continuing personal development. It could be as simple as getting RE teachers together to discuss where they themselves stand on the purpose or aims of the subject, and collectively unpack why they hold these beliefs.

The general consensus of agreement amongst RE teachers that RE contributes to pupils' character development, and that RE teachers should model good character to pupils, suggests that RE can and does make a positive contribution to character education. The report suggests that more thought should be given in RE rationales and syllabi towards how RE can maximise opportunities for developing character, but character is as much taught as it is caught through role-modelling (Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, 2017). Some syllabi have made steps towards this in the past, such as the Birmingham Agreed Syllabus, which includes 24 character dispositions that are expected to be cultivated through RE lessons (Birmingham City Council, 2007).

For those interested in further research, another point of consideration is that our research project focussed on RE teachers working in secondary schools. More research is needed to ascertain whether primary school teachers, parents, pupils or perhaps even the general public hold a similar viewpoint (or vision) of RE as those identified by the participants in the report.

### **Biography:**

Jason Metcalfe, Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, School of Education, University of Birmingham.

### **Find out more:**

This magazine article is an update to an earlier piece published in the spring 2019 edition of *RE Today*. Please visit: <https://www.jubileecentre.ac.uk/RETeacher> for more information about the Religious Education Teachers project. For any further questions, please contact Jason Metcalfe. Email: [J.M.Metcalfe@Bham.ac.uk](mailto:J.M.Metcalfe@Bham.ac.uk)

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