

Does a Religion and Worldviews approach help or hinder children's spiritual development?

Dr Aidan Gillespie

Northumbria University, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, England.

Abstract: The recommendation arising out of the Commission on Religious Education's report (2018) is for Religious Education in England to have a change of focus and scope and to be retitled 'Religion and Worldviews'. It is hoped that by doing so, educators will have a clearer understanding of the purpose and scope of the subject of what is currently 'Religious Education', the teaching of RE and spiritual development of pupils being a legislative requirement in the English context. By proposing a change of subject name, philosophy and oversight, the Commission on Religious Education have asserted that in its current guise, children are not receiving a good education in this particular subject area. The Commission on Religious Education have encouraged debate among educators in schools and Initial Teacher Education programmes to develop pedagogies which will not only provide an outstanding educational experience but equip children with the personal tools to thrive in an increasingly diverse society. This article explores some of the ways this can be envisioned, what it may mean for the development of children's spirituality and how an explicit teaching of the scope and limitations of different 'knowledge types' such as Propositional, Procedural, Personal and Tacit, would aid children's engagement with Religious Education.

Key Words: knowledge, worldview, pedagogy, religion, spirituality.

Article: Within the English context, Religious Education (RE) as a subject has had a long history of interpretation, philosophy and pedagogical approaches. This is largely because of the education system in which the subject is situated. Within faith schools, RE often incorporates explicit religious instruction as part of the delivery of RE, as well as encouraging the development of knowledge of religion(s). In the non-faith school setting, RE varies considerably across local authority areas (who have oversight of the subject through local council bodies SACRES) in regard to curriculum design, quality of teaching and assessment. As such, RE unlike any other subject, is not defined nationally. Teachers have been identified as not knowing what the subject is or indeed, its purpose (Ofsted, 2013). In order to address these issues, the Commission on Religious Education (CRE) produced the paper *Religion and Worldviews: the way forward* (2018) which sought to offer practical suggestions for fundamental change in order to provide quality education of religion and worldviews to pupils across faith and non-faith school settings. The CRE present 11 recommendations to replace RE with Religion and Worldviews (RW) through a 'National Entitlement' which broadly sees RW developed by subject professionals, a statement applicable to all schools outlining the minimum coverage and standards students should receive, and a review of the role and responsibilities of Ofsted and Standing Advisory Councils for Religious Education (SACRES) (2018, pp11-18). In short, the CRE seek to make clear the scope and coverage of RW across the country so that it is consistent regardless of school types. The spiritual component inherent in the study of religion, either as a body of

knowledge or as a lived experience, is not addressed in depth in the recommendations. This has prompted some providers of faith-based schooling such as the Roman Catholic as well as the Church of England to issue statements to say that their schools already address the recommendations set out by the CRE (The Church of England Office, 2018 and the Catholic Education Service, 2018) and in fact exceed it.

While justifiable and laudable given the variance of RE provision across the country, the CRE's recommendations largely ignore or at the very least, provide no direction, on the aspect of RE-RW that would develop pupil's spiritual component, regardless of tradition or worldview they belong to. This is an omission which I would assume will be addressed across school contexts to fit in with their own culture and tradition (CRE, 2018, pp10-11). What is in the recommendations is an emphasis on the development of intellectual knowledge and ways of communicating and collaboration. As such, the epistemological scope of the CRE's recommendation focusses on knowledge which is either propositional or procedural in nature. While it is important that pupils develop a knowledge of a religion, its core texts, philosophies, morals etc and the way these are expressed, it is also important to infer that pupils will draw on their own deeply held beliefs and ways of expressing those beliefs. As such, personal and tacit knowledge must also form part of an RW pedagogical approach. It is in this way that the knowledge and skills learned through the implementation of the CRE's recommendations can resonate deeply by pupils exploring how and what they believe and to make connection with individuals and traditions they are part of as well as those that are unfamiliar to them. It is the opportunity to explore personal and tacit knowledge through a RW pedagogical approach that would facilitate in some way the exploration of spiritual development in pupils, regardless of tradition, religious or otherwise.

A worldview as understood by Dilthey takes into account that knowledge is derived from a knowledge of culture and history (Dilthey cited in Chater, 2020, p 116). As such, how one views a belief must take into account not only the culture where that belief is expressed but also the historical processes that has allowed that belief to develop into its current expression. As such a RW programme of study and pedagogical approach can incorporate religious and non-religious worldviews equitably. This provides the opportunity to explore spirituality as a part of a tradition or worldview as a legitimate area of study and activity in itself. There are many definitions of spirituality but one which is appropriate to the educational context is, 'Spirituality is those moments of profundity and connection that leads to change' (Gillespie, 2021, p15). As such, exploring spirituality through a RW approach also acknowledges that spirituality can constitute in whole or in part a worldview held by an individual or group, which is not static but is dynamic in nature.

Drawing on the knowledge gained through an awareness of the propositional and procedural knowledge through a study of RW, educators can assist pupils in developing an awareness of their own or others' spiritualities by incorporating a knowledge of personal and tacit knowledge domains into their planning, teaching and assessment. Education practitioners teaching RE/RW in schools may have little exposure to epistemological philosophy as part of their training or practice but by considering the characteristics of propositional, procedural, personal and tacit knowledge types, the lesson scope and dynamic would benefit (Morton, 2003 & Polanyi, 2009). In part because it would allow for activities and discussions to be rooted in authentic expressions of a worldview by drawing

on aspects of different communities who hold a variety of worldviews, religious or not. This would allow for propositional and procedural knowledge of traditions to be stated and observed. From this, the personal and tacit knowledge could be used to draw connections between different RWs, their origin and inheritance and locate these in discussions and activities that would allow learners to draw on their own stories and deeply held feelings. It is this engagement with an active connection with self and other which could prompt change and develop not only pupils' knowledge but their spiritual aspect.

From the recommendations made by the CRE at this point, the development of knowledge and an appreciation of religions and worldviews is the current focus. As stated previously, this could be because of the questionable standards of RE provision currently reported by Ofsted and CRE. However, where there is a lack of guidance on what this means for developing pupil's spiritualities there is also the possibility of continued confusion. While this may be the case, it is also a possibility that this lack of guidance leaves the door open for educators to explore spiritualities and the spiritual literacy of pupils in ways which are personal and appropriate to them rather than prescribed in a generalised and broad form.

Implications for Research and Practice

A RW pedagogical model could take many forms and indeed will, depending on the context in which it is implemented. The opportunities for further research could centre around how epistemology and epistemological literacy could develop not only pupils' academic knowledge but their knowledge of self. The role of faith schools and their well-established traditions of formation and spiritual development is one where the nexus between cognitive and intuitive forms of knowing could be explored and what this might mean for spiritual education. Faith and non-faith schools may benefit from collegial conversations and networking in order to explore the worldviews held and expressed in their settings and how both contexts can learn from one another's best practice. What is certain however, is that the debate about how RE should give way to RW will continue. What this means for educators and scholars of children's spirituality is that new opportunities will arise to work with colleagues and children in exploring spirituality from a different perspective to what has been normative in the English school context.

References.

Dilthy cited in: Chater, M. (2020) *What do we mean by Worldviews Reforming RE. Power and Knowledge in a Worldviews Curriculum*. Woodbridge: John Catt Publications.

Gillespie, A. (2021) *Spirituality in Education. Professional Accounts of the Impact of Spirituality on Education*. Bingley: Emerald Publishing Ltd.

Morton, A. (2003) *A Guide Through the Theory of Knowledge*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

Ofsted. (2013) *RE: realising the potential*. London: The Stationary Office.

Polanyi, M. (2009) *The Tacit Dimension*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

The Commission for Religious Education. (2018) *Religion and Worldviews: the way forward. A national plan for RE*. London: RE Council.

The Commission for Religious Education. (2018) Executive Summary. *Religion and Worldviews: the way forward. A national plan for RE*. London: RE Council.

The Catholic Education Service. (2018) *Religious Education – The Case for the Catholic Approach*. Available at:

<https://www.catholiceducation.org.uk/component/k2/item/1003656-religious-education-the-case-for-the-catholic-approach>

The Church of England Education Office. (2018) *A Statement of Entitlement*. Available at:

<https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2019-02/RE%20Statement%20of%20Entitlement%20for%20Church%20Schools.pdf>