

Incorporating the new 2007 Standards

Achieving
QTS
meeting the professional standards framework

Teaching Religious Education

Primary and Early Years

Elaine McCreery • Sandra Palmer • Veronica Voiels



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**Elaine McCreery, Sandra Palmer
and Veronica Voiels**



LearningMatters

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Preface

This book brings together the philosophy, ideas and experience of three teachers of religious education (RE). Between us we have taught thousands of trainee teachers over 30 years and have followed and been part of the development of RE taught in schools.

Our aim is to continue to advance and support the teaching and development of RE in primary schools. Underpinning this aim is a central belief in the importance and value of RE for young people. At its heart, RE is about the eternal human desire to understand and relate to life in all its facets. RE involves children in examining and exploring those matters that are of primary concern to humankind: *RE provokes challenging questions about the ultimate meaning and purpose of life* (Religious Education: The Non-Statutory National Framework, QCA, 2004, p18). RE also offers children the opportunity to reflect on their own beliefs and experiences and those of others in order to help them understand their relationship to the rest of the world. For many children this will also involve them in reflecting on their relationship with God.

Sometimes there has been uncertainty about RE and a lack of clarity about its purpose – especially in a multifaith society such as Britain. This book therefore seeks to clarify misunderstandings and offer practical approaches to developing effective, meaningful RE in primary classrooms.

This book is written primarily for you as a trainee teacher, providing an introduction to the subject as part of your familiarisation with the primary curriculum. However, it can also be used by practising teachers, who will be able to use it for developing their own RE teaching. Parents and school governors could use it to help them understand what their children are doing in RE. Finally, teacher trainers could use it to support their teaching of RE on QTS courses.

The book has been structured to give you a thorough overview of the principles of good RE which then culminate in the planning process. However, each chapter can be read on its own if particular aspects of RE are of interest. Throughout the book you will also find tasks that can be used on your own or in a group to help you think about some of the issues that are raised in each chapter. The Appendix gives you an introduction to the six major world religions and how they fit geographically and historically.

By the end of the book, you will have a fuller understanding of the place of RE in the primary curriculum and the value it has for helping children to learn more about themselves and the world in which they live.

E. McCreery
S. Palmer
V. Voiels
2008

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1

RE in England and Wales: the law, the curriculum and attainment targets

Chapter objectives

By the end of this chapter you will have developed knowledge and understanding of:

- the law regarding RE;
- the role of a Standing Advisory Council for Religious Education;
- the location of the curriculum for RE;
- the aims and objectives of RE;
- the Attainment Targets for RE;
- RE and school worship.

This chapter addresses the following Standards for QTS: **Q3a**

Introduction

Religious education (RE) can be one of the most dynamic and exciting areas of the curriculum to teach, for it is here that children can gain an understanding of the rich world of faith and explore some of those questions which are fundamental to human existence. Who am I? What is the purpose to life? What are my responsibilities to others? What will happen after death? How should I react to someone whose beliefs are different from mine? These are just some of the questions of meaning and purpose which form the core of RE as it is conceived in the law of England and Wales. These questions are not explored in a vacuum but in learning about beliefs and practices of different religions.

The notion that you should explore such big questions with young children and help them understand the world of religion may feel quite daunting. This book is written to help you. However, before you can begin to think about how to teach the subject you need to understand what the subject is about.

REFLECTIVE TASK

Before you start to read the rest of the chapter stop and think about your own religious education. What did you do? What do you think was the point of it?

How do you feel about it? Write your answers down so that you can return to them at the end of the chapter.

The law: what you need to know

Each country has its own understanding of RE. In Australia, for example, children are taught a social studies syllabus in which children learn about religion in society but also have a period of religious instruction given by teachers, usually volunteers, from their own Christian denomination or another faith. In France and the U S A the teaching of religion is banned in state schools. In Germany children receive denominational teaching.

A particular understanding of RE has evolved in the British context though, as in any subject, there are debates and controversies. This understanding of RE is embodied in the law as expressed in statutes and guidance. It is important that you have a good grasp of the legal requirements and understand its implications for you as a professional: *Be aware of the professional duties of teachers and the statutory framework within which they work* (Q3a).

The types of legal documentation

- Acts of Parliament and statutory circulars regarding the content of RE. Local authorities are bound to obey these documents.
- Non-statutory guidance about the content of RE. It is here that we find guidance about the aims and objectives of RE. These documents are offered as guidance to the implementation of the law.
- Local Agreed Syllabuses for RE (see below).
- Diocesan syllabuses or those supplied by the religious foundation of the school.

Two Acts of Parliament are of particular significance:

- The 1944 Education Act, which gave every child an entitlement to free education until the age of 15.
- The 1988 Education Reform Act (ERA), which established a National Curriculum.

There is a requirement to teach RE in community schools

The 1988 ERA (Chapter One section 8) makes the provision of religious education mandatory in all maintained schools (now known as community schools). This was a continuation of the 1944 Act. Children have an entitlement to RE unless the parents exercise their right to withdraw them (see below). Children should thus not be taken from RE for extra lessons in reading or any other activity, however worthwhile.

The curriculum is set at a local rather than a national level

Although RE is part of the basic curriculum, if you look in your National Curriculum you will NOT find a section on RE there. Instead your statutory curriculum document is a **Local Agreed Syllabus**. This syllabus is determined at a local authority level at a Local Syllabus Conference convened by a committee set up by the **Standing Advisory Council for Religious Education (SACRE)**. SACREs meet regularly to oversee and support RE in the local authority and must, by law, review the syllabus every five years. A SACRE is comprised of four groups representing the Church of England, other religions and other Christian denominations, the council and teachers.

The RE curriculum is determined at a local level because this practice was already in place at the time of the 1988 ERA. Before 1988 all schools determined their own curriculum; what they taught in English, maths and science was completely up to the individual school or even teacher. The one exception was Religious Instruction; maintained schools had to follow a Local Agreed Syllabus. This was an indication of the sensitivity at the time surrounding what should be taught to children about faith and religion. The content had to be agreed by the community and not just left to the individual teacher.

At the time of the 1988 Act and the birth of a curriculum set at national level Parliament decided to maintain the status quo rather than set a National Curriculum for RE, a decision which some have since regretted. It means that there are as many syllabuses for RE as there are local authorities. An unfortunate consequence of this local location of the syllabus is that

RE is often side-lined in school because it isn't in the National Curriculum. Nevertheless, it is just as much a legal requirement as any other area of the curriculum.

There are, however, three significant differences between the 1944 Act and the 1988 Act. Under the 1944 Act religion in school was referred to as RI: Religious Instruction. The 1988 act changed the word 'instruction' to 'education'. Government circular 1/94 further reinforced the idea that RE was education, with the decree that Agreed Syllabuses *must not be designed to convert pupils or to urge a particular religion or religious belief on pupils*. (DfE, 1994, p15).

REFLECTIVE TASK

Analyse the difference between instruction and education. What are the implications for the way you teach RE?

Secondly, an Agreed Syllabus shall *reflect the fact that the religious traditions in Great Britain are in the main Christian while taking account of the teaching and practices of the other principal religions represented in Great Britain*. (DfE, 1994, p45)

The explicit reference to Christianity has been perhaps the most controversial aspect of the law. Christianity was not mentioned in the 1944 Act because there was an assumption that Religious Instruction would be Christian. However, significant studies by Loukes (1961) and Goldman (1964) suggested that children were not understanding the subject matter and were finding it irrelevant. As a consequence, from the early 1970s onwards there was a move away from the Bible-based syllabuses of earlier years to syllabuses that prepared children for the understanding of religious concepts and then in later years to syllabuses that embraced the increasingly multicultural society. Rather than being a sharing of one faith, some syllabuses became the examination of world-views. These shifts brought about a backlash among those who were concerned that children were failing to understand the Christian cultural and religious heritage and who feared that a national identity would be lost. Their lobbying ensured that an explicit reference was made to Christianity in the new act. The justification for the predominance of Christianity was largely a cultural one rather than to do with the RE.

REFLECTIVE TASK

List evidence that Christianity is the religion which has had the most influence on this country. Think of the landscape, history, festivals, rites of passage and the Arts. What do you think children need to know and understand in order to have an understanding of this society?

The third significant change is that the law made explicit for the first time that all children should learn about the other principal religions practised in Great Britain. It thus recognised and valued the increasing presence of people of non-Christian religions in the UK, an indication of a hope that knowledge and understanding would also lead to mutual respect between members of different faiths.

The current guidance to SACREs is that Christianity should be studied at each key stage whereas the other religions must be studied in the course of a school career. The Non-

Statutory National Framework for RE (QCA, 2004) also encourages teachers to draw on the religious backgrounds of children in their classes from smaller religions such as the Bahai faith and from non-faith perspectives.

The other principal religions studied are not prescribed by law but are generally held to be Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism and Sikhism. There is an introduction to each of these religions at the back of this book.

The changes outlined above were specific to RE. The 1988 Act also introduced a requirement for the whole curriculum that it should: *promote the spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical [SMCMP] development of pupils at the school and of society* (Ch. 1, ERA, 1988). SMCMP is a duty of the whole curriculum but has special resonance for RE. Chapter 5 of this book pays particular attention to it.

The right of withdrawal from RE

Parents have the right to withdraw their children from RE. If a parent asks for a child to be withdrawn from RE try to have an open discussion with him or her about the nature of their objections or if you don't feel confident enough to do this, refer the parent to the head teacher.

Many teachers are understandably concerned when parents ask for a child to be withdrawn from RE, especially since it suggests that the parents are not willing for their child to learn and respect viewpoints other than their own. The most common group requesting withdrawal is the Jehovah's Witnesses, who do not permit the observation of festivals, including birthdays. There is also a concern that children will feel excluded if asked to leave the classroom. This is ultimately the parents' choice and there are no neat answers to the problem. However, you can give the child something to do which is related to the subject under discussion. Example: ask the child to write a story on the theme of good overcoming evil when doing Diwali. Or try to think of an unobtrusive positive way of enabling them to be absent from the class.

CASE STUDY

A Year 2 teacher was concerned about the fact that a shy Jehovah's Witness child would feel further excluded during her RE lessons so she arranged that the child should be made a special helper in the Nursery; her time in the Nursery just happened to coincide with RE lessons. She also held non-religious celebrations of the seasons so the child could join in.

You also have the right to be excused from teaching RE on the grounds of conscience. We hope that after reading this book you will see that you can teach RE without being unfaithful to your own beliefs and values. However, if you really feel that you must exercise your right to decline it is your professional duty to inform the head teacher. The children have an entitlement, whatever your views are.

RE in voluntary aided schools (faith schools)

There is one more area regarding the law which you need to understand before you can be fully aware of your professional responsibilities. In order to understand the legal status of RE

it is necessary to be fully aware of the distinction between maintained state (community) schools and voluntary aided (faith) schools in the UK. State schools are fully maintained by the state and hence are also known as maintained schools or, since 1998, community schools. Community schools are operated and established by local authorities (county councils). There are also various types of voluntary schools – voluntary aided and voluntary controlled. It is voluntary aided schools which are our concern here. These schools are jointly funded by the state and a religious body.

Most of these voluntary aided (faith) schools are Christian church schools, mainly Church of England (CofE) or Roman Catholic (RC), though there are some long-established Jewish schools. The Labour government in the 1990s extended voluntary status to what were previously private schools rooted in traditions other than Christian and Jewish, most notably Muslim communities. Since 1997 Muslim, Sikh and Hindu schools have also joined the voluntary aided sector. Many religious schools do admit children from other religions and indeed some parents prefer their children to go to a school where there is a high respect for the life of faith and belief in God, even if it is not their own religion. A number of CofE schools in the inner cities have a very high percentage of Muslim children. Clergy are usually very respectful of the religious integrity of the children and seek to build bridges between faiths rather than impose their own religion on the children.

If you teach in a voluntary aided school you will NOT follow the Local Agreed Syllabus. Instead you will follow the religious syllabus set by the school or the funding body. The Roman Catholic Church and Church of England have diocesan syllabuses. Although these syllabuses are usually premised on the truth of the claims made by the faith, some do have some teaching about other religions in order to encourage respect and harmony.

Not all schools with a religious title are voluntary aided. Some are fully in the maintained sector and are voluntary controlled. These schools follow the Local Agreed Syllabus.

REFLECTIVE TASK

Think about why parents or guardians would choose to send their child to a 'faith school'. What are the arguments for and against faith schools?

The aims of RE

It is very important that you understand the educational aims of all the subjects that you teach, so that you teach them in a manner that addresses these aims. Strictly speaking, each local SACRE is able to determine its own aims and objectives for RE so long as they are within the 1988 Act. These are set out in the front of your Local Agreed Syllabus. However, the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) and central government have issued a number of documents to guide local SACREs when they review their Agreed Syllabuses. Among these documents were the Model Syllabuses (SCAA, 1994), which were two models for SACREs to follow if they wished to do so when writing their local syllabus. These model syllabuses were drawn up in wide consultation with members of different religions. They offered the following aims for RE which were reiterated in the QCA's 2004 Non-Statutory Framework for RE.

RE aims to help children to:

- acquire and develop knowledge and understanding of Christianity and other principal religions represented in the United Kingdom;
- develop an understanding of the influence of beliefs, values and traditions on individuals, communities, society and cultures;
- develop the ability to make reasoned judgements about religious and moral issues with reference to principal religions represented in the United Kingdom;
- enhance their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development;
- develop positive attitudes towards other people, respecting their right to hold different beliefs from one's own, and towards living in a society of diverse religions.

These aims acknowledge the importance religion has in the lives of many individuals throughout the world and also the impact of those beliefs on the whole of culture and society. This assumes that a general aim for education is that children understand the world in which they live, including religion.

Finally, RE has an explicit objective of helping to maintain a harmonious society. This last point has been reconfirmed in a recent report from OFSTED entitled *Making sense of Religion* (2007), which stated clearly that RE in schools has new responsibilities to promote social cohesion:

Those with responsibility for RE therefore have the task of ensuring that children and young people are able to make sense of religion in the modern world and issues of identity and diversity.

Attainment Targets in RE

The aims of the subjects of the Basic Curriculum are developed into Attainment Targets to help shape the curriculum, but once again in RE these are determined at a local rather than a national level. However, Model Syllabuses advised that a Local Agreed Syllabus should have two Attainment Targets for RE:

- AT1 Learning about Religion;
- AT2 Learning from Religion.

In this book we make reference to these two Attainment Targets as they are widely used in Agreed Syllabuses. However, as they are not statutory, syllabuses may express and interpret them in slightly different ways. Hampshire, unusually, has only one Attainment Target: *interpreting religion in relation to human experience*.

Attainment Target 1: Learning about Religion

This is concerned with:

- enquiry into, and investigation of, the nature of religion, its beliefs, teachings and ways of life, sources, practices and forms of expression;
- the skills of interpretation, analysis and explanation. Children learn to communicate their knowledge and understanding using specialist vocabulary;
- identifying and developing an understanding of ultimate questions and ethical issues;
- values and commitment.

Attainment Target 2: Learning from Religion

This is concerned with:

- developing children's reflection on and response to their own and others' perceptions and experiences in the light of their learning about religion;
- developing children's skills of application, interpretation and evaluation of what they will learn about religion.

Children learn to develop and communicate their own ideas particularly in relation to questions of identity and belonging, meaning, purpose and truth.

Underpinning the idea of learning from religion is the fundamental idea that religions are an expression of a desire for meaning and purpose in life. People seek answers to questions such as *Why do good people suffer?* or *Is there a God?* and *What's the point of living?* For many religious people that meaning and purpose has been revealed by God in a holy book or person. For others the quest for meaning and purpose is part of life's journey – there are no complete answers, though some answers may be better than others. That meaning and purpose is as likely to be found in engagement with ritual, or being part of a community, as in assent to a set of teachings.

Of course, there are many millions of people who find meaning and purpose outside the world of religion, in the communities they belong to, and in the values they hold. Community schools as well as faith schools often give children a strong sense of belonging and identity, valuing them as individuals. Teachers can convey to children a huge sense that life is worth living. Moreover, religions don't have all the answers, which is perhaps why the Birmingham Agreed Syllabus of 1975 included Marxism as a world-view and the Humanist Society is pressing for Humanism to be included in RE. Moreover, some traditional teachings and practice may be challenged by a changing morality. There is a clash, for example, between attitudes to women and to homosexuality, as found in some religious teachings, and a growth towards equality, inclusion and respect for individual choice, as found in the law.

A lot of spontaneous discussion in the classroom perhaps in response to a book, or something seen on television, is about such questions. However, RE is the place where you should plan to ensure that such discussions happen because the religions deal with these questions of meaning. In RE we encourage children to think about themselves and the implications of what they are studying for their lives.

The **learning from** aspect of RE has been welcomed by some teachers but perceived by others as difficult. Whereas learning about the facts and ways of life of various religious cultures is relatively easy to plan and deliver, enabling children to understand their own beliefs and values more deeply and also reflect upon them, is a real challenge. Yet it is here that RE can most contribute to children's development as whole people who make active, thoughtful contributions to society.

RE teachers face this challenge constantly. It is often simpler for them to fall back on the mechanics of religion instead of tackling the reality of being religious. Textbooks tend to concentrate on ceremonies rather than what it is like to live as a Catholic, a Muslim or a Hindu in the community; and to discuss where values and codes for living come from for children who do not have religious belief. It is an

area which needs considerable work if we are to meet our objectives of developing active, articulate, critical learners who understand the value of difference and unity and have the ability to participate and engage in current debates.

(DfES, 2007)

However learning from religion can provide opportunities for holistic approaches to learning, which included emotional and moral dimensions and can contribute to the personal, moral and spiritual development of the child. This is particularly apparent in the attitudes developed through RE which are defined in the National Framework as self awareness, respect for all, open-mindedness, appreciation and wonder. (DfES, 2007).

Suggestions on how to integrate Learning about Religion with Learning from Religion are made throughout this book.

The structure of Local Agreed Syllabuses

The fact that the syllabus is designed locally gives variety and flexibility to the content and structure of RE. Some SACREs appoint a working group of teachers who develop this local syllabus. Some have extensive consultations with members of the local communities, including religious leaders. One of the consequences of the local nature of the RE syllabuses is that there can be huge differences between them. These differences lie not only in which religions are covered at each stage but in the manner of organisation.

For example, the Hampshire Agreed Syllabus is built around key concepts whereas the Manchester Agreed Syllabus, uses such themes as Growing Up in a Christian family in Key Stage 1, Special People in Years 3 and 4, and Special Books, and The Journey of Life in Years 5 and 6. The content which supports and exemplifies each of these themes reflects the multicultural nature of the communities in Manchester.

The organisation of Agreed Syllabuses tends to fall into two main types.

- **Systematic approaches** consider each world religion separately as a discrete unit with distinctive features. The strength of this approach is that it means children are more likely to have a sound basis of knowledge in each religion. The drawback is that they learn to see religions in little boxes and may fail to make connections between them.
- **Thematic approaches** take a key feature of religion such as worship, rites of passage, special books or sacred places, and seek to explore the nature and purpose of this feature across various religions. This has the advantage of helping children see connections but the disadvantage that each religion may not be understood in its own right. Themes such as environmental awareness and citizenship may be drawn from the cross-curricular themes (see Chapter 5).

Remember that it is the Local Agreed Syllabus which is the statutory document NOT the units of study for RE on the QCA Website. These units are a helpful resource as you plan RE but should not be followed slavishly; the variance between Agreed Syllabuses means that it is impossible to create a sequence of units that matches all Agreed Syllabuses.

PRACTICAL TASK PRACTICAL TASK PRACTICAL TASK PRACTICAL TASK PRACTICAL TASK

Look at the Local Agreed Syllabus for your area or for a school in which you are teaching. Compare its Aims and Attainment Targets with those found in the Model Syllabuses. Look at how the curriculum is organised. Compare the programme of study with the units of study found on the QCA Website.

From syllabus to school

Community schools are at liberty to plan their RE themselves so long as they cover the content of the Local Agreed Syllabus, including its skills. Thus the material in the syllabus may be organised around discrete religions, but the school may decide to deliver it in a cross-curricular way integrating it with other curriculum areas and other cross-curricular themes such as citizenship. Some local authorities provide more detailed programmes of study than others.

CASE STUDY

The RE co-ordinator was discussing the programme of study in the Agreed Syllabus with a Year 1 teacher. The study of Islam was one unit in the Local Agreed Syllabus. Most of the children were Muslim. They decided that instead of studying Islam as a separate subject they would integrate it with curriculum areas in recognition of how important it was in children's lives. Thus in a topic on water and its uses they decided to look at washing hands before prayer. In a unit on time they would look at prayer times for the day and when the special Friday prayers were. They were covering the content required but in a way that was relevant to the children in the class.

For more on cross-curricular planning see Chapter 2.

RE and collective worship

RE should not be confused with school collective worship. They are two separate entities. You are responsible for RE in your class unless other arrangements are made. It is the head teacher's or in the case of voluntary aided schools the chair of governors' responsibility to see that a daily act of worship takes place in the school. This worship should be *wholly or mainly of a broadly Christian character* unless the school has applied for exemption because it has a large number of children from another religion. This is a controversial law open to wide interpretation but legally school collective worship does not have any more link with RE than with any other subject area. A Muslim festival of Eid can be marked in an act of worship in a joyful way and on the occasion be reinforcing RE, but then a favourite author's birthday can also be celebrated. Poetry and music can be brought together for a theme on the weather, thus making a link with geography; children can share their excitement and knowledge about a history topic.

However, good school collective worship can supplement RE in that it can give children experiences of community, shared joys and times of sorrow, awe and wonder which can be drawn on later in an RE lesson. An act of worship based on the life of a hero-figure such as Mary Seacole could be followed up with an RE lesson on different types of bravery.