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Religious Education Teachers' Perspectives on Character Education

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Abstract

This article presents the findings of a qualitative interview study undertaken with RE teachers (n=30), working in English schools with secondary status. Despite recent policy interest in character education, there is a lacuna of information about the extent RE contributes to character education. The present study focuses on teachers' perspectives on virtue literacy, a theme identified across participants in response to open-ended prompts about RE, religion and character. The participants in the sample hold different worldviews and work across a range of schools, providing a variety of informative perspectives. There were clear differences between the responses of participants' from faith and non-faith schools regarding the contribution of RE to pupils' virtue literacy. These findings mark a distinctive contribution to our understanding of the differences between RE in faith and non-faith schools.

Keywords: Religious Education; Character Education; Virtue, Teachers.

1. Introduction

The recent inclusion of character education in the *Ofsted Inspection Handbook* demonstrates that character education is receiving renewed attention (2019). However, debates continue about what is meant by the idea of character (contrast e.g. Kristjánsson, 2015, with Jerome and Kisby, 2019). Though there have been several suggested definitions, the lack of agreement over a comprehensive definition for character is but one reason for the multiple types of character education programmes that exist (Arthur, 2003).

The study described in this article is motivated by our view that, given the historical links between RE and ideas of moral or character development, the current silence on the potential role of RE in the resurgence of character education stands in need of academic amelioration. As the contribution of RE to moral development, or more broadly character formation, is not well understood, a series of 30 life-story interviews were conducted as the first phase of a project examining the life stories, professional values and worldviews of RE teachers. The findings of this project are available in *Religious Education Teachers and Character: Personal Beliefs and Professional Approaches, Research Report* (Arthur *et al.*, 2019). There were two central aims of the project. Firstly, to understand how personal worldviews affect professional approaches to RE, and secondly, to provide elucidation of how RE and character education inform each other. Both aims relate to the motivation behind this article, either directly or indirectly.

2. Background

The *Ofsted Inspection Handbook* does not specify how schools should deliver character education (2019), and the term is used in a manner reminiscent of an instrumentalist, technicist understanding with emphasis on mere performative virtues such as resilience. Yet the connection to holistic moral development is not completely lost. Though school leaders may

opt to focus on character in their whole-school ethos, or confine it to a subject such as Personal, Social, Health Education (PSHE), the subject of RE has historically held a close association with moral development.

For clarity, it is a statutory duty for all maintained (publicly-funded) schools in England and Wales to promote pupils' moral development. This idea was articulated in the *Education Act 1944* (s.2.7) and reinforced in the *Education Reform Act 1988* alongside pupils' spiritual and cultural development (s.1.2). These three forms of development would later be associated with pupils' social development, coining the phrase Spiritual, Moral, Social and Cultural (SMSC) development (DfE, 1994). SMSC applies to all educational activities and is cross-curricular (Moulin-Stožek, forthcoming), appearing in government guidance for the whole school (DfE 2014; 2019) and RE respectively (DfE, 1994; QCA 2004; DCSF, 2010; Ofsted 2013). However, guidance for RE on SMSC development details that the subject was regarded as holding an 'important, although not exclusive' contribution (DfE, 1994, p.9) and was perceived as a 'vehicle for guiding the development of moral and social qualities' (Ofsted 1994, p.2).

The study of religion has been present in state schools since their introduction in 1870 (Shaw and Shirley, 2018). However, at this time it was referred to as religious instruction (HMSO, 1870), a form of Christian confessionality that promoted the moral standards of undenominational Christianity (Barnes 2014). The study of religion was officially renamed to religious education in the *Education Act 1944*, but it was from the 1960s onwards that religious education began transitioning from a confessional approach to the multi-faith approach enshrined in the later *Education Reform Act 1988* (*ibid.*). However, RE was still widely regarded to have a moral aim as religions were, on the whole, considered to constitute comparable systems of moral conduct, with the ideas of learning about and from religions providing the stimulus for pupils to develop morally (Moulin-Stožek and Metcalfe, 2018).

The historical literature supports this interpretation. A white paper released prior to the *Education Act 1944* referred to the need to ensure the development of pupils' character and stated that the wish to give RE a more prominent place in schools came from an aspiration to revive the personal and spiritual values in society (1943). The later *Education Reform Act 1988* reinforced this message, though less explicitly, through references to RE and pupils' cultural, mental, moral and spiritual development. Since the 1988 Act, there has been further guidance about the potential of RE in promoting pupils' moral development (DfE 1994; QCA, 2004; Ofsted, 2010).

Some faith schools have endorsed a character education agenda explicitly. A recent project by the Church of England intended to promote Christian character development through teaching and learning across the curriculum using the 'what if learning' approach (The Church of England Education Office, 2016, p.4). Though this programme was conducted in Church of England schools, it showed that a religious-centred intervention could lead to a positive impact on pupils' character. Pupils were recorded to be making fewer negative judgements about those they perceived to be different and responded well to the task of being hospitable to others (*ibid.*, p.5).

RE exists in alternative forms in what are commonly referred to as 'faith schools' (Hughes and Barnes, 2008); these are legally defined as 'school[s] with a religious character' (DfEE, 1999, brackets mine). In this particular usage the term 'character' is meant in a manner synonymous with 'foundation'. To avoid conflation between alternate meanings of the term 'character', the term 'foundation' will be used when referring to the 'religious character' of schools in this article.

However, character education has not just been the preserve of faith schools. A close connection between RE and character education applies to all forms of RE found in England and Wales. The subject can however be delivered in different styles due to the establishment

of the 'dual system' (Hughes and Barnes, 2008, p. 28). In faith schools, RE can be delivered in a confessional manner, whereas in non-faith schools RE is often multi-faith in approach, in accord with the Education Reform Act (HMSO, 1988).

RE provision is currently declining across all schools, at both Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4 (CoRE, 2018). One probable reason for this is the non-inclusion of RE in the English Baccalaureate, and the lack of consequences for schools which ignore their statutory duty to deliver RE (REC, 2019). The absence of RE from the English Baccalaureate has been criticised on the basis it reveals a perceived low profile for RE, further contributing to the decline in the status of the subject (CoRE, 2017).

Of much relevance to the present study, we note that recent discussions about how RE can justify its place in the curriculum have often centred on the role of RE in promoting moral development (e.g. Barnes, 2014; Clarke and Woodhead, 2015; Stern 2018). However, it is well established that RE is overburdened with many competing imperatives and expectations (Lundie, 2010, 2018; Teece 2011); ideas of moral development and character can be considered as one subject aim amongst the many proposed in surrounding literature (see Chater and Castelli, 2018).

2.1. Previous Research into RE Teachers

This article addresses the lack of research about teachers' perspectives on RE and character education. For clarity, our aim is to examine teachers' perspectives about the extent that the subject of *Religious Education*, and not how *religions* themselves, contribute to character education. Whereas many previous studies of RE teachers have tended to focus on trainee or newly qualified teachers (Sikes and Everington 2001; Everington 2012, 2016), this article covers new ground through investigating the perspectives of serving RE teachers.

Barnes identified three basic models of the role of moral education in post-confessional RE: the civic, multi-cultural and spirituality models (2011). Though not referring to a language of virtues, Barnes nevertheless assigns a series of virtues to each of the models in his article. Different approaches to moral development in RE have also been identified, which are articulated in deontological and virtue ethics frameworks (Moulin-Stožek and Metcalfe, 2018).

An examination of the literature surrounding RE establishes that the subject can contribute to pupils' character development through four key areas: knowledge and understanding of virtues, opportunities for reflection, virtue reasoning, and virtuous action/practice (Moulin-Stožek and Metcalfe, 2019). These findings suggest that, in principle, RE should provide opportunities for character education.

2.2. Conceptual Framework

The concepts of 'character', 'virtues', and 'virtue literacy' need some elucidation in order to understand the analysis in the following findings section. Character has been utilised within the field of personality psychology to refer to morally evaluable personality traits (Kristjánsson, 2015). The ancient Greeks did not have a term that translates to 'moral' and did not make a distinction between personality and character (*ibid.*); however, their understanding of moral worth is identifiable through the virtues and vices in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (1999).

For the purposes of this article, we will use the Jubilee Centre definition for character. Character is a set of personal dispositions that produce evaluative emotions at appropriate times, provide motivation, and inform our behaviour (2017). Character education is, on this view, best understood as an umbrella term for any approach to moral education that centres on the cultivation of good character *qua* the development of virtues (Kristjánsson, 2015).

The Jubilee Centre adopts a neo-Aristotelian model, which considers virtues best understood as the character traits that enable us to respond to different situations appropriately (2017). According to this model, virtues form four main blocks: civic, intellectual, moral, and performance virtues, with an overarching meta-virtue of practical wisdom integrating all other virtues (*ibid.*). The intellectual virtues are those necessary for discernment whilst moral virtues enable us to act well in ethical situations (*ibid.*). Civic virtues empower us to be active and responsible citizens, and performance virtues have an instrumental value in enabling the civic, intellectual, and moral virtues (*ibid.*).

Virtue Literacy is a concept introduced in the *Knightly Virtues: Enhancing Virtue Literacy through Stories, research report* (2014) and revised in the *Framework for Character Education* (2017). Virtue literacy consists of three inter-related components. The first component of virtue literacy is virtue perception, which is an awareness of situations that either involve or require the virtues (*ibid.* 2017). The second component is virtue knowledge and understanding, which is when we comprehend the meaning behind a virtue and understand its importance, both at an individual level and as part of the overall flourishing life (*ibid.*). The final component is virtue reasoning, which is an understanding of when virtues collide or conflict in a situation and where the relevant discernment and adjudication is required before action (*ibid.*). Virtue literacy can be regarded as necessary for character building; it is a component of overall virtue which has proven to be cultivated in school contexts (Arthur *et al.* 2014).

3. Materials and Methods

30 semi-structured interviews were conducted with RE teachers to understand their life stories, worldviews, professional beliefs and approaches to RE. These interviews were part of the first phase of a research project examining the perspectives of RE teachers, the findings of which

are available in *Religious Education and Character: Personal Beliefs and Professional Approaches, Research Report* (Arthur et al., 2019).¹

As part of the interviews, all participants responded to a question asking them about their perspectives on the extent that RE can contribute to the development of pupils' character. However, as the interviews were semi-structured, participants sometimes revealed more about their views in earlier or later questions.

Participants ages ranged between 24 to 59 years, 11 were male and 19 were female, they worked within 26 schools across England. Participants narrated working in a wide range of schools, including academies, comprehensives, grammar and independent schools amongst others. For clarity, the *Get Information About Schools* website (2017) details that these schools consisted of eleven Academies (converter or sponsor led), three Community schools, one Free school, one Foundation school, eight Independent schools, and two Voluntary schools, Whilst 24 of these schools had secondary status, two were middle-deemed secondary. Participants were recruited from across England to ensure a variety of responses.

From a legal perspective, 17 of the 26 schools were listed as holding a religious foundation and/or ethos on the *Get Information About Schools* website (2017). However, a tension was identified between the legal designation of the school and the participants' own narration in the interviews. Specifically, five participants, all working in respective schools, did not narrate that their school had any kind of religious ethos during the interviews. When examining the transcripts, only 12 of the participants in the 17 schools explicitly narrated that they worked within a school with a religious ethos.

¹ All data in this article was collected by the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, School of Education, University of Birmingham.

Though it is conceivable that these five participants did not feel it was necessary to narrate the religious ethos of their schools, it was decided to be cautious when approaching this matter as one of these participants explicitly stated that they had never worked in a faith school (Participant 16). Similarly, another participant narrated that the school did not affiliate with any religious clubs or organisations, that they personally were against faith schools, and that it was not their role to promote religious faith (Participant 12). Similarly, two participants thought that RE should not promote the development of religious faith in pupils, and that teachers should not pray in lessons (Participants 1 and 19). The fifth participant stated that RE should not promote the development of religious faith, that they personally would find it unusual to pray in lessons but stated that it is dependent on context (Participant 21).

The narrations of participants suggest that defining a faith school based on whether it is legally recorded as having a religious foundation and/or ethos, is not enough to determine whether a school is a faith school. For instance, the narrations of Participants 12 and 16 strongly suggest that their schools are religious in legal status only, and that there is nothing distinctly religious about their schools. Considering the narrations of Participants 1, 19, and 21, the data suggests that the distinction between a faith and non-faith school is difficult to clearly define, and that they might be better thought as on a spectrum of religious faith.

For these reasons, we will refer only to the 12 participants who explicitly narrated their school as having a religious ethos as 'faith schools'. However, for transparency in this article, these participants' narrations and legal status will be detailed when quotes are used.

A diverse purposive sample of teachers with a range of religious backgrounds were sought to take part in the study. As such, participants were not homogenous in their worldviews and encapsulated a wide range of perspectives on religion and life more generally. Participants formed two broad categories, which can be subdivided further into smaller sets. The first group

(n=12) encompassed participants holding primarily non-religious worldviews. However, as some of the teachers would not clearly fit neatly in this classification, the category was made broader to include those who expressed a lack of clear belief in a higher power or deity. This category can be broken down to include: six atheists (including one Humanist), five agnostics (including one Humanist agnostic), and one teacher who identified as holding fluid or other worldviews.

The second category (n=18) comprised participants who expressed a worldview that would include a clear belief in a deity of higher power. This group included seven Catholics, one Anglican, one Church of England, three Christians, one Quaker, Religious Society of Friends, one Muslim, one non-practicing Sikh/theist, one theist, one person who identified as holding spiritual beliefs and lastly one person who identified as spiritual, sympathetic with Quaker views. Ten of the twelve participants who worked in faith schools, and eight of the 18 participants working in non-faith schools, expressed a worldview that would include a belief in a deity or higher power.

Full ethical approval was obtained from the University of Birmingham ethics committee. This study ensured that participants provided fully informed consent. Care has been taken to ensure that participants cannot be identified from data used within this article.

After the piloting of the interview schedule, interviews were then administered with participants over a span of six months. The length of interviews ranged between 67 and 205 minutes. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed and uploaded to NVIVO software. Themes were then identified within the data in line with Braun and Clarke's approach (2006). This consisted of becoming familiar with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing these themes through examining more data, and lastly naming and defining themes for production (*ibid.*).

4. Results

Across all participants' transcripts, a theme was identified that RE could contribute to the development of the three inter-related components of what was previously defined as pupils' virtue literacy (Jubilee Centre, 2017, p.8). Participants varied in their responses about how RE contributes to the three components of virtue literacy. These differences were principally between participants who worked within faith and non-faith schools. The following two sub-sections reflect this difference, examining in turn the participants from faith and non-faith schools, to highlight the differences between these two groups. As we are also broadly interested in the relationship between personal and professional worldviews, we will also refer to participants' self-reported worldviews where necessary.

4.1. *Virtue Literacy in Faith Schools*

This first sub-section details the responses of participants from faith schools. This sub-section will explore the three inter-related components in turn, in terms of participants' perspectives about how RE can contribute to virtue literacy.

Participants agreed that RE lessons provide pupils with an opportunity to develop pupils' virtue perception, the first component of virtue literacy, through exploring ethical issues either including or standing in need of the virtues. Participants from different worldviews stated that pupils have opportunities to engage with various ethical issues in RE, providing opportunities to develop their virtue perception. The extract below captures this viewpoint:

I was having this conversation actually with one of my classes earlier. I was saying "what are the subjects that you talk about things like abortion and euthanasia and war and peace, prejudice and discrimination in the way that we do in RE?"

Participant 5, Catholic, school legally designated as an Academy with a Roman Catholic foundation. During the interview, the participant narrated a religious ethos within the school.

Participants reported that RE could contribute to the second component of virtue literacy, pupils' virtue knowledge and understanding. Often, participants who worked in faith schools referred directly to examples of virtues from across all four building blocks of character, identified by the Jubilee Centre in the *Framework for Character Education* (p.5).

Out of these four building blocks, participants primarily referred to examples of moral virtues, but there was also some reference to examples from the intellectual, performance and civic virtues. When participants mentioned one virtue, they tended to go on to speak about other virtues, reinforcing the idea that virtues are connected and form clusters (Kristjánsson, 2015, p. 14). This is illustrated below, where a participant speaks about the four central principles that they perceive RE can contribute toward, moving from speaking about care to forgiveness:

Absolutely because it is all about caring, sharing, loving, forgiving, they're the four principles, aren't they? It all about making them into the people they need to, want to, can be or should be, or whatever expression you want to put into it.

Participant 9, Catholic, school legally designated as an academy with a Roman Catholic foundation. During the interview, the participant narrated a religious ethos within the school.

From the responses of participants, a theme was identified that RE can develop virtue reasoning, the third component of virtue literacy, in a manner that benefitted pupils from a range of religious backgrounds. In the example below, the participant explains how using the parable of the Good Samaritan can get pupils to reflect on how they would act in a similar situation, and through this reasoning, develop their character:

So, if I was teaching about the Good Samaritan and I have 10 atheists in my class, or 10 students who are not Christian, that can still allow them to develop their character... through the content of your lesson you can allow them to reflect how does this influence the way you treat people? ... the next question could be: reflect on or apply this as to how would you deal with a similar situation? So, my answer could be as a student: "If I came across someone who was attacked, this story has now told me that you should not walk on by and ignore, thinking that someone else is going to help them. Because at the end of the day we should ignore what religion you are and go and help the person". ... Internally developing their character and their morals, values, human development, whatever you want to call it, you're trying to develop them as a good person.

Participant 2, non-practising Sikh/theist, school legally designated as a Voluntary school with a Roman Catholic foundation. During the interview, the participant narrated a religious ethos within the school.

Similarly, another participant who identified as atheist stated that RE can allow pupils the opportunity to reflect on how they impact others and develop their empathy:

I'm hoping that by the time students leave here after the sixth form that they've been taught how to think for themselves, how to identify with other people and understand people's feelings and how they have an impact on that. I think to a large extent they've learnt that in RE. That's where they've been given the opportunity to reflect on those kinds of things.

Participant 11, atheist, school legally designated as an Independent school with a Church of England ethos. During the interview, the participant narrated a religious ethos within the school.

4.2. *Virtue Literacy in Non-Faith Schools*

This second sub-section details the responses of participants working in non-faith schools. We will again explore participants' responses to how RE can contribute to the three components of virtue literacy, but we will refer back to the findings from participants in faith schools to highlight similarities and differences. In the first example below, a participant explains how RE can present opportunities for pupils to develop their understanding of virtue perception through engagement with ethical issues in lessons:

You've got the war, terrorism, the horrific things, and you've got the beautiful poetry and art and selfless action and heroic action. You've got everything there that makes people - people. Including their characters and their virtues and what they hold important.

Participant 24, atheist, school legally designated as a Foundation school with no religious foundation or ethos.

Likewise, participants who reported a religious worldview also noted that RE could present opportunities to develop virtue perception. In the extract below a participant outlines how RE can deliver content on ethical issues surrounding community issues and the sanctity of life:

It's more about the other side, the things that we do, like in Year 9, the community stuff, the sanctity of life stuff, the problem of evil stuff. That's more... everyone can kind of give their views on that.

Participant 27, Muslim, school legally designated as a Foundation school with no religious foundation or ethos.

Relating this back to faith schools, these findings suggest that RE in all types of schools, regardless of faith foundation or the participants' religious worldviews, are similar in that they allow pupils opportunity to engage with ethical issues in lessons. This provides opportunities for the development of pupils' virtue perception through highlighting with them situations that need a virtue response.

Participants from non-faith schools often narrated about how RE could contribute to pupils' overall character development. However, character was often articulated in a broad or even technical manner that did not refer to specific virtues, for example moral ones, as was the case in the faith schools:

We sometimes just see it about the GCSE subject and what they're going to get there and then, but actually we're building people... The soft skills element. I think for character I think it gives you things in a subtle way, rather than an explicit boom - here's your character; this is the virtues for example that you've learnt. No, there isn't any of that in RE, but I'm not convinced that there needs to be.

Participant 3, agnostic, school legally designated as an Academy with no religious foundation or ethos.

This was also the case for participants reporting religious worldviews, who also spoke about the general contribution that RE lessons can make to the development of pupils' character. The example below demonstrates one example of this finding:

RE contributes in a way that students develop morally, perhaps not necessarily spiritually. So I'd make that distinction. It develops their character in a personal, social and developmental sense.

Participant 29, Christian, school legally designated as an Academy with no religious

foundation or ethos.

Referring back to the first sub-section, these findings suggest that participants who work in faith schools are more likely to utilise a language of virtues through RE lessons. However, this is not to suggest that non-faith schools do not cultivate virtue knowledge and understanding more generally across the school. In the example below, a participant states that the RE teacher has a role in developing pupils' virtues, but that this is situated in the greater context of the whole school:

I am of the opinion that virtues don't come easily, because virtues aren't one off actions. ... To become virtuous would imply that they've developed a character habit, that they've instilled and it becomes a long-standing thing that they do on a day-to-day basis. That has to start from home and early on in schools. I think that's the job of the entire school, not just the RS teacher. I think the RS teacher has an interesting perspective on that because virtues are a big part of the ideas that we teach about, but if a school expected like "right so the RS department is now responsible for character development in our school and this is all done through these lessons" - that's not enough.

Participant 30, Humanist agnostic, school legally designated as an Academy with no religious foundation or ethos.

Participants noted that, through engaging with ethical issues, pupils have an opportunity for discussion of ethical issues in the RE classroom and through this interaction develop virtue reasoning. The account below shows an example of this:

If we take something like euthanasia, the majority of my Year 10s have given it no real thought until we discuss it. Through discussing it, they are also touching on what they think about life after death, what they think about the value of life and the

sanctity of life, all those things. I think those things all help to build your character. So I think through having these open discussions, it allows them to develop who they are.

Participant 17, theist, school legally designated as a Community school with no religious foundation or ethos.

This finding was the same for participants who reported no identification with a religious worldview. The example below shows that there is a space for virtue reasoning through discussion in RE:

I think we definitely have a unique space in RE where you can talk about things in a way that you can't in other classrooms. You're trained to be able to think in ways. Not told how to think, but you're given tools for how to think. And how to discuss, and how to consider different things, in ways you're not... maybe in other lessons... RE is the place where you're actually considering these different things, getting these different tools for how to understand humanity. For me, that's crucial for character building.

Participant 14, atheist, school legally designated as a Community school with no religious foundation or ethos.

Connecting these findings with those of the previous sub-section, participants who worked in faith and non-faith schools stated that RE provided a space for discussion and reflection, which facilitated the development of pupils' virtue reasoning. However, as explained already, there was a significant difference in the emphasis and focus of these two cohorts, as participants working with faith schools were more likely to use a language of virtues when asked about the extent that RE contribute to character education.

Across all participants, there were clear examples of virtues from the intellectual, moral, and performance categories; there was also a singular mention of wisdom, and the civic virtue of service (Jubilee Centre 2017).

The most commonly cited virtues were from the moral virtues category (n=20). The most common examples were compassion (n=3), respect (n=3) and tolerance (n=2). Following this, there was one mention for each of the following moral virtues: altruism, courage, duty, empathy, forgiveness, gratitude, justice, love, openness, patience, trust, and ‘understanding people’s feelings’ (which we interpret as sympathy).

Intellectual virtues were the next most mentioned category (n=10). The most commonly cited examples were reflection (n=4), understanding (n=3) and judgement (n=2). Lastly, there were also recurrent references to the performance virtue of listening (n=4). The above counts of virtues do not include when participants have repeatedly referred to the same virtues in their answers.

4.3. Alternate Routes to Develop Character

Although some participants believed that RE could make a positive contribution to the three inter-related components of virtue literacy, a third of participants emphasised that RE was not solely responsible for the development of pupils’ character. This finding was consistent for participants both in faith and non-faith schools. In the example below a participant concurs with the views of Ofsted (2019) and the Jubilee Centre (2017) in that character education should permeate all subject lessons to ensure its successful delivery:

Well, in any school, really, it should. Any subject should. So, if I’m looking at in History or Geography or any Humanities subject the experiences of people round the world. So, maybe it’s, I don’t know, a natural disaster, famine or war, and I’m able to identify with that on a human level, I should be in my classroom developing

empathy and compassion. In Maths, if I'm teaching children about the importance of ambition or resilience or drive or whatever else, to keep going with a difficult problem, I think really that should permeate everything, if you're doing it well.

Participant 7, Anglican, school legally designated as an Academy with a Church of England foundation. During the interview, the participant narrated a religious ethos within the school.

Participants in non-faith schools stated similar reasons. In the quote below the participant states that the whole-school ethos and PSHE curriculum can also contribute to the development of character:

I think every subject done in the right way can develop a pupil's character. I don't think it's the unique remit of RE. I think you can do lots of different things in History, in Geography that are all about character as in values. I think we might have certain areas where we might discuss it more but PSHE can do it. If you look at some of our PSHE thing, there are whole sections on character and virtues. So, I don't think it's just the remit of RE. The ethos of the school can do it as well.

Participant 16, Other Worldviews [Fluid Worldviews], school legally designated as an Independent with a Christian foundation and ethos. During the interview, the participant did not narrate a religious ethos in the school.

Similarly, another participant narrated the entire school contributes to the development of pupils' character, but also noted the contribution of external influences:

That has to start from home and early on in schools. I think that's the job of the entire school, not just the RS teacher.

Participant 30, Humanist agnostic, school legally designated as an Academy with no religious foundation or ethos.

5. Discussion

The narrated responses of participants working in faith and non-faith schools were different regarding the extent to which RE contributes to pupils' virtue knowledge and understanding. Participants working within faith schools tended to use a language of moral virtues when prompted about the relationship between RE and character education. This was not as evident within those participants working in non-faith schools, suggesting that the structure of RE lessons in faith schools provides more emphasis on the development of moral virtues. As the development of moral virtues can be considered part of the wider responsibility of a school to provide SMSC development to pupils, the findings of this article would suggest that SMSC development is approached differently in faith and non-faith schools.

However, this is not to suggest that non-faith schools do not develop pupils' moral virtues; some participants explained that this was due to the influence and work of individual teachers or is the responsibility of the whole-school ethos. Either of these possibilities would not exclude the impact of the RE classroom, as it resides within the school ethos and will be taught by a teacher. Participants in non-faith schools also narrated that the virtues were more likely to appear in PSHE. Within faith schools, whole-school ethos and RE are more clearly intertwined (DoCE, 2012). This would suggest that in non-faith schools, where ethos and RE are separate, it is the case that moral virtues are more likely to emerge and develop through whole-school ethos and PSHE lessons than RE lessons.

The finding that school type, rather than personal worldview, makes more difference to the responses of the 30 participants was unexpected, as it indicates that institutional factors matter more than personal ones. However, as the research study only examines the viewpoints of 30 participants, we cannot speak generally about all types of faith and non-faith schools. Furthermore, as participants were asked to volunteer for the interviews, there may have been a selection bias.

6. Conclusion

This article has outlined the partial results of 30 interviews undertaken with participants across England. All the RE teachers in the interviews responded positively when asked whether they believe RE contributes to character education or not, and there was an overarching theme across participants that RE contributes to pupils' virtue literacy as defined by the Jubilee Centre framework (2017). Participants in faith schools referred to virtues from all of the four building blocks of character (*ibid.*), however the most commonly cited were the moral virtues. This article reinforces existing claims made that RE does contribute to moral virtues such as respect (CoRE, 2018; Ofsted, 2013).

As these are findings from the perspectives of the RE teachers themselves, it does not mean that RE is necessarily positively developing pupils' character or moral virtues. It may be that RE teachers perceive their work to be more effective than it is in actuality, or they have fallen prey to a social desirability bias in the interviews. We are unable to generalise from these 30 interviews alone. However, they provide an indication of what may be occurring within different school types, and they add further support to arguments about the importance of RE within the new character-education movement.

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