



CREaTE

Canterbury Research and Theses Environment

Canterbury Christ Church University's repository of research outputs

<http://create.canterbury.ac.uk>

Please cite this publication as follows:

Casson, A. and Cooling, T. (2019) Religious education for spiritual bricoleurs? the perceptions of students in ten Christian-ethos secondary schools in England and Wales. *Journal of Beliefs and Values*. ISSN 1361-7672.

Link to official URL (if available):

<https://doi.org/10.1080/13617672.2019.1632596>

This version is made available in accordance with publishers' policies. All material made available by CReaTE is protected by intellectual property law, including copyright law. Any use made of the contents should comply with the relevant law.

Contact: create.library@canterbury.ac.uk



Religious Education for spiritual bricoleurs? The perceptions of students in ten Christian-ethos secondary schools in England and Wales

Abstract

Religious Education (RE) in England and Wales functions within a post-secular culture. In the last fifty years, approaches characterised by academic rigour, impartiality, and professionalism have been prioritised. In this post-secular culture, the notion of bricolage aptly describes how some young people seek meaning, explore the spiritual dimension of life, with fragmented understandings of, experiences and encounters with the religious traditions. This paper draws on data from an empirical research project involving 350 students, to explore why students in ten Christian-ethos secondary schools in England and Wales recognised Religious Education (RE) as a significant contributor to their spiritual development. The analysis is illuminated by employing Roebben's (2009) concept of a narthical learning space (NLS) as the lens with which to examine young people's experiences. Three aspects of RE are explored: the debating of existential questions; opportunities to theologise and reflect; and encounters with the beliefs, practices, and opinions of others. This article argues that the concept of RE as a narthical learning space alongside the notion of young people as spiritual bricoleurs illuminates how the students in this study interpret the contribution of RE to their spiritual development.

Keywords: religious Education; spiritual development; faith schools; Christian Education

Introduction

The religious landscape of Western Europe has undoubtedly changed in the last fifty years; the Christian tradition exists now in a post-secular culture characterised by pluralisation, individualisation, and de-institutionalisation (Boeve 2012; Bowie, Peterson & Revell, 2012). The eminent French sociologist Danièle Hervieu-Léger (2000) argues that the fragmented and forgotten memory of the Christian tradition may

have led to a de-institutionalisation, but it has not led to a disappearance of religion. However, this de-institutionalisation has resulted in a focus on the individual, on personal choice. Hervieu-Léger (1998) argues that a consequence of this is that people choose to practice religious bricolage, and assert a right, so to do. Bricolage is a process by which individuals create meaning, by making creative and resourceful use of whatever materials are to hand regardless of their original purpose (Hervieu-Léger, 1998). Bricolage could be negatively construed as pick and mix, but it offers a positive potentiality. Given their complexity, plurality, and internal diversity, religious traditions, and other worldviews are thus spiritual resources to be drawn on. Relevant elements contribute to the construction of a personal worldview, which is influenced by institutional worldviews, whether consciously or not (Commission on Religious Education, 2018, p.72). Bricolage does not happen in a vacuum; young people are not entirely free to choose, but rather are reflexive inhabitants of a habitus (Cooling, 2019). What then would RE look like if it paid attention to the idea of young people as spiritual bricoleurs?

A potential model of RE, which encompasses this vision, is the narthical learning space (NLS) approach developed by Bert Roebben (2009). This article looks to evaluate this approach, drawing on an empirical research study, involving students in ten Christian-ethos secondary schools. The concept of NLS is employed as a potential lens to examine young people's experiences of spiritual development within RE. In particular, three aspects of RE are considered, the debating of existential questions; opportunities to theologise and reflect; and encounters with the beliefs, practices, and opinions of others. The discussion considers how the concepts of the NLS and bricolage illuminate how the students in this study interpret the contribution of RE to their spiritual development.

Spiritual development

Spiritual development is an ambiguous term, and often the breadth of interpretation renders it meaningless; in a post-secular culture, it has been redefined, reinvented with little reference to the traditional meaning of the term (Davis, 1998; Giordan, 2010).

Spirituality fills the vacuum left by religion, maybe because religion is no longer able to meet people's spiritual needs (Flanagan, 2010); individuals are no longer at home within institutional religion. The work of Hay and Nye (2006) has been influential in defining the nature of the spiritual development of young people; they argue that spirituality is, in essence, relational. They speak of relational consciousness and identified four categories of spiritual relationships child-God, child-people, child-world, and child-self. Spiritual development is about developing positive relationships with others and being supported by others to develop spiritually. It is an understanding of these relationships in the spirit of Martin Buber's I-Thou analysis, characterised by a depth of encounter and engagement, rather than I-It relationships (Hay, 1998). Another scholar of interest here is Australian scholar Brendan Hyde (2008), who describes young people's approach to the spiritual dimension as being about questing, a weaving of the threads of meaning.

Within the context of English education, the National Curriculum for England (section 2:1) requires all state-funded schools to ensure that their curriculum promotes the spiritual, moral, cultural and social development of their pupils (Department for Education, 2013). Spiritual development is evidenced by, among other things, students' ability to be reflective about their beliefs, religious or otherwise, and their respect for others faiths, feelings and values; and their ability to use imagination and creativity in their learning (Ofsted, 2016, 35). This leads to a wide variety of interpretations within

schools. The focus of this paper is on spiritual development within the context of Christian Education. The spiritual dimension has always been there within Christianity; often flourishing within religious communities, occupying a liminal space between individual and institution (Giordan, 2010). The understanding of spiritual development employed in this article informed by the work of Hay and Nye (2006), and Hyde (2008). It recognises that spiritual development is an essential element of human flourishing, about growth in an openness to the spiritual dimension of life, characterised by critical openness (Astley, 2018, 22). In Christian schools, the ethos or the characteristic tone or feel, the cultural dispositions are shaped by the Christian tradition in which they exist. (McLaughlin, 2005, 311; Grace, 2002). For example, Church of England schools draw on a vision of Education that is deeply Christian, with the promise by Jesus of 'life in all its fullness' at its heart. (Church of England Education Office, 2016)

Religious Education

Religious Education holds a unique position in a post-secular culture as it offers significant space and time within the curriculum, where young people can draw on the resources of faith and belief traditions, to explore and discover meaning, discuss existential questions and consider the responses of the religious traditions. The 1944 Education Act in England and Wales established RE as compulsory in all state-funded schools. In the early years, confessional approaches were commonplace; it was assumed that RE was based within the Christian tradition, and often interpreted in a faith formation context. Since the 1960s, within mainstream RE, a variety of approaches have been adopted, such as phenomenological, dialogical, experiential, interpretive, narrative, and religious literacy (Jackson, 2000; Worsley, 2013). All these emphasise more impartial approaches to Religious Education, with the stress on a move towards

teaching and learning without discrimination as to ethnicity, religion, class, or political opinions (Jackson & Everington, 2017, 10). The focus here is on the Christian education sector, and here also there was a move towards more impartial approaches, which were seen as more professional and more relevant in a pluralist culture (Worsley, 2013). One result of these changes is that in a culture characterised by detraditionalisation, RE in all schools, including within Christian Education, has not sufficiently addressed the question of its influence on young people's spiritual development. Is it possible to interpret RE in a way that pays attention to this, without returning to confessional approaches focussed solely on faith formation? This is of particular relevance at a time when RE is often the only place where young people encounter an institutional religious worldview.

Narthical Learning space

A search for pertinent interpretations of a model of RE which addressed this question led to the influential work of Bert Roebben in Western Europe. Roebben (2009) recognises that young people are seeking meaning, and they no longer have access to an experience of religious traditions, and he argues that it is now time for a new approach, for a spiritually sensitive RE in the classroom. He proposes a way of learning in/through religion, learning in the presence of the other, where RE should be an opportunity for the discovery of meaning, rather than a place of meaning giving. The image of the narthex, which is literally the entrance of a church building, becomes the metaphor for this religious learning process. RE is a narthical learning space (NLS); a space between spaces where young people can explore issues of faith and spiritual development in safety. There is a focus on the exploration of the existential dimension of human life; where existential questions are discussed and considered seriously; and

'interpretive models for understanding and responding to these questions can be found and discussed in peaceful constructive ways' (Roebben, 2016, 13). Secondly, there is a provision for opportunities and encouragement for students to theologise. Thirdly, RE is a place where there is an openness for encounters of religious traditions and experiences; a focus on narrative and personal storytelling, where students can explore the roots of their beliefs and values. RE is thus potentially a place for the learner (and the teacher) to view life from a different perspective and enter into the space of "productive otherness" (Roebben, 2009, 17). The understanding of the RE classroom as a safe space for the personal exploration of others' beliefs resonates with research into Integrated Worldview Education in Finland. Here the RE or Worldview education classroom functions as a safe space for encounter and exploration of others beliefs, with an acknowledgment of a fluid, flexible and more eclectic approach to religious identity (Åhs, Poulter, Kallioniemi, 2016). It is a space where students are developing their personal worldview, in encounters with institutional worldviews, religious, and non-religious (Commission on Religious Education, 2018, Cooling, 2019). The concept of NLS encompasses the understanding of spirituality identified by Hay and Nye, (2006) and Hyde, (2008), offers a space for developing a personal worldview, while recognising that young people's approaches are individualistic; undertaken in the way of a bricoleur, fluid and fragmented.

However, the NLS model is not without shortcomings, three of which need to be addressed here, (i) the use of the metaphor of the narthex, (ii) the question of whether this is a return to a confessional approach to RE and (iii) the interpretation of the role of the RE teacher. The use of the narthex as the metaphor could be misinterpreted as a threshold into faith. Sagberg (2015) identified evidence of an NLS model in practice, where teachers sought to enable children to talk about faith, without influencing them in

a particular direction. However, he considered the image of pilgrimage to be a more open and appropriate metaphor, if the essence of Education is about the 'art of exploring the most important questions of life on a journey together with young co-travellers' (Sagberg, 2015, 153). For the NLS to have relevance within RE, it should not be viewed as a threshold point, not a signpost to faith, but rather a safe space to practise bricolage, to explore faith traditions.

The NLS model has been employed with a confessional framework; it inspired De Kock's (2015) development of the concept of encounter in his youth ministry studies. The NLS could be interpreted as confessional as it encourages the provision of opportunities for students to theologise. Doing theology within RE is a contentious issue; it is seen as irrelevant, challenging, impossible outside of a community of believers (Brine, 2016) and Cush, (1999) would question whether theologising within the RE classroom counts as theology. Research has highlighted that students and teachers struggle with theological interpretation in RE (Copley, Freathy, & Walsh, 2004; Conroy, 2016). However, Pett and Cooling's (2018) detailed analysis of the Church of England's new resource *Understanding Christianity* suggests that a theological approach is accessible and appropriate within state-funded Religious Education. This paper argues that the voice of young people should be valued; they are capable of being ordinary theologians (Astley, 2002). This is not a return to confessional approach, the NLS interpretation of RE as a space for exploration, clearly challenges the more confessional, traditional aim of Christian or Catholic Education of faith formation (Wright, 2018).

Within the NLS approach, the RE teacher has a crucial role. They are expected to be an authentic, proactive presence, moving beyond traditional models, open to the potential that 'new spiritual experiences originated when young people experientially

learn to redefine and re-dignify themselves through religious traditions' (Roebben, 2016, 34). This poses a challenge for RE teachers, especially as it can no longer be assumed that they have experience of being within a religious tradition. Edward Wright (2018) explored how employing the NLS model encourages students to reflect and represent their lives in more creative ways. He concluded that many Catholic educators would lack the skills to help young people develop their own stories and place them within the context of the Catholic faith tradition (Wright, 2018, 7). Court (2013) argued contentiously that the RE teacher in a school with a religious character must be a spiritual seeker. In contrast, the most common approach adopted by teachers of religion is what Sagberg (2015) describes as the town square model, in other words, an impartial approach where teachers' talk about the meaning of religion without giving it special focus or involving oneself' (Sagberg, 2015, 15). This approach considers RE as a detached, objective exercise. However, it is not neutral, and Sagberg (2015) questions whether this approach can provide holistic learning within RE. The nature of teaching and learning within RE is integrally connected with personal spiritual development, and thus, it will inevitably lead to issues of personal meaning giving (Roebben, 2016). The NLS demands an openness to new spiritual understandings and experiences from the RE teacher, which is challenging both for teachers with religious and non-religious worldviews.

Despite the critiques of the NLS model, a compelling reason to take the NLS approach seriously is that when listening to the voice of the young people, it echoes their experience. The NLS responds to changes in western European society and reflects an awareness of a post-secular culture where, although there is a decline in the religious institutions, there is not a decline in the religious (Hervieu-Léger, 2000). It could be

seen to address the needs of spiritual bricoleurs; it acknowledges young people's spiritual questing, their seeking of meaning.

Method

In the UK, young people's spiritual development within faith schools is a much-neglected area of research (Cooling & Green, 2009). In seeking to address this gap in the research, a two-year research initiative was undertaken by the National Institute for Christian Education Research (NICER) at Canterbury Christ Church University, working in association with Warwick Religions and Education Research Unit (WRERU) at the University of Warwick. The project investigated how ten Christian-ethos secondary schools in England and Wales contributed to the spiritual development of their students. The data for this article is drawn from this project, which employed both quantitative (WRERU) and qualitative methods (NICER). Schools were invited to apply through an open competitive process to participate in the research project. They had to provide written evidence and examples of their commitment to making a positive contribution to the spiritual development in school. Ten secondary schools were selected (through rigorous scrutiny of applications by the project steering committee), who had provided examples of a holistic approach to spiritual development (a limit of ten was selected as being the maximum that could be reasonably investigated in depth within the time constraints of the project). The selected schools were a joint Catholic and Anglican secondary school, a Christian foundation school, and eight Church of England schools; each was unique, expressing a Christian-ethos in their context (Casson, Cooling & Francis, 2017).

The ten schools involved are described as Christian-ethos schools; the terminology of Christian ethos is deliberately chosen to be inclusive of both church schools and other schools with Christian foundations. The state-funded Christian education sector in England and Wales is diverse; the majority of schools are founded by the Church of England or Catholic Church, but the sector also includes multi-academy trusts and free schools with Christian foundations. Their place in the English and Welsh education system is contentious; they can be misinterpreted as faith schools where all students share the faith tradition, and the aim is to nurture students' faith. The Church of England is the largest provider of such schools and academies in England, with 4,700 schools educating one million students (Church of England, 2016), and has a long history of involvement in Education (Chadwick, 2001, 475). Their schools are distinct; they are schools with a church foundation serving the local community. They are schools where the ethos reflects the Christian faith tradition, but not all students are from that tradition, and the stated aim is not the faith formation of students. However, Church of England schools have traditionally held in balance two functions, a domestic function of Education of children from Christian homes and a general function of service to all in the community (Francis, 1993, 54). This century the Church of England has prioritised the service role of their schools, recently (2016) presenting a vision of Education for the whole community; Education with a Christian framework rooted in scripture and Christian theology.

Essential to the research process was working in collaboration with the schools as partners; they were encouraged to help shape the research in their respective schools. Secondly, there was a desire to bring to the fore the voices and perceptions of the young people in each school; to explore students' interpretations of spiritual development in school. With all research in school, there are ethical risks; the research team were

aware of and sought to mitigate the risks to young people and educational professionals in exploring sensitive issues about personal beliefs and values. Although all the schools agreed to be named in the final publication (Casson, Cooling & Francis, 2017), all participants were anonymised and given pseudonyms where relevant. The project was scrutinised by University ethics committees.

The research project generated both quantitative and qualitative data, analysis of the former highlighted that it is the collective worldview of the students, which is crucial in reflecting and shaping the ethos of schools (Francis, Casson, and McKenna, 2018). This article draws on the qualitative data generated in these Christian-ethos schools, in particular, from semi-structured focus group interviews with 350 students. The researcher spent two weeks in each of the schools over a period of two years. Students were interviewed in groups of 6 to 8 on the school premises. The original groups were selected by a key contact in the school, from years 7 & 8 (11-13 years old); year 9 (13-14 years old); and years 10 & 11 (14 -16 years old) and where relevant years 12& 13 (16-18 years old). In addition, students from specific groups were interviewed; for example, the school worship committee, the school council, and student chaplains.

Within each of these schools, the researcher was an outsider, not connected with the schools. However, the researcher was also an insider, in that they were a Christian and had previous experience of teaching RE within Christian-ethos schools. For the students interviewed, many presumed that the researcher role was inspectorial. The groups of students were accustomed to and confident about speaking with school inspectors, school governors, or other visitors and interviewing potential new members of staff. The importance of moving away from this perception and establishing a rapport was crucial, and this became apparent in the openness and fruitfulness of the

discussions, particularly in the interviews that took place on the return visit to the school.

Focus groups were chosen over individual interviews as being the most effective method of investigating the approach of the school, rather than an individual's spiritual development journey. One drawback of pupil focus groups is the undeniable influence of their peers on each other's responses and that less confident children may be more reluctant to contribute (Lewis, 1992). The research team was aware that different responses might have been obtained in individual interviews, outside the school time and space. Other interviews were undertaken with staff, parents, governors, and other key stakeholders. A selection of teachers was interviewed either individually or in focus groups, and this article also draws on individual interviews with RE teachers in all the ten schools.

The interview transcripts and observation notes were uploaded and coded using NVivo software; the aim of the analysis process was for the themes to emerge from the data. A detailed analysis led to a wide variety of features identified as positively contributing to the spiritual development of students. This article focuses on one of the features identified by students, namely, time and space in Religious Education. Closer scrutiny of the students' responses led to the identification of three aspects: the opportunity for discussing existential questions, a space to do theology and reflect; and a place for encounters with ideas and practices of others. It can be seen how these resonate with the characteristics of the NLS model, employing this lens illuminates their understanding of the contribution of RE to spiritual development.

The findings

Before exploring the contribution of RE, it is useful to look at how the students

interpreted spiritual development. As with the findings of Hay and Nye (2006), the main focus was relational, although, in contrast to the latter's findings in this project, there was little reference to the child -world category. Students focussed on the development of self; this was about an individual's potential and aspirations. Secondly, there was an emphasis on a sense of community, this was about a connection with other people, and being there for others. Thirdly, some students spoke of development in terms of getting closer to God and making a connection with God. Finally, in a category that echoed Hyde (2008) research, spiritual development was seen as a quest for meaning: a deepening of knowledge and understanding, being able to articulate an informed, reasoned opinion on matters of faith and religion. It is this last category, that resonates with how the students characterised the contribution of RE. Students stressed that RE was different from all other subjects in school. It was a lesson where they were encouraged to be spiritual, as one student explained, 'most of the times in our [RE] lessons it isn't so much like they're teaching; [it is not] like maths where they talk to us, and then we'd write it down and then move on' (Year 9 Student).

Students drew attention to Religious Education as being a time and space to discuss the existential questions, in-depth topics and critical issues. Students highlighted the opportunities provided in RE to be challenged by questions of philosophy, ethics, and theology. A group of year 9¹ students referred to a module on the Holocaust, which had stimulated many discussions on the question of suffering and the existence of evil in the world: for one student it proved that 'humanity has failed,' others questioned whether it meant God could not exist. In one school, the RE curriculum focussed on the big religious, philosophical, and ethical questions, encouraging students to question and

¹ English secondary school year groups: y7 11-12 years; y8 12-13 years; y9 13-14 years; y10 14-15 years; y11 15-16 years; y12 16-17 years; y13 17-18 years.

seek meanings. Students engaged with these questions reflected, and developed their responses and questions; they were enthusiastic about this approach and appreciated the debates. Several students across all the schools stressed that RE made them think differently, it 'can stimulate questions that we talk about outside of the lessons, at lunch and break' (Year 10 student). Engaging with the existential questions encouraged students to form their responses, and develop opinions, perceived by students as a critical factor in their spiritual development. For example, a year 9 student explained 'the way they do it; it helps you to solidify your opinions on what matters ... teaches you what you to sort of think about stuff and the way you see the world'. Students interpreted developing opinions as shaping the person you were becoming.

Without opinions you're just listening to what everyone else thinks. I think that opinions and every opinion you ... makes you who you are, and without opinions, you wouldn't really know yourself, and nobody else would really know who you are and what makes you. So, I think that [RE] enables you to give your own opinion. (Year 8 Student)

Some students reflected that the open discussions in RE helped them to understand their faith better.

I think the RE lessons are important because it's a lesson which you're free to challenge and discuss things in. There is a sense of an open discussion, where people can say what they think and question their faith, which allows them to understand it better. (Year 12 Student)

For student, an inquiry-based approach to RE was perceived as contributing to their spiritual development. Here it could be seen that RE was functioning as a NLS where young people could explore the existential dimension of life.

A second strand common to both the students' responses and the NLS model is the

opportunity to theologise. This was visible in one school, where theology was designated as a separate subject in addition to Religious Studies. This school was unique among the ten schools in that a high proportion of the students identified as Christians (Casson, Cooling & Francis, 2017). The leadership in this school had focused on providing opportunities for their students to be challenged and to develop an educated faith. Theology involved engagement with theological concepts and controversies; the study of eschatology was a favourite with many students. It provided an opportunity to learn about theological concepts in depth, in a way that was absent from the young people's worshipping community, where students suggested the preaching was often directed at the adults. Within each the RE classroom, there was a diversity of expressions of what it meant to be a Christian, which provided a richness of theological discussions.

In all of the schools, students drew attention to opportunities in RE for reflection and prayer. For example, the RE departments made use of the school chapel, bringing the whole class into the sacred space. Students mentioned opportunities to pray in RE; for example, some of the teachers had a prayer tree on their desk. One Head of RE had deliberately built in thinking time to all lessons, even into the examination classes, as she recognised that students needed time to process the questions, to fathom out what it meant for themselves and their beliefs. The findings suggested that RE was providing as in a NLS, opportunities to theologise, where students were developing critical thinking skills and a questioning approach to faith.

The third strand of an NLS is the openness to encountering others and a place to explore who they are and their spiritual development. Many students commented on how encountering the opinions of other people, and different worldviews influenced

their spiritual development, learning about other religion 'engaged' their minds and helped them 'understand other people's kind of ways of thinking '(Year 9 Student).

You'd expect [as] a Christian school that they'd more persuade you towards being Christian, but it's not like that here it's different, and it's about making your own choices and understanding like other religions so you can make your own choice.
(Year 9 Student)

When the students spoke of encountering other students' views in the classroom, they were mainly referring to those of other Christian denominations or from a non-faith background. In all the ten of these Christian-ethos secondary schools, most students had a background in the Christian faith tradition or had no faith background; there was only a minority of students from other faith traditions. While there was an awareness of diversity within Christianity, several of the students from non-Christian faith traditions explained that there was not the same awareness of diversity within their tradition. One year 10 Muslim student eloquently explained how in RE, it was problematic as 'it's usually the main branch that they will teach about and I am not from the main branch. So, I'm just sitting there not agreeing with certain things that are taught'. Another year 8 Muslim student explained how he wasn't a 'real' Muslim as his family didn't do what Muslims did in the textbook. A student from a Jewish background explained she was Jewish by race not religion and she knew little of Judaism, 'because I went to a Christian primary school as well, now I know a lot of stuff about Christianity even though I'm not Christian.' These examples highlight the diverse, multi, fragmentary spiritual identities of young people within the RE classroom. Any approach in RE, which involves learning with others, about and from other traditions in the classroom, needs to acknowledge students own understanding of their spiritual development and the fragmented ways they may connect with faith traditions. There is a need for an

awareness of diversity between religions and for RE teachers' an interest in students as individual persons (rather than simply learners) is key' (Jackson and Everington, 2017, 14). This involves examining information about young people's religious background in the context of diversity within and without religious traditions.

Students were exploring who they were and the roots of their beliefs within faith traditions. It must be noted that this exploration was taking place within a school ethos rooted in the Christian tradition, findings would have been different in a different habitus. Several students identified themselves as a Christian atheist; which usually meant that they had rejected certain aspects of Christianity, a few rejected beliefs and retained practices such as attending church with the family. For the majority, it was a rejection of Christian practice, with acceptance of a selection of beliefs, or attitudes, which they deemed relevant. In this respect, the findings resonate with Woodhead's (2016) surveying of adults in Britain who profess no religion, where the surveys reveal clearly that the 'nones are not straightforwardly secular' (Woodhead, 2016, 249). One student spoke how RE had influenced her journey from a Christian in year 7, to a militant atheist to now her present agnostic position. However, for some, RE was an opportunity to reflect on and strengthen their understanding of their faith tradition. One year 11 student explained 'in a way looking at other religions that sort of grounded my faith even better.' Another suggested that one factor in her development has been studying RE with like-minded students and teachers.

[The school] has made me more of a Christian ... [in RE] ... that's when the whole belief thing came in for me. So, I think it's definitely helped me yes just by being surrounded by people who question and people who believe and teachers who are like-minded like you and know what you're thinking. (Year 12 Student)

The students had a fragmentary approach to the religious traditions; this was apparent

in their perception that learning about and from others, provided an opportunity for them to reflect on elements relevant for their spiritual development. RE could be seen to be functioning as a NLS, providing an 'encounter with lived religion, traditions, symbols and rituals – viewed from 'the narthex' yet without necessarily entering the sanctuary itself" (Sagberg, 2015, 152). For many students RE was an invaluable resource; it offered a diversity of responses to the existential questions, a variety of beliefs, and practices, alongside opportunities to discuss, form opinions, and to reflect. It appeared that students were adopting a bricolage approach (Hervieu-Léger, 2000; Casson, 2011), in some cases with evident roots in the Christian faith tradition.

Some RE teachers in these schools were more ambivalent about any contribution to specifically religious influence on students' spiritual development or hint of an accusation of a confessional approach to RE. They sought to place RE firmly in an academic framework. Where one teacher spoke of the spiritual needs of students, describing his students as 'quite spiritually thirsty,' others wished to stress the academic rigour; it 'is an academic subject and it should be treated as such' (Teacher).

Religious studies primarily is an academic pursuit, what we do is an academic subject, but it does [seek] to give voice to people's opinions and an expression of what they think and some of the deeper question of life, so obviously the philosophical questions and the ethical issues (Teacher)

However, what is apparent from the students' views, is that engaging with the broader issues of life, encountering the beliefs of others means that RE cannot be separated from spiritual development.

[The focus is] on providing subject content that challenged students to think deeply, to encourage all students to develop their responses to challenging philosophical and ethical issues; and to include time in lessons even exam courses for personal reflection. (Teacher)

The responses of the RE teachers illuminate the challenge of adopting an NLS model in RE. Roebben (2016, 27) argued that 'a detached religious studies approach in the classroom cannot but lead to issues of personal meaning giving'; these findings suggest that it is both a challenge and an opportunity. There needs to be a recognition of the professionalism, the academic rigour of RE, alongside an acknowledgement that when engaging with religious traditions, and existential questions; there must be an openness to the implications and opportunities for spiritual development in the classroom.

Discussion

This paper suggests that the RE classroom is functioning as a narthical learning space; it is providing a space for the discovery of meaning. If we think of young people as spiritual bricoleurs then the significance of RE as space of encounter becomes apparent; it is where students encounter the existential questions, are offered a variety of responses to these questions and have an opportunity to reflect on them. Roebben (2016) argues that all young people have a right to a learning environment where existential questions are encountered and space where they are provided with responses. This paper argues that an interpretation of RE as an NLS is relevant for students in these particular Christian-ethos schools. It is essential to recognise that this emerges from young people's perceptions of RE in the classroom; this is what they say is already happening in the classroom. This is not surprising given that the concept of NLS emerged from Roebben's work with young people.

The concept of spiritual bricoleur helps understand how students quest and seek meaning, not usually within the framework of a single meta-narrative, but rather selecting elements that are of interest or relevant to them at any given moment in time. The findings suggest that there is a need for an awareness of the diversity of students' approaches to spiritual development, there is a need to engage with the young people in

this process, to listen to the student voice. Holistic religious Education is about recognising young people as active agents in the process. An investigation into how RE may contribute to this is essential. Young people need to be challenged, given the opportunity to explore other perspectives and time to reflect on ways to spiritually develop in a more informed way. The research findings presented here concur with Roebben that facilitating spiritual development is not about faith formation in a specific tradition; it is about enabling young people to participate in the dialogue between religions and basic life options. Another way of looking at this is that the task of RE is to help young people develop their personal worldview in encounters with an institutional Christian worldview (Commission on Religious Education, 2018, Cooling, 2019). The concept of spiritual bricoleur could help us to understand what is going on in that encounter between personal and institutional worldviews.

As with all research, this project has highlighted the need for further research, to establish whether adopting an enquiry approach focussed on questioning or a theologising approach has different effects on young people's understanding of their spiritual development. Alternatively, to explore whether it is the context that determines which approach is more fruitful, for example, is doing theology more appropriate when many students are from active Christian homes? RE cannot be separated from the nature and context of the schools involved; it is inevitably influenced by and influences the school ethos. The rich data generated by the project needs to be compared with data from other faith schools and from community schools within the UK and within an international context. There is scope for analysis of the depth of influence of RE on the spiritual development of different groups of students, Christian, and those of schools of other faith traditions and none. Evaluating the depth of the influence of RE has been

beyond the scope of this project, it would be of interest to investigate further whether long-lasting effects could be detected in adult life.

In conclusion, this article has provided an insight into how the students in this research study engaged with and interpreted the contribution of RE to their spiritual development. The notion of young people as spiritual bricoleurs and Roebben's concept of the narthical Learning Space has illuminated the extent of the active agency of young people and the value of exploring how a personal worldview is constructed within the context of Religious Education in Christian-ethos schools.

Acknowledgement

This mixed-method research study was sponsored by the Douglas Trust under the leadership of Professor Trevor Cooling of Canterbury Christ Church University in collaboration with Professor Leslie Francis at the Warwick Religions and Education Research Unit.

References

- Åhs, V., Poulter, S., & Kallioniemi, A., 2016. Encountering Worldviews: Pupil Perspectives on Integrative Worldview Education in a Finnish Secondary School Context, *Religion & Education*, 43:2, 208-229
- Astley, J., 2018. The Naming of Parts: Faith, Formation, Development, and Education. In *Christian Faith, Formation and Education*, edited by Stuart-Buttle, R., & Shortt, J., 13-27. Palgrave Macmillan
- Astley, J. 2002. In Defence of 'Ordinary Theology.' *British Journal of Theological Education*, 13(1): 21-35
- Brine, A. 2016. Thinking Theologically in RE, online [retrieved from] <http://www.reonline.org.uk/news/alans-blog-thinking-theologically-in-re-part-1-alan-brine/>
- Boeve, L. 2012. Religious Education in a post-secular and post-Christian context. *Journal of Beliefs & Values*, 33(2):143-156.
- Bowie, B., Peterson, A., & Revell, L., (2012) Post-secular trends: issues in Education and faith, *Journal of Beliefs & Values*, 33(2): 139-141.

- Casson, A. 2011. The right to ‘bricolage’: Catholic pupils’ perception of their religious identity and the implications for Catholic schools in England. *Journal of beliefs & values*, 32(2), 207-218.
- Casson, A., Cooling, T., & Francis, L. J. 2017. *Lessons in Spiritual Development: learning from leading secondary schools*. Church House Publishing.
- Cooling, T. 2019. The return to worldview: Reflections from the UK, *International Journal of Christianity & Education*, 23 (1), 3-9
- Chadwick, P. 2001. The Anglican perspective on Church schools. *Oxford Review of Education*, 27(4): 475-487.
- Church of England Education Office. 2016. *Church of England vision for Education: Deeply Christian, serving the common good*. London: Church of England Education Office.
- Commission on Religious Education. 2018. Religion and Worldviews: the way forward. A National Plan for RE [retrieved from] <https://www.commissiononre.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Final-Report-of-the-Commission-on-RE.pdf>
- Conroy, J., 2016. Religious Education and religious literacy – a professional aspiration? *British Journal of Religious Education*, 38 (2): 163-176
- Cooling, T., & Green, E. 2009. Mapping the Field: A review of the current research evidence on the impact of schools with a Christian ethos. Theos
- Copley, T., Freathy, R. J. K., & Walshe, K. 2004. Teaching Biblical Narrative: A summary of the main findings of the Biblos Project, 1996-2004. School of Education and Lifelong Learning, University of Exeter
- Court, D. 2013. Religious experience as an aim of religious Education, *British Journal of Religious Education*, 35(3): 251-263
- Cush, D. 1999. The relationships between religious studies, religious Education, and theology: big brother, little sister and the clerical uncle? *British Journal of Religious Education*, 21(3): 137-146.
- Davies, G., 1998. What is spiritual development? Primary Headteachers’ views. *International Journal of Children’s Spirituality*, 3(2): 123-124.
- De Kock, A., 2015. Being a church through religious learning at the street level. *Ecclesial Practices*, 2(2), 217-234.
- Department for Education. 2013. National Curriculum for England. [Retrieved from]

<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/national-curriculum>

- Flanagan, K. 2010. Introduction in Flanagan, Kieran and Peter C. Jupp, Eds. *A sociology of spirituality*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate
- Francis, L.J. 1993. Theology of Education and the church school. In *Christian perspectives on church schools*. Edited by Francis, L. J. and Lankshear, D. W., Leominster: Gracewing.
- Francis, L. J., Casson, A., & McKenna, U. 2018. Christian ethos secondary schools in England and Wales: a common voice or wide diversity? *Journal of Beliefs & Values*, 1-18.
- Giordan, G., 2010. Spirituality: From a religious concept to a sociological theory in Flanagan, Kieran and Peter C. Jupp, Eds. *A sociology of spirituality*, (Pp.161-180) Burlington, VT Ashgate
- Grace, G., 2002. *Catholic schools: Mission, markets, and morality*. Routledge
- Hay, D. 1998 Why should we care about children's spirituality, *Pastoral care in Education: an International Journal of Personal, Social, and Emotional Development*, 16(1), pp.11-16.
- Hay, D. and Nye, R. 2006. *The Spirit of the Child*, London: Jessica Kingsley
- Hervieu-Léger, D. 1998. The transmission and formation of socio-religious identities in modernity: an analytical essay on the trajectories of identification. *International Sociology*, 13(2): 213.
- Hervieu-Léger, D. 2000. *Religion as a Chain of Memory*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press.
- Hyde, B. 2008. Weaving the threads of meaning: a characteristic of children's spirituality and its implications for religious education. *British Journal of Religious Education*, 30(3): 235-245.
- Jackson, R. 2000. Law, Politics and Religious Education in England and Wales: some history, some stories, and some observations. In M. Leicester, C. Modgil & S. Modgil (Eds.), *Spiritual and Religious Education* (Vol. 5, p 86-99). London: Falmer
- Jackson, R. & Everington, J. 2017. Teaching inclusive religious Education impartially: an English perspective, *British Journal of Religious Education*, 39:1, 7-24,
- Lewis, A. (1992). Group child interviews as a research tool. *British Educational Research Journal*, 18(4), 413-421.

- McLaughlin, T. (2005). The educative importance of ethos. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 53(3), 306-325.
- Ofsted, (Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills) 2016. School Inspection Handbook [online]. Retrieved from: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/school-inspection-handbook-from-september-2015>
- Pett, S & Cooling, T. 2018. Understanding Christianity: exploring a hermeneutical pedagogy for teaching Christianity, *British Journal of Religious Education*, 40 (3), 257-267
- Roebben, B. 2009. Narthical religious learning: redefining religious Education in terms of pilgrimage, *British Journal of Religious Education*, 31(1): 17-27
- Roebben, B. 2016. *Theology Made in Dignity: On the Precarious Role of Theology in Religious Education*. Peeters.
- Sagberg, S. 2015. *Holistic Religious Education-is it possible?: The complex web of religion, spirituality, and morality*. Waxmann Verlag.
- Woodhead, L. 2016. The rise of 'no religion 'in Britain: The emergence of a new cultural majority. *Journal of the British Academy*, 4(1), 245-261.
- Worsley, H. J, ed. 2013. *Anglican Church school education: moving beyond the first two hundred years*. A&C Black.
- Wright, E, 2018. Nurturing identity formation in adolescence through narrative learning: a dialogue between the pedagogies of media literacy and religious education. *British Journal of Religious Education*, 1-11.