A critical reflection on the Commission on Religious Education's proposed National Entitlement to Religion and Worldviews in England and Wales

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Abstract

This paper responds to the Commission on Religious Education's proposed National Entitlement to Religion and Worldviews in England and Wales. Qualitative data were collected from nine English primary Religious Education (RE) teachers to establish their responses to the proposed National Entitlement from their perspectives as RE practitioners. Findings show that teachers were supportive of the high ambitions the National Entitlement has for RE, that they saw opportunities for pupils' social and personal development as well as advancement in substantive knowledge, but that they were concerned about content-heavy curricula and structural barriers to implementing the National Entitlement. In response, the paper examines 'cumulatively sufficient' curricular design and 'pedagogical reduction' as strategies to activate the National Entitlement, and raises questions about 'instrumental purposes' in the conceptualisation of Religion and Worldviews. The paper recommends sharper account of the originality of Religions and Worldviews in order to advance the cause of the National Entitlement.

Keywords Religious Education · Commission on Religious Education · Religion and Worldviews · Pedagogical reduction

1 Introduction

This paper reports on nine English primary school teachers' responses to the proposed National Entitlement, which is the second of eleven recommendations made by the Commission on Religious Education (CoRE, 2018) for improvements to Religious Education (RE) in England and Wales. The paper begins by explaining the Commission's enquiry into RE and its recommendation for a National Entitlement. Next, through discussion of published literature, it calls for a sharpened description of the distinctiveness of Religion and Worldviews as it applies to the National Entitlement. Then the qualitative methods of the research are explained followed by presentation of findings under three themes: subject

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content, social and personal development, and structures. In response to the findings the discussion examines ‘cumulatively sufficient’ curriculum design (Ofsted, 2021) and ‘pedagogical reduction’ (Lewin, 2020) as strategies to activate the National Entitlement; and questions whether the conceptualisation of Religion and Worldviews is inclusive of ‘instrumental purposes’. The final conclusion summarises how primary teachers’ responses to the proposed National Entitlement inform and advance current discourse about the Commission’s recommendations. The paper makes an important contribution to responses to the Commission, and to RE more widely, because it foregrounds experienced teachers’ considered opinions, which are currently under represented in published literature (an exception is Chater, 2020).

1.1 The Commission on Religious Education and its recommendation for a National Entitlement to Religion and Wordviews

The Religious Education Council of England and Wales (REC) is a non-governmental organisation established in 1973 to support and promote excellent RE in England and Wales (Religious Education Council). In 2016 the REC sponsored, but did not influence, a two year (2016 to 2018) review into RE in England and Wales titled The Commission on Religious Education (henceforth CoRE). The commissioners were fourteen professionals with complementary expertise and experience of RE and religion in public life (Tharani in Chater, 2020, 38). Their biographies, CoRE’s terms of reference, and the final report, ‘Religion and Worldviews: the way forward. A national plan for RE’ (2018) are on CoRE’s website (www.commissiononre.org.uk). The commissioners were tasked to review RE’s educational, policy and legal frameworks (Tharani in Chater, 2020, 38) and reflect on evidence generated by CoRE’s public conversations with and call for responses from a wide range of RE stakeholders that included pupils and teachers (CoRE 2018, Foreword).

The REC’s intention for CoRE was to set RE in England and Wales on a pathway to excellence for all pupils in all schools. Longstanding inconsistency in RE provision is well documented in literature (Baumfield & Cush, 2013, 231; Clarke & Woodhead, 2015; 2018; Dinham & Shaw, 2015; NATRE, 2017; Ofsted, 2013; Orchard, 2020). A recent research report on RE in England and Wales conducted by Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills) comments that recent researches into RE generally conclude that it, ‘has not kept pace with the academic and intellectual developments that might help pupils to make sense of our complex multi-religious and multi-secular society’ (Ofsted, 2021, 4). In 2013 the REC published a curriculum framework review of RE in England to support RE teachers with curriculum planning (REC 2013). This was done in parallel with the Department for Education’s 2011 to 2013 review of national curriculum subjects because although RE is compulsory in England and Wales it is not included in the national curriculum. CoRE, in part, faced a ‘legacy of issues’ raised by the curriculum framework review (Tharani in Chater, 2020, 38). Professor Trevor Cooling, then Chair of the REC since 2015, ‘challenged the commissioners to produce a ‘game-changer’ akin to Council Working Paper 36 published in 1971 (Tharani, 2020, 3). For many RE professionals Council Working Paper 36 was the fulcrum that redirected much of RE in England and Wales from confessional Christianity to non-confessional multifaith RE and influenced the reconceptualisation of RE in the Education Reform Act 1988 (Cush, 2019). In setting up CoRE the REC signalled its ambition for another momentous shift in direction for RE to re-establish and future-proof its educational standing in light of changes in social demographics, public attitudes to religion, and contemporary scholarship about religion/s.

Research into how RE might respond to social diversities better is becoming a prevailing trend internationally (Gunnarsson, 2020; Lipiäinen et al., 2020; Sierra-Huedo & Fernández Romero, 2020; Ubani et al. 2020).

As the REC has no legislative power CoRE's final report was drafted to influence education policy makers, including central government, which accounts for its assertive tone (Cooling, 2021). Since its publication in 2018 the REC has partnered with TRS-UK in a three-phased enterprise called the 'Worldview Project' to examine the academic and practitioner implications of CoRE's recommendations (Cooling, 2021). TRS-UK is the 'professional association for Departments, Units and Subject Associations for the Study of Religion and Theology the UK' (trs.ac.uk). Phase one of the Worldview Project was to commission an independent academic literature review on the concept of 'worldview' in Religious Studies, Theology and aligned disciplines (Benoit et al., 2020; Tharani, 2020, 3). Phase two was a series of five online conversations in which RE advisors and academics in RE and other relevant disciplines reflected on the literature review and the implications of 'worldview' as paradigm for RE. These conversations were written up by Amira Tharani as four discussion papers (Tharani, 2020; see p4 for list of discussants). Phase three will be development of exemplary materials by RE practitioners to support future syllabus design. The CoRE report and Worldview Project combined cover three bases of policy influence, academic enquiry, and practitioner engagement and support.

CoRE's final report made eleven recommendations (2018, 11–18). This paper focuses mainly on recommendation two;

The National Entitlement to the study of Religion and Worldviews should become statutory for all publicly funded schools (2018, 11).

A historical legacy of education policy in England and Wales is that there are different categories of school that have different requirements for RE in addition to central legislation that RE is compulsory for all schools. The aim of the National Entitlement is twofold: to bring consistency to RE provision across different categories of school, and to reimagine how RE is conceived in curriculum design and delivery. To engender consistency the National Entitlement proposes centralised curriculum guidance replace current policy for localised local authority and school-based syllabuses, with the caveat that schools of a religious character combine the National Entitlement with the faith requirements of the school (CoRE 2018, 11). The National Entitlement is not intended to be rigidly prescriptive, but instead to encapsulate a reimagined culture for RE and provide a supportive framework for local or school level syllabus design that aligns with this new culture (Tharani in Chater, 2020, 42). The criteria of the National Entitlement are set out in nine points (CoRE 2018, 12–13). In brief summary these criteria assert that RE is taught by knowledgeable teachers; well-resourced and given adequate curriculum time; that syllabuses include religious and non-religious outlooks to authentically represent the fluidity, multidimensionality and intersectionality of people's religious and non-religious beliefs and experiences; and that methods of study are explicit. CoRE captures this new culture for RE under the 'organising concept' of Religion and Worldviews (Tharani in Chater, 2020, 41), which is recommendation one of the report;

The name of the subject should be changed to Religion and Worldviews. This should be reflected in all subsequent legislation and guidance (2018, 11).

Whether CoRE's recommendations will rise to Cooling's rallying-cry for a 'game-changer' remains to be seen. The then Secretary of State for Education's response to CoRE's recommendations was emphatically that policy change would not be forthcoming

(Hinds, 2018). The Catholic Education Service responded negatively to CoRE's 'contentious redefinition of Religious Education' (2018; see also Whittle, 2020). The response from the National Association of Teachers of Religious Education (NATRE, 2018) was measured but positive. The National Association of Standing Advisory Councils on Religious Education commended some recommendations and raised serious concerns about others, especially those pertaining to changes in the local determination of RE syllabuses (Smalley, 2018; see also Smalley, 2019). A representative response from teachers is impossible to determine; some have been cautious (Freeman, 2020), some reflective (Wood, 2020) and some appreciative (Kidney, 2020).

2 Literature review

Current published responses to CoRE's 2018 report are early contributions to what is likely to be a wide-ranging conversation that may influence the future shape of the National Entitlement. These early responses were isolated from the richer outcomes of the Worldviews Project that complement the report and so sometimes misconstrued the report's primary purpose of beginning to influence policy.

One critique of the National Entitlement as it is set out in the report is that too many religious traditions plus the addition of non-religious worldviews will lead to crowded curriculum design. Barnes (2021, 7–10) argues that excessive content is more, not less, likely to lead to 'stereotypical representations' and that 'skills necessary to interpret, understand and evaluate religion are best acquired by a detailed study of limited number of them'. (See Cooling, 2021 for a rebuttal). Barnes and Schweitzer query the apparent arbitrariness of the religious and non-religious worldviews listed in the report. Barnes seeks clarification on the 'educative purpose' of the religious and non-religious worldviews selected (2021, 7) and Schweitzer questions 'who is responsible for the selection and presentation' (2018, 5). Barnes implies concern about relativism when he questions, "Does the study of every worldview have the same educational value?" (Barnes, 2021, 8). An underpinning rationale for content selection and representation of topics is a valid line of enquiry for curriculum design in any subject, and for RE in particular. Lewin (2020) argues that 'pedagogical reduction' (though not reductionism or relativism) is inevitable in formal education. Cooling highlights 'academic responsibilities' with reference to Thiselton's (2009) pedagogy of 'responsible hermeneutics' (2021, 411). However, in levying their criticisms against CoRE's final report, Barnes and Schweitzer have 'put the cart before the horse'. The National Entitlement as set out in the report is not a prescriptive curriculum framework or list of topics to be included, but rather "a set of organising principles which form the basis for developing programmes of study" (CoRE 2018, 32). Barnes and Schweitzer's concerns may become valid if and when the National Entitlement influences curriculum design.

Cush clarifies that CoRE's intention was to find an approach to representing and teaching about religion and worldviews that, 'helps the students to get away from the problem of ever-expanding content in order to look at how worldviews work' (Cush, 2021, 5. Also Cooling, 2021). Shaw's examination of religion and worldview literacy argues that breadth and diversity in RE does not compromise nuance if curricula focus on learning about 'how individuals and communities make sense of and experience religion in their daily lives' (2020, 155–156). Shaw draws on Dinham's (2016) four-fold framework of religious literacy; the first stage—'category' – recommends 'understanding of religion and

worldview at the conceptual level' (Shaw, 2020, 153), which is comparable with Cush's 'how worldviews work' explanation. One of CoRE's ambitions for RE curricula is to manage content selection for more authentic representations of religions and worldviews, and to make methods in the study of religions and their critiques more explicit (Cush, 2021, 4). The breadth of topics given in the National Entitlement is illustrative of the diversity of choice open to syllabus designers to achieve these aims (Cooling, 2021). In this regard, the National Entitlement makes a significant departure from current legislation for RE. Section 8 (3) of the Education Reform Act 1988 requires that locally agreed syllabuses shall 'reflect the fact that the religious traditions in Great Britain are in the main Christian whilst taking account of the teaching and practices of the other principal religions represented in Great Britain' (Department for Education). This requirement has not changed in subsequent Education Acts. The National Entitlement as it is set out in CoRE's report disregards Sect. 8 (3). Its removal from statute would be the kind of game-changer Cooling called for; though judging by the Secretary of State's response if this is on the horizon it is a distant one.

Renaming RE 'Religion and Worldviews' (CoRE 2018, 11) denotes a new way of representing and teaching religious and non-religious orientations that is beginning to emerge from the processes of the Commission. The report defines 'worldview' as;

A person's way of understanding, experiencing and responding to the world. It can be described as a philosophy of life or an approach to life. This includes how a person understands the nature of reality and their own place in the world. A person's worldview is likely to influence and be influenced by their beliefs, values, behaviours, experiences, identities and commitments (CoRE 2018, 4).

Cooling concedes that in the report the concept of Religion and Worldviews is foggy; 'CoRE marks a significant, but not yet fully understood, paradigm change for RE in England' (2020, 411). Subsequent publications (Benoit et al., 2020; Cooling, 2020; Cooling 2020a; Tharani, 2020; Downe, 2021) have cleared the mist, though the view is not yet crystal. Tharani describes Religion and Worldviews as 'a subject with a new identity' to 'better reflect both lived realities and academic approaches' that is 'crystallised' in the National Entitlement and that makes RE more inclusive through acknowledging 'interplay between 'institutional' and 'personal' worldviews' (in Chater, 2020, 38–41). Cooling describes it as, 'focusing on the way in which all humans make sense of their lives through a study of how religious and non-religious worldviews work in human life' (2021, 10). This echoes the motifs of function and concept seen in Cush and Shaw above. Cush justifies a reorientation towards worldviews because it makes RE, 'relevant to all pupils, not just those who consider themselves 'religious' or are particularly interested in studying religious traditions' (Cush, 2021, 5. Also Cooling, 2020). The need for RE to reclaim relevancy in response to the combination of secularisation and diversity in societies is picked up by Lipiäinen et al (2020) and Shaw (2020). For CoRE Religion and Worldviews has two interlaced strands; a novel approach to representing religious and non-religious traditions, and activating this approach in curriculum design and teaching. Phase three of the Worldviews Project plans to explore the latter (also see Whitworth, 2020). Part of the novelty of Religion and Worldviews as imagined by CoRE is its aspiration to push 'beyond current norms' by dislocating from the familiar world-religions paradigm and associated essentialist representations of religions that Tharani suggests are 'boring', 'untrue' and 'sanitised', and that leave pupils 'disillusioned' (Tharani in Chater, 2020, 40–41. Also Owen, 2011; Ofsted, 2021, 14). Early critiques of the National Entitlement have been made from within and not 'beyond current norms'; from the vantage point of ill-fitting though more familiar lenses informed by the

world-religions paradigm (Cooling, 2021). This is why critiques focus on areas such as content coverage, crowded curricula, arbitrary topic choices, and relativism.

Cooling has drawn parallels between the potential outcomes of CoRE and Council Working Paper 36, discussed above (Tharani, 2020, 3). Viewed retrospectively, the paradigm shift triggered by the work leading up to Council Working Paper 36 has sharp definition; a shift from confessional Christianity to non-confessional multi-faith RE. Time will tell if CoRE will have comparable impact, but for Religion and Worldviews to take root its distinctiveness compared with existing approaches needs to become distinguishable to the RE community. Cush comments, ‘a move to ‘worldviews’ could indeed be disastrous for RE if interpreted as the ‘global worldviews paradigm’ (2021, 4). A practicable description of Religion and Worldviews could avert such ‘disaster’ and mitigate widely differing interpretations undermining the usefulness of future critical dialogue. For example, Hannam and Biesta interpret the National Entitlement’s application of worldviews as ‘hermeneuticism’ (2019; See Cooling, 2020 for a response) to which they offer a useful critique, but which is insular unless it mirrors an interpretation (or interpretations) acknowledged by the wider RE community. Cooling is resistant to a monolithic definition for Religion and Worldviews preferring Tharani’s metaphor of a ‘can opener’ that ‘opens-up thinking through identifying family resemblances between different uses of the term’ (Cooling, 2020, 47; Cooling, 2021, 12; Tharani, 2020, 5). Literature with genuine intention of constructively ‘opening up’ Religion and Worldviews as it relates to CoRE’s proposed National Entitlement has acknowledged the legacy of Jackson’s (1997) ‘interpretive approach’ (Cooling, 2020, 408); expressed a departure from essentialist representations of religions influenced by the world-religions paradigm (Tharani, 2020); expressed a need for authentic representations of human meaning-making that embrace dynamism and intersectionality (Cooling, 2019); and advocated a move away from content-heavy propositional knowledge towards constructive understanding of how religious and non-religious orientations ‘work’ in human life (Cush, 2021). To sharpen how the distinctiveness of Religion and Worldviews is expressed these, and likely other, attributes will need to gel through ongoing critical dialogue. Consensus about originality is important to avert new curricula design ascribed as Religion and Worldviews simply replicating familiar paradigms that the National Entitlement aims to move away from. Valid critiques from advocates and opponents of the National Entitlement will no doubt emerge as on-going discussion bring the texture of Religion and Worldviews into common view.

3 Research context, sample and methods

This paper is drawn from a research project that ran between September 2019 and September 2021 that supported primary RE teachers in England to carry out research on their own practice. The project complies with BERA’s (2018) ethical guidelines for educational research and was approved by the host university’s research ethics committee. Nine experienced primary RE teachers from different schools were recruited to the project. Between them the teachers share a wide range of professional experience, including planning and delivering classroom RE; organising and hosting RE network meetings; and senior leadership. Most of the teachers had not met each other prior to the project start. The schools represented by the participating teachers include four Academy Schools, three Community Schools, one Church of England voluntary controlled, and one Church of England voluntary aided. All schools gave curriculum time to RE.

The project adopted a Communities of Practice methodology (Wenger et al., 2002). To sustain the community of practice teachers met together for two full days in September 2019, three half days in October 2019 and then one half day monthly until March 2020. All the meetings took place at the host university and were facilitated by the lead academics. Teachers were offered the opportunity to host meetings at their schools, but unanimously preferred to meet at the university. The meetings were research-orientated workshops that included training on research methods; discussion about research with a range of academic education researchers; support from the lead academics for the teachers to plan and carry out research on their own practice; and time for the teachers to discuss their RE practice together. With lockdown meetings moved on line from April 2020. The final group meeting was in December 2020.

One aim of the project was to support primary RE teachers in carrying out research on their own practice. A second aim of the project, and the focus of this paper, was to record these teachers' qualitative responses to the National Entitlement. To collect valid data it was important for the teachers to have a comprehensive, contextualised understanding of the National Entitlement. To achieve this, Professor Denise Cush (named with permission) attended the first meeting in September 2019 where she gave three inter-related presentations interspersed by rich discussion with and between the teachers. In the first presentation Professor Cush drew on her professional autobiography to trace the historical development of RE policy and practice; in the second presentation she explained the context, processes and outcomes of CoRE; the third presentation addressed Big Ideas (Wintersgill, 2015) which was relevant to the project, but not to this paper. Professor Cush was purposefully selected for her longstanding, first-hand experience and expertise in RE and her role as a CoRE commissioner. The presentations heightened teachers' awareness of how different stakeholders have given importance to RE over a long period of time (Ofsted, 2021, 37), which made them feel part of something bigger than their own classroom practice and sparked their investment in the research.

At the second meeting, the day after Professor Cush's presentations, teachers were given time to review the National Entitlement as it is set out in CoRE's final report in order to form considered opinions. Quiet time was allocated for them to read through the National Entitlement individually and note down their initial responses. Next they paired up to discuss their responses before joining together in a whole group discussion. The teachers engaged in rich democratic discussion together as they agreed and disagreed with each other, and revised and affirmed their opinions. As the group discussion drew to a close teachers individually wrote their responses to the National Entitlement on sticky-notes – one statement per sticky-note. Then they worked as a group to arrange the sticky-notes into thematic clusters. This was a tangible process of data analysis over which the teachers had group agency. They had to agree on where dominant themes broke into subordinate themes, on relationships between themes, how to deal with overlapping themes, and how to deal with outliers. Such decisions in the process of data analysis are not straightforward and so caused the teachers to continue to reflect deeply on their collective responses to the National Entitlement, repositioning the sticky-notes several times until the group was happy that they captured the interrelated themes of their discussion accurately. One of the lead academics typed up the themes and subthemes replicating exactly how the teachers had arranged them. The typed sheets were expanded to A3 size to allow space for annotation and were given to each teacher two weeks later at their next meeting. At this second meeting time was allocated for teachers to review and annotate the sheets individually, which gave them opportunity to revisit the themes of their original discussion and to independently endorse, refute and expand on them. Teachers annotated their sheets liberally.

After this individual work was completed teachers engaged in group discussion to reflect further on their responses to the National Entitlement, jotting down additional notes when inspired to. At the end of the discussion the annotated sheets were collected by one of the academics who was in attendance, and are one of the data sets for this paper.

The second data set is a focus group discussion that the teachers held in December 2020, fourteen months later. This gave them extended time to reflect on the National Entitlement and its potential application to practice. Seven teachers participated in the discussion which was held on-line. They were given thirty minutes to discuss pre-set questions that prompted them to interrogate the National Entitlement and asked to nominate a different group member to feedback for each question on behalf of the whole group. Once set up, the lead academic left the meeting and re-joined for the teachers' feedback, which was audio recorded and transcribed.

Data from the two data sets were analysed inductively and thematically. Themes are treated as nomothetic not ideographic because the research is interested in the generalities of the teachers' collective responses rather than in the particularities of individual responses (Cohen et al., 2018). The methods of data collection were designed to generate valid data for meaningful results by prompting candid, authentic and carefully considered responses. This was achieved by enabling participating teachers to become well-informed about the National Entitlement; by giving them ample opportunity to reflect deeply on their responses to it over time both as individuals and as a group; and by facilitating their agency by respecting them as RE experts whose opinions counted. Teacher agency was cultivated through the collegiality of the community of practice and by empowering teachers to recognise that their expertise in RE has value beyond their own classrooms (2021a; Salter & Tett, 2021a, 2021b).

4 Findings

Overall teachers responded positively to the National Entitlement, though they also had some reservations. Three themes dominated the data: subject content; pupils' social and personal development; and structures. Each theme is discussed in turn.

4.1 Subject content

The teachers evaluated the National Entitlement as having high aspirations for RE, which they welcomed. They judged that the quality of RE to meet these aspirations would reach for subject knowledge that is broad, deep and sophisticated. In this they saw opportunities for RE to challenge stereotypes by being open to diversities of religious and non-religious expression, beliefs and practices. They did not challenge or reject the inclusion of non-religious orientations. They considered the alignment of 'worldviews' with religion a refreshing, inclusive stance; but did not probe its conceptual meaning. In their discussions teachers identified opportunities for creative syllabus design and cross-curricular teaching which they believed could further enhance pupils' learning. Overall, the teachers were optimistic that the National Entitlement could frame RE securely as an academic subject. They felt this would help to defend RE and boost its prioritisation in schools, which, in their opinion, is needed. They did not pick up any features of the National Entitlement as significant conceptual departures from current RE in their schools; instead they said the National Entitlement was '*like RE on a good day*' and '*how RE should be every lesson*'.

Whilst teachers commended the breadth, depth and diversity of subject content that they interpreted as inferred by the National Entitlement, they also expressed concerns about '*content overload*' in three ways. First was management of lots of content within the limited teaching time allocated for RE coupled with the need for carefully scaffolded learning. Second was the introduction of a lot of diversity across and within religions and worldviews to younger learners. Teachers worried that '*too much diversity too soon*' is overwhelming. Third, teachers raised concerns about the National Entitlement's recommendation that 'academic disciplines' be included in RE as methods of study (CoRE 2018, 35. Point 9). This is because they regarded it as content additional to substantive knowledge about religions and worldviews and were unsure how it could fit into what they perceived as an already crowded syllabus. In their discussions teachers wrestled with what they identified as a tension between the nuanced representations of religions and worldviews advocated by the National Entitlement and, as they put it, '*having to start somewhere*'. 'Starting somewhere' meant giving pupils a foothold by teaching defined content. This was contentious because teachers were also aware that most substantive content about religions is contestable (Ofsted, 2021, 8). Teachers had a sophisticated understanding of essentialism in the study of religions and discussed its educative pitfalls at length, but were routed back to the seemingly intractable dilemma of '*having to start somewhere*'. They also raised concerns about curriculum design and teaching implying a false hierarchy between religions, though they did not raise concerns about relativism.

4.2 Social and personal development

In their review of the National Entitlement teachers readily identified and discussed opportunities for pupils' social development. They highlighted these opportunities as enabling pupils to learn about people who hold viewpoints different to the pupils' own; by pupils learning how to express their opinions respectfully; and by pupils learning how to ask questions about religions and religious people responsibly. Together teachers discussed the importance of pupils learning how to '*disagree well*' with others, and how diversity in and of religions and worldviews promoted by the National Entitlement could help support this. In their discussions teachers examined intersections between pupils' social and personal development. They drew on their professional experiences to examine how learning about the beliefs, values and practices of others often prompts pupils into self-reflection of their own beliefs and values. Teachers regarded this critical self-reflection as a crucial strand of pupils' self-development and an important feature of RE.

4.3 Structures

Teachers responded to the National Entitlement as an opportunity for RE to be valued in schools more consistently by raising and standardising requirements and accountability for RE across all types of school (CoRE 2018, 32, 34). As supporters of RE they regarded this as a positive move. They referred to RE's '*Cinderella status*' frequently throughout their discussions and used the phrase '*the RE lottery*' to denote inconsistency in the quality of RE in English primary schools. Overall teachers regarded what they interpreted as the '*standardising*' measures of the National Entitlement as an antidote to the current, messy policy arrangements for RE. They commented on CoRE's proposed national guidance for RE in line with national curriculum subjects (CoRE 2018, 14) as having the potential to

improve the status and quality of RE across all types of school. They felt this may also improve the public face of RE by helping parents/carers to understand why RE is part of the curriculum and to appreciate its importance. Teachers were optimistic that better regard for RE would follow better consistency in quality across schools.

Teachers also reflected on potential drawbacks to national guidance. Though they welcomed consistency in quality and standards, they were nervous about this being overly prescriptive and shutting down teachers' autonomy and creativity. In their discussions they analysed closely the debates about advantages and disadvantages of local syllabuses versus national guidance for RE; some settling on the consistency of national guidance others preferring the agility and intimacy of locally devised syllabuses. Teachers supported the ambition of the National Entitlement in principle, but pointed out structural restrictions that they felt made it implausible in practice. These restrictions included inconsistent and low prioritisation of RE in schools, and poor investment in RE centrally and locally. Areas of poor investment they identified and discussed included initial teacher education, continuing professional development, insufficient resourcing for RE teaching, and insufficient curriculum time for RE. They predicted the National Entitlement's high aspirations for RE would place high demands on teachers' breadth and depth of subject knowledge, and were unconfident that adequate support for teachers would be resourced.

5 Discussion

5.1 Subject content

Teachers' concerns about '*content overload*', '*having to start somewhere*', and falsely implied hierarchies suggests, similarly to Barnes and Schweitzer, that they critiqued the National Entitlement through the familiar lens of a world-religions paradigm. This is further supported by the teachers' response that the National Entitlement is '*like RE on a good day*' and their acceptance of Religion and Worldviews without scrutinising its conceptual differences to regular RE. Teachers were frustrated because although they welcomed the National Entitlement's high ambitions for RE, it seemed to them that essentialism, implied false hierarchies and content overload were inevitable outcomes of such breadth of coverage. Ofsted's research report acknowledges that content-heavy curricula that 'might lead to superficial caricatures of religious and non-religious traditions' is a general concern of RE professionals and academics (Ofsted, 2021, p9). Despite these concerns the report states that content overload is not, and should not, be a given in RE. The report argues that '[i]t is perfectly possible for pupils to get better at RE without knowing all of the different ways that people express religion or non-religion in their lives' (p11) when a curriculum is designed to have 'cumulatively sufficient knowledge and skills' and 'collectively enough' content to 'amount to a high standard of subject education' (p10). The report recognises that there are likely to be points in curriculum design where generalisations are necessary to aid pupils' beginning understanding of topics, and that these need to be revisited and critiqued with nuance when pupils' cumulative knowledge is sufficiently sophisticated (p12). Therefore progression planning and content selection go hand-in-hand in curriculum design that is 'cumulatively sufficient' and 'collectively enough'. Reflecting on a cumulatively sufficient curriculum and permission to generalise, knowing that generalisations will be challenged later on in a pupil's learning journey, could alleviate the concerns of '*content overload*' and '*having to start somewhere*' raised by the teachers in this research.

Lewin (2020) argues convincingly that ‘pedagogical reduction’ is a fact of formal education. ‘Pedagogical reduction’ and ‘cumulative sufficiency’ are aligned concepts. Both assert that longer lists of topics is not a solution for effective curriculum design in formal education. Lewin’s analysis of pedagogical reduction argues for a rationale in curriculum content selection and curation that has clear understanding of the relationships between content and the ways in which a curriculum subject is conceived and represented; further that the rationale understands the power dynamics in selection and representation. As Lewin puts it, ‘the interests governing the pedagogical reduction are made explicit’ (2020, 13). The Ofsted report advises that clear, ‘subject-specific end goals’ are needed to design a curriculum that is cumulatively sufficient (Ofsted, 2021, p 25). In applying Lewin’s analysis of pedagogical reduction to Ofsted’s cumulative curriculum design approach, meeting the ‘subject specific end goals’ becomes the rationale for content selection and curation. Clearly, in this model the end goals are inextricable from how the curriculum subject is conceived and represented. CoRE’s conception for the National Entitlement is to deliver authentic representations of religion/s and worldviews that foreground lived experiences in their diversity, dynamism and intersectionality, and which avoid reductionism by replacing the familiar world-religions paradigm approach to RE with a novel Religion and Worldviews approach. Pedagogical reduction rationalised by representing religious and non-religious orientations through the lens of Religion and Worldviews promises to be useful in translating the National Entitlement into manageable, cumulatively sufficient curricula that avoid retreating to ‘*content overload*’.

Arriving at end goals for cumulatively sufficient curricula presents challenges for the National Entitlement to resolve. An aim of the National Entitlement is to improve consistency for RE across all types of school (CoRE 2018, 32). This includes schools of a religious character in receipt of some public funding (known as ‘voluntary aided’); ‘a requirement should be introduced to provide Religion and Worldviews in accordance with the National Entitlement as well as the requirements of their Trust Deed’ (ie the religious requirements of the school) (CoRE 2018, 32). In England and Wales different categories of school have different non-confessional and confessional requirements for RE and different accountability measures. Further, the teachers in this research were concerned about a top-down model infringing on teachers’ professional autonomy. Accepting that curricula end-goals may differ between schools to meet schools’ specific needs and aspirations for RE seems *prima facie* in tension with the National Entitlement’s aim of consistency. A solution is for curricula end-goals to differ between schools in response to their specific needs whilst consistently mirroring the novel ethos of Religion and Worldviews. This matches CoRE’s intention for the National Entitlement as central curriculum guidance rather than a prescriptive national curriculum. For such consistency to occur a sharper way of expressing the originality of Religion and Worldviews that is discernible to the RE community needs to be found.

Lewin argues that a rational process of pedagogical reduction is ‘generative or productive’ (2020, 6) because ‘it is precisely through the aperture of the reduction that something can come into view at all’ (2020, 10). If Lewin’s theory holds, then the processes of content selection and curation to translate the National Entitlement into cumulatively sufficient, teachable curricula that are rationalised by the ethos of Religion and Worldviews should assist in consolidating the originality of Religion and Worldviews and sharpen its distinction from the world-religions paradigm. For this to work, practitioners involved in early curricula modelling (phase three of the Religion and Worldviews Project) need to already have a good vision of Religion and Worldviews to inform their rational choices of content selection and curation, and end goals. The process of pedagogical reduction does

not bring Religion and Worldviews into being, but brings it into focus. Focus is needed if schools are to devise their own curricula and end-goals that ‘demonstrate they are fulfilling the National Entitlement’ (Cooling, 2021, 11 and 7). Further, processes of pedagogical reduction rationalised by (in this instance) Religion and Worldviews might address concerns raised by the Ofsted report that the types of knowledge and amount of content that are ‘cumulatively sufficient’ in curriculum design in RE is under researched (Ofsted, 2021, 11).

5.2 Social and personal development

Teachers made a link between the National Entitlement and their pupils’ social and personal development. In this discussion, social development refers to how pupils regard and interact with others; personal development refers to pupils’ self-reflection on their own beliefs, values and attitudes. Through learning about the religious and non-religious orientations of others, teachers saw opportunities for pupils to develop understanding and acceptance about why people have different beliefs, values and practices, and for this to spark pupils’ own analytical self-reflection. Teachers saw this as important for pupils’ self-development; to learn how to ask questions about people’s religious and non-religious orientations responsibly and to learn how to ‘*disagree well*’ when needed.

Personal development—sometimes associated with moral and spiritual development—and social development, normally associated with intercultural and interreligious understanding, are commonly expected instrumental purposes of RE and worldviews education internationally and nationally (Cooling, 2020; Lipiäinen et al., 2020). Orchard (2020) observes how Hand’s (2004) ‘socialisation justification’ for RE has in more recent literature been reframed as ‘religious literacy’, itself a contested term. Drawing on the work of Gadamer (1975) Shaw argues that religion and worldview literacy contributes to ‘intercultural understanding and competency by developing the ability to talk well about and engage well with religion and worldviews in diversity, from a self-aware perspective’ (Shaw, 2020, 154. See Ubani et al. 2020 for a Finnish perspective on this point). The Ofsted Report acknowledges the role of RE in pupils’ social development as ‘part of the basis on which young people go on to speak and to act in society in matters of religion and non-religion’ (Ofsted, 2021, 10). It acknowledges RE’s role for personal development as one of three types of knowledge in RE: substantive, disciplinary and personal. It defines personal knowledge as when, ‘pupils build an awareness of their own presuppositions and values about the religious and non-religious traditions they study.’ (Ofsted, 2021, 8). Scholarship also contests instrumental purposes for RE. In response to the National Entitlement Schweitzer (2018) and Hannam and Biesta (2019) offer pragmatic challenges to romantic notions that learning about the religious and non-religious orientations of others leads pupils to wholesome self-reflection and attitudes of understanding, respect and acceptance of others. Hannam and Biesta argue that ‘it is wonderful [...] when enhanced understanding does lead to a change in attitude, but the claim that understanding is the key ‘mechanism’ here, cannot be substantiated [...] enhanced understanding can lead to the opposite: to disrespect, hate, and so on’ (2019, 58). Barnes warns against excessive self-reflection in RE to the point where the ‘pupil’s own religiosity or lack of religiosity’ supersedes substantive knowledge about religion/s as the ‘objects of study’ (Barnes, 2021, 11). Though debates about RE’s contested instrumental purposes are ongoing, for the teachers in this research pupils’ social and personal development were anticipated outcomes, and for CoRE they are desirable and expected outcomes of the National Entitlement;

It is one of the core tasks of education to enable each pupil to understand, reflect on and develop their own personal worldview. This is a whole school responsibility and the explicit, academic study of worldviews is an essential part of it. Through understanding how worldviews are formed and expressed at both individual and communal levels, the ways in which they have changed over time, and their influence on the actions of individuals, groups and institutions, young people come to a more refined understanding of their own worldview – whatever this happens to be – as well as those of others. Currently, this study takes place mainly through RE. (CoRE 2018, 5).

Drawing directly on Everington (2000) Teece (2011, 163) lists three typically accepted purposes of RE as: to ‘enable pupils to gain knowledge and understanding of religion(s)’; ‘to promote understanding of and respect for people whose cultures and beliefs are different from one’s own and to promote a positive attitude towards living in a plural society’; and ‘to promote the personal, moral and spiritual development of pupils’. Teece questions whether these three purposes affiliate with three different subjects—Religious Studies, Citizenship, and Moral and Spiritual Education—or whether they unite as Religious Education. If the latter Teece then questions, ‘how are these related to each other in an overall conception of the nature and purpose of the subject?’ (Teece, 2011, 163). Teece’s question is highly pertinent to the current examination of the National Entitlement. The academic and instrumental purposes of CoRE’s ambition for the National Entitlement are reflected in Teece’s list, so his question can be reframed for the current context as ‘how are these [purposes] related to each other in an overall conception of the nature and purpose of Religion and Worldviews?’. The question pushes for clarification of how Religion and Worldviews is (to be?) conceptualised. Is Religion and Worldviews intended as a novel paradigm for the academic study of religious and non-religious orientations at any level of education that offers more authentic representations than the world-religions paradigm; ie a re-imagination of Religious Studies?. Or, is Religion and Worldviews a novel paradigm for the academic study of religious and non-religious orientations that also includes instrumental purposes alongside academic purposes; ie a re-imagination of Religious Education? The CoRE report suggests the latter, which implies instrumental purposes, such as social and personal development, are intrinsic to its conceptualisation.

Clarification of instrumental purposes in the conceptualisation of Religion and Worldviews is important to pedagogical reduction, cumulative curriculum design and curriculum end-goals. Instrumental purposes intrinsic to Religion and Worldviews would need to be articulated in curricula end-goals and inform rational choices about content selection and curation. The Ofsted Report makes related points regarding curriculum content and progression to support the instrumental purpose of ‘personal knowledge’, ‘[s]ubject leaders and teachers need to consider carefully what content within the RE curriculum is most useful for pupils to develop ‘personal knowledge. [...] As ‘personal knowledge’ requires content for pupils to reflect on, the sequencing of ‘personal knowledge’ depends on the sequencing of substantive knowledge in the curriculum’ (Ofsted, 2021, 22). Applying cumulative curriculum design to Religion and Worldviews inclusive of instrumental purposes gives curriculum designers three foci to balance: accurate representations of religious and non-religious orientations; academic end-goals, and intrinsic end-goals.

5.3 Structure

Teachers' interpretations of the National Entitlement picked up on policy and structural barriers to consistency in good quality primary RE that are echoed in literature; 'the current provision and legal basis for RE [is] inappropriate and unsustainable' (Tharani in Chater, 2020, 38. Also Ofsted, 2013). They noted that the National Entitlement shows promise in dismantling these barriers by standardising expectations of quality and accountability of RE across different types of school; by raising the prestige of RE to match core curriculum subjects, and, in so doing, by improving public perceptions of RE. A viewpoint that Tharani agrees with (Tharani in Chater, 2020). Yet they were also sceptical that RE could attract the resources it needs, including teacher development and curriculum time, to improve its status. They regarded the National Entitlement as an opportunity to boost RE whilst at the same time conceding that RE's low standing is intractably resistant, inferring that the National Entitlement alone cannot 'rescue' it. Teachers may have responded in this way because the research focussed on the National Entitlement. The wider scope of CoRE's report acknowledges policy and structural barriers and addresses these in its recommendations (2018, 11–18); including improvements to initial teacher education and continuing professional development (recommendations 6 and 7) and tighter inspection and accountability measures (recommendations 9 and 10). Teachers' responses emphasise their opinion that, in line with the principle intention of CoRE's report, influence on policy change is needed for consistent and sustained improvements for RE and to mitigate the '*RE lottery*'.

6 Conclusions

In this research primary teachers' responses have informed and advanced discourse about CoRE's recommendation for a National Entitlement in valuable ways. It is evident that teachers' critique of the National Entitlement was situated from within a familiar world-religions paradigm. This suggests that for sustained, 'game-changing' impact the originality of Religion and Worldviews in comparison with existing approaches needs to be clearly distinguishable to the RE community as a whole. Reflecting on teachers' concerns about content overload led to consideration of cumulatively sufficient curricula as a means of activating the National Entitlement, and to rationalised pedagogical reduction as a means of sharpening the conceptual focus of Religion and Worldviews. Opportunities for pupils' social and personal development that teachers noticed in the National Entitlement raised questions about whether instrumental purposes are intrinsic to the conceptualisation of Religion and Worldviews, and the implications of this on curriculum design. Teachers were positive about the National Entitlement's ambition for RE, but also highlighted what they saw as intractable structural barriers. Without dismantling these existing barriers the teachers struggled to see how RE could flourish. Pedagogical reform alone, without structural revisions, may be insufficient to deliver the consistency in improvement to RE quality that CoRE aspires to. However, as the legacy of Council Working Paper 36 has shown, it's a good place to start.

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