



“Covid made me think about...” What really matters in RE: a European research project

Tania ap Siôn^{1,2} · Sandra Cullen³ · Sonja Danner⁴ · Bianca Kappelhoff⁵ · Eszter Kodácsy-Simon⁶

Accepted: 8 February 2024 / Published online: 28 February 2024
© The Author(s) 2024

Abstract

Living and working through the challenges of a pandemic offered a unique research opportunity to engage with some core questions about what really matters in Religious Education (RE) in countries across Europe. The *What Covid Reveals to Religious Education Specialists* research project sought to provide a reflective space for RE specialists, drawn from the board members of the European Forum for Teachers of Religious Education (EFTRE), to consider their experiences of RE during the Covid-19 pandemic and to begin to articulate what they might want in the future for RE in light of their experiences. Areas explored in the online qualitative survey included: challenging questions and issues, social unrest, student–teacher relationships, learning scenarios, valued dimensions in RE, opportunities for the future, and ‘ideal’ RE. Respondents were from sixteen of the twenty-two countries present on the EFTRE Board, offering their individual perspectives from Western, Northern, Central and Southern Europe. Using the tool ATLAS.ti, an inductive analytical approach was employed; a number of key group ‘themes’ emerged from the responses, which provided a basis for further analysis. This paper will present some of the main findings in dialogue with the focusing research stimulus question: *What does Covid-19 reveal to RE specialists about their subject?* The project is a European collaboration involving researchers from Austria, Germany, Hungary, Ireland and Wales.

Keywords Religious Education · Covid-19 · Qualitative survey · Europe

1 Introduction

If one thing may be said about the Covid-19 pandemic, it is that despite the suffering, fear and death associated with it (Kaman et al, 2023), the pandemic has confronted people with core questions about their lives and what really matters to them. These kinds of reflections rarely have a space in everyday life but often come to the forefront in dangerous and life-threatening situations. Arguably, the pandemic challenged people to reflect on their personal lives as well as consider how to shape living together in society. This was also the case for the education sector across Europe. Schools and (as part of them) Religious Education (RE), experienced new educational situations, including temporary school closures

and distance learning, hybrid teaching solutions, and teaching at schools under hygiene rules (OECD, 2022; Fickermann & Edelstein, 2020; Institut für Demoskopie Allensbach, 2021; Chapman et al., 2022; Hall et al., 2021). Under these circumstances, new ways of teaching and learning had to be invented and the question arose: What is Religious Education really about?

As these situations and discussions were experienced across Europe more or less simultaneously, the pandemic has provided a particular incentive to go beyond national studies (Dietzsch, 2020; Kim, 2021; Molnár et al., 2021; Sturm, 2023) and to conduct European research. That is why a group of researchers from Austria, Germany, Hungary, Ireland and Wales gathered together to develop a qualitative research project on this topic. The aim was to benefit from this unique opportunity to analyse what kind of conclusions RE specialists in different European countries draw for their subject from this very similar situation. In this context, the present study focuses more on the individual perception of RE (Simojoki et al., 2016; Dohrmann, 2021; Schütt, 2012; Popp, 2013) than on an objective analysis of RE models and structures in place (Ziebertz & Riegel, 2009; Rothgangel et al., 2016–2020; Schweitzer et al, 2023). By exploring the broad research question *What does Covid-19 reveal to RE specialists about their subject?* this study also aims to go beyond the immediate Covid-19 pandemic experiences to focus on what RE specialists would like for the subject now and in the future. In the following, the study's insights will be set out by first explaining the research methods and presenting the code groups that resulted from the analysis before discussing the results of the study. In the discussion, four key areas will be highlighted: changing and non-changing elements in RE; challenges for teachers; existential matters; and being connected.

2 Research sample

The study's target group was the board members of EFTRE (The European Forum for Teachers of Religious Education—www.eftre.net) who represent twenty-two European countries, are key actors in teacher education, research, and agenda setting, as well as being qualified RE teachers and representatives of their country's RE community. All twenty-two board members were invited to participate in the study, sixteen of these responded positively by completing the research survey. In those countries where this study's authors are board members, equivalent national RE professionals participated in the survey. Table 1 indicates the breakdown of respondents according to the background variables pertaining to 'RE model', 'region', and 'area of work'. The research sample proved to be sufficiently large and heterogeneous to have confidence that a diverse range of perspectives were captured in the research with no major areas of relevance omitted.

3 Research design

An inductive qualitative approach to research design was employed in order to give respondents appropriate space and time to reflect on their Covid-19 experiences and to consider whether such experiences had affected what they think really matters in RE. The exploratory nature of the study required a disciplined 'openness' to be built purposefully into each step of the research design so as to capture a wide variety of subjective

Table 1 EFTRE respondents according to the model of RE provision, region, and area of work (N=16)

RE model (based on respondents' answers and Rothgangel et al., (2016–2020))	Denominational (n = 10)	Non-denominational (n=5)	Out of school RE experiences (n= 1)
Region (Rothgangel et al., 2016–2020)	Western Europe (n = 6)	Northern Europe (n = 2)	Southern Europe (n = 2)
Area of work	Initial teacher training (n=8)	RE teachers (n=3)	Continuing professional development (n = 3, of which one is also an RE teacher)
			Central Europe (n=6)
			Advisory persons (n=2, of which one is in initial teacher training and one is in CPD as well)

viewpoints and conclusions. One overarching research question which provided the study focus was identified: *What does Covid-19 reveal to RE specialists about their subject?*

An online English-language qualitative questionnaire was developed by the researchers, carefully taking into account the diverse contexts and models of RE around Europe. Section One of the questionnaire gathered general information about the respondents and their roles and contexts. Section Two posed a series of open-ended questions (Table 2) designed to stimulate reflection on RE in light of the respondents' experiences during the pandemic, and how this impacted on how they thought about challenging questions and issues in the RE classroom, social unrest, student–teacher interactions, learning scenarios, valued dimensions in RE, opportunities for the future, and what constitutes an 'ideal' RE. Open-ended questions helped to accommodate the diverse background of the respondents which was reflected in their linguistic differences, cultural diversity, and understanding and practice of RE.

The questionnaire was tested in a five-country pilot study in October 2021 and revised before the survey link was circulated to the target group in February–March 2022.

3.1 Data analysis

Content analysis (Mayring, 2021) was undertaken with the assistance of ATLAS.ti software. First, four coders worked independently to generate initial codes, bringing to the task their different perspectives, RE contexts and country backgrounds. Individual memos were

Table 2 Survey questions

This survey is divided into two parts:

PART 1 asks you to provide some brief general information about yourself (questions 1–3)

PART 2 asks you to reflect on RE in relation to your experiences during the pandemic (questions 4–12)

Part 1

1. What is your country affiliation?
2. How long have you been working in the field of education?
3. Briefly describe in a few sentences your RE-related position and role (please also include the organisational context/s e.g. church, state, university)

Part 2

4. What is your general experience of the impact of the Covid-19 period on the teaching of RE in your context?
 5. What are the challenging questions or issues that you have seen emerging in the RE classroom during the Covid-19 period? (You may think of religious, ethical, spiritual, or other issues which impact on RE.)
 6. How do you think the social unrest of 2020–21 (You may think of social inequalities, political controversies, economic tensions, climate crisis, racism, nationalism, military conflicts) affects the teaching of RE?
 7. The pandemic has challenged student–teacher interaction in many different ways. How do you think the Covid-19 experience affects the relationship between RE teachers and their students?
 8. The experiences during the pandemic have made me realise that three things that I most value about RE are ...
 - a. Do these three things differ from what you would have pointed out before the pandemic? Please elaborate
 9. What has Covid-19 made you see in terms of opportunities for the future of RE?
 10. After experiencing various learning scenarios in online, in-person and hybrid settings, where do you see the greatest possibilities to improve learning processes in RE?
 11. When you think about what you have learnt during the pandemic regarding RE, what would your ideal RE look like in 5 years?
 - a. What might prevent your ideal RE from becoming reality?
 12. If there is anything else that you would like to add, please do so here
-

also kept by the coders. The next steps involved continuous consultation and consensus among the coders to reduce the subjective component and to ensure the transparency and reliability of the analyses. This continuous code review and refinement led to the generation of eight non-hierarchical code groups. The data was then allocated to multiple code groups. A second round of analysis was then undertaken in light of the main research question and follow-up questions arising from the coding results. This second analysis also examined how the background variables and the eight code groups were co-occurring with one another.

4 Results

Eight inter-related, non-hierarchical code groups emerged from the data analysis which revealed the respondents' areas of interest and concern whilst reflecting on their experience of the pandemic and its impact on their professional roles in RE. The eight code groups are: *online settings*, *wellbeing*, *life questions*, *understanding RE*, *teachers' situation*, *relationships*, *social aspects*, and *wider context*.

4.1 Online settings

Many respondents reflected on their experience of teaching and learning in RE in online settings, which had been brought into sharp focus by the pandemic's face-to-face restrictions. They identified the challenges that these online settings posed. For example, respondents reflected on trying to create suitable learning environments to discuss sensitive topics, as well as observing disparities in students' access to technology. They also identified the opportunities and future potential of such technology in terms of its contribution to RE. In addition, personal preferences, and attitudes as well as shifts within these as a result of experience) were highlighted. Generally, online provision was not seen as something that could replace the in-person experience; however, it could complement it and open up important new dimensions for RE.

4.2 Wellbeing

Respondents raised aspects related to wellbeing as a consequence of the pandemic period. Wellbeing issues included the spiritual, mental, emotional and physical needs of students as well as the importance of developing resilience. Respondents considered the role, contribution and value of RE in challenging times. They also reflected on how this could impact the future of RE in light of the pandemic experience. It was recognised that broader societal wellbeing issues had a direct influence on students, and these are relevant to the RE classroom. It was also acknowledged that there is a relationship between wellbeing and learning environments, teaching and learning approaches, pastoral care, and provision of resources.

4.3 Life questions

Many challenging life related questions and issues came into focus during the pandemic. Respondents referred to these in general terms as big or ultimate questions, or in specific

terms such as individual meaning and purpose in life, death, suffering, the place of God, as well as issues related to life, society and culture in the world today. A sense of spiritual need and searching was also identified. For some respondents this pointed to the relevance of spiritual skills and demonstrated the place of belief and faith as a support during difficult times. Respondents also referred to moral and ethical dilemmas arising during the pandemic. For example, media ethics; freedom, rights, and responsibility; rules, regulations and the greater good. The importance of learning how to navigate through life with the necessary support also featured. For RE to be responsive to students' needs and relevant to their lives, life questions and issues were viewed as important. Learning to engage with life questions could bring benefits both to individuals and to wider society. In practice, however, some felt that the ability to respond adequately to life questions had been limited for various reasons. Finally, the pandemic provided an opportunity to consider values and what is important in life, which in the case of one respondent, led to a significant change in professional practice.

4.4 Understanding RE

Responses often revealed respondents' understanding of RE when they reflected on their views about the purpose, aims and goals of RE, its characteristics and contribution to education, as well as broad approaches to the subject. For many, the pandemic had demonstrated the value of RE which was described as having a range of concerns. Respondents wrote that RE is about: "encounter, connection, relationships", and "community", "challenging prejudices and opinions both religious and non-religious", "raising and responding to life's big questions", "searching for meaning and purpose", "discussing and developing beliefs, values and ethical perspectives", and "preparing students for the challenges of life in the world today". The importance of RE being relevant was emphasised. Specific approaches to RE were promoted either as a current reality or as a future ideal, such as, RE that is "inclusive", "critical", "non-didactic", "objective, critical and pluralistic". Also included were intercultural approaches; philosophical / hermeneutical approaches; multidisciplinary approaches; and a more integrated approach in the wider curriculum. Threats to the future of RE and what form that will take were also identified.

4.5 Teachers' situation

Respondents often included their own and other teachers' experiences of and perspectives on RE stimulated by reflections on the pandemic. For example, respondents wrote about teaching and learning conditions during the pandemic and what these revealed about teacher preparedness and professional needs. In other instances they identified cases of positive support available to them. Teachers' priorities, such as, the importance of student wellbeing and relationships, being relevant, and having a focus on people rather than performance, were considered. Didactic approaches and pedagogical considerations were also discussed.

4.6 Relationships

Respondents discussed the challenges to relationships posed by the pandemic, as well as issues relating to student–teacher engagement. The importance of being relevant to students and authentic in relationships was again emphasised. For some, engaging with the student voice was a part of this and there were reflections on what is important for relationships.

Relationships were seen as a distinctive part of the rationale for RE, for example, in relation to pastoral care and wellbeing. In addition, opportunities for a wider range of relationships were seen as arising from the pandemic, for example, the world-wide networking and co-working enabled through developments in technology.

4.7 Social aspects

The code group, social aspects, focussed on big social issues, media and communication matters, as well as related values arising in RE in response to experiences during the pandemic. These were shared challenges and crises. Respondents considered the relevance of some social aspects to RE, either affirming it or approaching it more cautiously. Also included within social aspects was student engagement or non-engagement with these issues, as well as the more personal effects of the pandemic on social skills and relationships.

4.8 Wider context

This included respondents' reflections on wider context issues, influences, opportunities and threats viewed as significant for RE. For example, religious and political influences were highlighted, as well as perceptions of RE on the part of the public, parents, and the school itself. Wider context also related to the nature of RE, which involves encounter and contact with others as well as with broader societal issues. Online opportunities for greater networking in RE were identified as positive developments. Finally, the growing presence of secularism and atheism in all school types were viewed by some as needing to be part of conversations about RE.

5 Discussion

Further analysis of the data through the lens of the eight code groups led to the identification of four over-arching themes emerging from engagement with the research question: *What does Covid-19 reveal to RE specialists about their subject?* These themes are: changing and non-changing elements in RE; challenges faced by RE teachers; existential matters; being connected.

5.1 Changing and non-changing elements in RE

Question 8 of the survey invited respondents to reflect on the relationship between their pandemic experiences and what they valued most about RE. They were also asked to indicate whether they think their response would have been different prior to the pandemic. Responses to this question suggest that the aspects of RE valued by the respondents appear to be largely unchanged by their experience of the pandemic. Ten respondents explicitly stated that they saw no change in what they most valued about the subject. Five respondents answered with a simple "no" whilst the others confirmed their position by adding that the pandemic "has only reaffirmed them" (Respondent 10), or "has amplified this" (Respondent 6), or made "it more evident in these circumstances" (Respondent 4). Even those respondents who indicated that their perception of RE had changed to some extent as

a result of the pandemic did not indicate a change in content, only a modification in intensity and clarity, as in, “this has been strengthened” (Respondent 15). For Respondent 9, the three things they most valued in RE “rose to the surface”. In addition, the areas of RE valued by respondents appeared to be independent of the background variables relating to the model of RE, region, or area of work. It is important to note that Question 8 addressed the perception of change explicitly in the context of value. If change is understood more broadly, there are many examples in the questionnaire responses as a whole that indicate important changes to RE during the pandemic. For example, changes in the circumstances of teaching, topics arising in the classroom, educational methods, and teachers’ tasks have ongoing relevance for the perception and practice of RE by professionals.

In their reflection on the value of RE as a subject, respondents highlighted four areas in particular as being of most value; these remain unchallenged or largely unaltered by Covid experiences. These areas related to aspects of RE within the code groups of *understanding of RE*, *life questions*, *wellbeing*, and *relationships*. Of these, aspects coded as *understanding of RE* were cited most frequently by respondents. This included different approaches to, and definitions of, RE, hermeneutical questions concerning RE, and the importance of critical thinking. RE’s connection to real life was emphasised as was RE as a relevant agent for navigating the world in which we live. As two respondents from different backgrounds in relation to denominational / non-denominational RE stated: RE “is about people and what matters most to them” (Respondent 15), and “it helps us reflect on big questions around the search for meaning and purpose in life, which was particularly important during the pandemic when we slowed down and had to adjust to a new normal” (Respondent 10).

Aspects relating to *life questions* followed next in frequency. Here, it was mainly topics of specific religious, ethical and spiritual questions that were raised, as well as the themes of theodicy and God. Respondents viewed religion or RE as a resource for helping students to engage with these, and therefore not a subject for change. The next most frequent area of the non-changing elements in RE is that *wellbeing* is or should be of central importance in the classroom. The value and reinforcing effects of meditation, pastoral approaches, spiritual skills, resilience and caring were mentioned here. Finally, aspects discussed under the heading *relationships* included the need for belonging to communities, the feeling of connection to the teacher and other students, and the value of engagement, interaction, encounter, caring and cooperation.

From the responses to question 8, it was observed that the aspects of RE not affected by the pandemic or changing social situations are those that people value most and are in line with the respondents’ understanding of RE. These were deepened but not changed. As one respondent stated:

“My understanding has widened without getting unconcrete (sic). Through the pandemic I trust more in the things that matter. Before I tried to control and provide more. Now I know I can’t anymore and feel the ability to let go the learning processes in the way they want to, without giving up responsibility for it” (Respondent 16).

5.2 Challenges faced by RE teachers

The pandemic presented a wide range of challenges for teachers which can be grouped thematically: *online teaching*, *communication*, *didactics and methods*. Respondents wrote of how moving to the *online teaching* and learning space proved to be demanding and tiring for them as they changed their usual schedules, adapted to virtual learning

environments and attempted to develop lessons that were creative and collaborative. Being unable to teach in a physical classroom had a significant impact on how the respondents thought about their task as RE teachers. Teaching online revealed a number of challenges: teachers did not feel adequately trained for the online classroom due to a lack of professional learning opportunities, and teachers were concerned about student engagement in this space. Of particular note for RE teachers was the concern that headteachers, parents and, to some extent, non-committed teachers, held the subject in low esteem in the curriculum. In one case the timetable for RE was shortened during the pandemic and sometimes the subject was dropped altogether if it was not an exam subject:

"The pandemic has not really changed my sense of what is important in RE. It has made me more fearful of how some people regard it and how, post-pandemic, they may feel that some 'peripheral' aspects of the curriculum should be set aside" (Respondent 7).

A second challenge noted by the respondents was in the area of *communication*. Teachers often had to communicate with 'black screens' as students turned their cameras off:

"The online system that we used allows the students to see the lecturer, but not each other, thereby further discouraging students from making themselves visible even to the lecturer. For a subject like RE, which requires encounter, interaction and exchange of ideas, this is very unhelpful" (Respondent 7).

When schools re-opened, wearing masks also had an impact on how students communicated with each other and with the teacher. Respondents noted that they had to engage even more in the pandemic to find new ways of communicating with their students. Staying in contact with them was not always easy and with some it was simply impossible, while with others the relationship deepened:

"I guess there are two ways: they either got more apart from another because of distance learning and restricted possibilities to reach the children; or they came closer because the children kind of used the RE-teachers as confidential persons for talking about their sorrows etc." (Respondent 5).

The online situation reinforced these two tendencies. The respondents considered that the development of effective RE lessons, either online or in person, depends on learning how to communicate authentically with students so that "learners will be more engaged in real, authentic, enquiry based upon real people" (Respondent 15).

A third challenge faced by RE teachers was in the area of *didactics and methods*. Respondents wrote of trying to respond to the individual entitlement to belief and practice of students in the online environment. They also observed how difficult it was to design resources for students with additional educational needs. Another challenge particular to RE was the need to respond to students experiencing crisis, whether that was expressed as anxiety, tiredness, feeling harassed, or as spiritual hunger and looking for meaning. Therefore, for some teachers it was clear that they had to prioritise student wellbeing which was an additional duty without sufficient resources. As Respondent 2 observed, "the need for deeper spiritual content on the part of students and colleagues has also strengthened. Serious questions of faith arose about suffering, the purpose of life, the role of God, and the importance of faith in that special situation." This highly demanding pedagogical task is seen as a unique strength of RE but also as one that is not put into practice widely enough

as it proves to be a challenge for teachers, “this ideal RE will depend on innovative and ongoing CPD for RE teachers” (Respondent 10).

Maintaining relationships between teacher and student was seen as essential during the pandemic despite being difficult to manage online. Teachers reported having to be more creative and adaptive in their teaching so developed active learning methodologies and online collaborative projects to deepen the students’ understanding of topics and engagement with issues, “[RE] has a significant role to play in enabling learners to develop the skills to understand the world and to work towards creating a better world for themselves and for others” (Respondent 15). To ensure this, one teacher wrote meditations, others worked with testimonies, stories, films, symbols or images to enable their pupils to become religiously literate. Teachers reported developing a broad field of teaching competencies such as critical thinking, knowledge transfer and spiritual skills which they tried to achieve with different didactic approaches.

5.3 Existential matters

RE specialists consider that a central purpose of RE is to engage with the personal development of the student. RE provides students “an opportunity to explore some of the biggest questions of all, the ultimate questions of life” (Respondent 15), and to search for their place in the world—a world that is complex, challenging, even overwhelming at times. Respondents highlight that RE needs to connect to this reality of students’ lives and to enable them to develop competences to navigate the world they live in. Only then, would RE remain relevant to them.

As a significant characteristic of RE, engagement with these life questions touches upon very sensitive and private concerns like life and death, the purpose of life and how to find a mentally healthy—and possibly spiritual or religious—way to deal with them. This became even more important during the years of Covid-19 and wider social unrest. “Greater emphasis should be placed on spiritual care and the strengthening of stress management and resilience development skills. (I mean it also for students and teachers!)” (Respondent 2). Respondents’ views on dealing with existential matters give an insight into their understanding of RE and how they describe what the purpose of RE is. RE needs to create safe spaces to discuss these sensitive topics. Sometimes these relate to bigger social issues like climate change, racism, social inequalities or war:

“I have been more aware of these issues, particularly around sexuality and gender, climate change and racism and prejudice and have modified my teaching programmes and training sessions to accommodate these. These and other issues are important to our subject and for many children and young people and so a focus on them makes what we do real and relevant for our learners” (Respondent 6).

These issues come into focus because they shape the students’ lives and affect the life questions they bring into the classroom. It is the teacher’s task to take that into consideration when designing learning scenarios. “However, it is also important that the impact of social unrest and current events doesn’t dominate RE. These topics often come up in other subjects too [...]. It is important that RE explores the issues emerging through a subject specific lens” (Respondent 10). The focus remains on the student, discerning the values at play in public debates and offering a space to reflect on their own point of view.

Dealing with existential matters is identified as a core purpose of RE and provides an insight into the respondents’ understandings of RE. This is shared by both respondents

from denominational and non-denominational contexts. Nevertheless, there are some differences in the ways each group describes this task. Both groups underline the necessity for students to develop skills to deal with their wellbeing and life questions but might highlight different approaches to how to do so. We can observe that those respondents from denominational contexts tend to emphasise the dimension of mental health and how to draw on religion and spirituality as a resource for this:

“There is a strong spiritual hunger in people that comes out stronger in difficult situations. We need to be able to respond to this because they are waiting for the spiritual message. [...] showing that God can also live everyday life in a crisis” (Respondent 2).

On the other hand, those respondents from non-denominational contexts tended to prioritise the task to create safe spaces for students to explore their own beliefs and worldviews.

Taking another look at how these issues connect to the experiences during the Covid-19 pandemic, we can observe that respondents state that dealing with existential matters is a key purpose of RE independent of the pandemic. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that topics such as ‘life questions’ and ‘mental wellbeing’ have been particularly present during the pandemic. It remains an open question as to what extent these experiences may subconsciously shape the respondents’ current thinking about their subject.

5.4 Being connected

“RE is all about connecting and connection” (Respondent 16). The importance of being connected in various ways was present in all sixteen responses, and relationships were explicitly identified as valued in RE by many respondents, in both denominational and non-denominational contexts. The respondents’ recollections of pandemic experiences revealed just how much people’s relationships had been affected by Covid restrictions, and the ways in which these impacted RE, both during the pandemic and post-pandemic. Four areas of interest related to aspects of being connected emerged from the responses, these included: professional priorities, working together, connecting more widely, and reflecting theologically.

Professional priorities were a concern for the respondents, and often related to relationship issues affecting student wellbeing. The weight of this responsibility was frequently viewed as being a part of the professional role of the RE specialist. Some considered these relationship issues to be still current post-pandemic, and (as such) should shape post-pandemic priorities. The “pandemic affected all relationships. And this has affected their [students] social skills: There is a significant amount of rebuilding that now needs to be done to rebuild relationships and then learning” (Respondent 15).

Some responses voiced concern about the detrimental effects of a rush to “pick up the pace” (Respondent 6), so as to make up for lost learning time during the pandemic. As one respondent wrote, “grading and evaluation seem to be prioritised areas, and self-reflection, meaning-making and collaboration have taken a step back” (Respondent 8). Another respondent identified an opportunity for RE:

“to see the importance of that "different kind of class" in a regular school day—RE as a place that is not about performance but rather about every single person that is there. It’s about looking at what your focus is, and what is needed” (Respondent 5).

Working together in RE and meaningfully connecting were of interest to all respondents. Pandemic experiences prompted reflections on the kinds of relationships developed within the RE classroom, and the role of conducive learning environments. Many comments, therefore, focused on what is possible in online or in-person contexts. For some respondents, working together included collaborating in RE, which may be seen in accessing the student voice, which “will be central to planning, teaching and assessment. Collaboration and creativity will be evident in RE lessons” (Respondent 10). For another respondent, the way students work with other students is significant: “The importance of encounter and engagement between students (at any level), but most especially so in a separate, divided school system” (Respondent 7). RE was also viewed as being about learning to work together for the common good. For example, an ideal RE is seen as, “letting the students think independently and create scenarios for the future. Work together with other subjects, building projects that can change the future for better” (Respondent 11).

Being able to *connect more widely* was identified by many respondents as a positive development in RE, which had come about largely as a result of the pandemic. It was now possible and more common in RE to connect and to collaborate more widely at all levels: “With online-classes there are more opportunities to communicate with people all over the world, to network and do projects together. Students can learn from other students, from other countries and cultures” (Respondent 11). The ecumenical dimension of this was also highlighted in one response, considering an ideal RE as: “[B]ringing together good professionals—either internationally or ecumenically” (Respondent 2).

The pandemic also opened up other kinds of connections, such as those with the home lives of students and involving families in the educational process for RE: “Remote work also united people and some felt a deeper connection as they became more aware of the home life circumstances of students” (Respondent 10). In addition, the connection with wider society was seen through the significance of social unrest and culture wars as part of the discussion in RE classes, although in one case the lack of student connection with these was a cause for concern (Respondent 7).

In denominational contexts, some respondents *reflected theologically* on relationships and being connected with one another. A respondent working in a denominational ‘out of school’ context wrote: “Every meeting in person has its uniqueness. It is not the teacher, whose thing it is, but Lord Jesus” (Respondent 9). Other respondents reflected on relationships as part of the nature of RE: “The constitution of good RE depends on the ability of the participants to connect. Things that matter, in religious sight, cannot be physically accessed anyway” (Respondent 16). The same respondent included ‘God’ within the body of relationships, when discussing the student–teacher relationship:

“Students are, as all of us, on the search. The challenge of belonging to someone and to relate oneself to others (and ☐god) has always been a central factor for RE and the relationship between RE teachers and their students.”

6 Conclusion

This qualitative study set out to investigate *What Covid-19 reveals to RE specialists about their subject* through a survey distributed to a defined group of RE specialists in Europe, the Board members of EFTRE. Results have revealed eight inter-related main areas of reflection and interest in the responses. These relate to: online settings, wellbeing, life questions, understanding RE, teachers’ situation, relationships, social aspects, and wider

context. Identifying these areas has enabled reflection on what RE specialists consider to be the changing and non-changing elements of RE, the challenges they face, the existential matters that emerge in RE and the value they place on connection. Limitations of the study include the distribution of regional representation among the respondents and the restriction in research scope through a narrowly defined sample group, who might share common European experiences and working that shape their perspectives.

Two major findings of the research reveal, first, what is held in common by RE specialists from very different European contexts; and second, what is perceived as changing or remaining constant in RE in light of pandemic experiences. Possible reasons for these findings would benefit from further discussion as secondary analyses of the data have begun to uncover some differences in emphasis among the respondents in relation to selected background variables. The findings suggest that Covid made RE specialists think about how their subject has been impacted by the pandemic, either in terms of their own perceptions and understandings of RE or in terms of changes within RE itself which will shape the identity of the subject into the future.

Funding Open Access funding provided by the IReL Consortium. The authors received no funding for this study.

Data availability The data that support the findings of this study are available from the authors upon reasonable request.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors contributed equally to this article and the authorship order is alphabetical. Four of the authors, Sonja Danner, Estzer Kodácsy-Simon, Sandra Cullen and Bianca Kappelhoff are unpaid members of the EFTRE Board. Sandra Cullen is a member of the Editorial Board of the *Journal of Religious Education*.

Consent to participate Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

Open Access This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

References

- Chapman, S., Evans, R. A., Horder, S., Jones C., Lloyd-Williams, S., Mahoney, N., Meace, S., & Pullen, M. (2022). *Experiences of blended and distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic in Wales: School and stakeholder evidence*. Cardiff: Welsh Government. Available at <https://hwb.gov.wales/professional-development/the-national-strategy-for-educational-research-and-enquiry-nserc/research-studies-on-the-impact-of-the-covid-19-pandemic-on-the-welsh-education-system/research-study-1/> Accessed on 1 May 2023.
- Dohrmann, J. (2021). *Überzeugungen von Lehrkräften. Ihre Bedeutung für das pädagogische Handeln und die Lernergebnisse in den Fächern Englisch und Mathematik. 1. Auflage*. Münster: Waxmann (Empirische Erziehungswissenschaft, 78).

- Dietzsch, A. (2020). Die Beziehung zwischen Lehrenden und Lernenden im Religionsunterricht – Bedeutung f r das Lernen und Impulse f r den digitalen Religionsunterricht. *Theo-Web*, 19(2), 34–49.
- Fickermann, D., & Edelstein, B. (Hrsg.) (2020). ‘Langsam vermisste ich die Schule ...’ Schule w hrend und nach der Corona-Pandemie. In: *Die Deutsche Schule*, 16. Beiheft. M nster: Waxmann.
- Hall, T., Byrne, D., Bryan, A., Kitching, K., N  Chr n n, D., O’Toole, C., & Addley, J. (2021). COVID-19 and education: Positioning the pandemic; facing the future. *Irish Educational Studies*, 40(2), 147–149.
- Institut f r Demoskopie Allensbach (2021). Lernen in Zeiten von Corona. Ergebnisse einer Befragung von Sch lern und Eltern von Kindern der Klassenstufen 5 bis 10 im Fr hjahr 2021. Retrieved April 19, 2023 from <https://www.telekom-stiftung.de/sites/default/files/files/media/publications/Lernen-in-Zeiten-von-Corona-Bericht.pdf>.
- Kaman, A., Erhart, M., Devine, J., Reiß, F., Napp, A. K., Simon, A., Hurrelmann, K., Schlack, R., H lling, H., Wieler, L., & Ravens-Sieberer, U. (2023). Two years of pandemic: The mental health and quality of life of children and adolescents—findings of the COPSy longitudinal study. *Deutsches  rztblatt International*, 2023, 120.
- Kim, H.-S. (2021). Beyond doubt and uncertainty: Religious education for a post-Covid-19 world. *Religious Education*, 116(1), 41–52.
- Mayring, P. (2021). *Qualitative content analysis: A step-by-step guide*. Sage.
- Moln r, Gy., H di,  .,  k rdi, R., & Mokri, D. (2021). A koronavirus-j rv ny okozta rendk v li oktatasi helyzet hat sa 2–8.  vfolyamos di kok tud s-  s k pess gszintj re az olvas ssz veg rt s, a matematika  s a természettudom nyok t rlet n. *Iskolakult ra*, 31(2), 3–22.
- OECD. (2022). *Education at a Glance 2022: OECD Indicators*. OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/3197152b-en>
- Popp, D. (2013). *Religion und Religionsunterricht in Europa. Eine quantitative Studie zur Sicht europ ischer Religionslehrerinnen und -lehrer*. LIT Verlag.
- Rothgangel et al. (2016–2020). *Religious Education at Schools in Europe*. Part 1–6. G ttingen: V&R unipress.
- Salda a, J. (2021). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers*. Sage.
- Sch tt, S. (2012). *Kooperation in der Schule. Eine Untersuchung der Orientierungs- und Handlungsmuster von Lehrern*. Peter Lang.
- Schweitzer, F., Freathy, R., Parker, S. G., & Simojoki, H. (2023). *Improving Religious Education through teacher training. Experiences and insights from European countries*. Waxmann.
- Simojoki, H., Schweitzer, F., Parker, S. G., & Freathy, R. (2016). Die Professionalisierung des Religionslehrerberufs als Aufgabe und Gegenstand religionsp dagogischer Forschung. Historische und systematische Perspektiven. *Zeitschrift f r P dagogik und Theologie*, 68(2), 135–152.
- Sturm, A. (2023). Digitaler Religionsunterricht in Coronazeiten – empirische Einblicke, religionsdidaktische Konsequenzen. In Schambeck, Mirjam & Verburg, Winfried (Ed): *Wie Religion f r Krisen taugt. Zum Beitrag religi ser Bildung in Krisenzeiten*. G ttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht. pp.150–166.
- Vodafone-Stiftung. (2020). Schule auf Distanz. Perspektiven und Empfehlungen f r den neuen Schulalltag. Eine repr sentative Befragung von Lehrkr ften in Deutschland im Auftrag der Vodafone Stiftung Deutschland mit Analysen von Prof. Dr. Birgit Eickelmann und PD Dr. Kerstin Drossel. Available at <https://www.vodafone-stiftung.de/schule-auf-distanz/> consulted on 19.04.2023.
- Ziebertz, H.-G., & Riegel, U. (Eds.). (2009). *How teachers in Europe teach religion. An international empirical study in 16 countries*. (Vol. 12). LIT Verlag.

Publisher’s Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

Authors and Affiliations

Tania ap Si n^{1,2}  · Sandra Cullen³  · Sonja Danner⁴ · Bianca Kappelhoff⁵ · Eszter Kod csy-Simon⁶ 

✉ Sandra Cullen
sandra.cullen@dcu.ie

Tania ap Siôn
tania.apsion@bishopg.ac.uk

Sonja Danner
sonja.danner@kphvie.ac.at

Bianca Kappelhoff
kappelhoff@comenius.de

Eszter Kodácsy-Simon
eszter.simon@lutheran.hu

¹ World Religions and Education Research Unit, Bishop Grosseteste University, Lincoln, England

² St. Giles' Centre, Wrexham, Wales, UK

³ School of Human Development, Dublin City University, Dublin, Ireland

⁴ KPH Wien/Krems, Vienna, Austria

⁵ Comenius-Institute – Protestant Centre for Research and Development of Education, Münster, Germany

⁶ Lutheran Theological University, Budapest, Hungary