



Shared Space: promoting teachers' academic understanding of inter-religious dialogue through a teacher fellowship model for religious education (RE)

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Abstract

We report on the design of a close-to-practice research project situated in Southwest England exploring the relationship between developing teachers' 'powerful knowledge' of inter-religious dialogue in religious education (RE) through a teacher fellowship model for RE specialists, including a specialist curriculum development programme and co-constructed evaluation of an intervention seeking to promote 'warmer' community relations. This current phase of the 'Shared Space' project combines insight from two existing subject-specific knowledge exchange projects—undertaken by us—with a Teacher Fellowship approach to pedagogical and curriculum knowledge development pioneered by the Historical Association, and an emerging one, 'After RE'. The current Shared Space project addresses two established concerns in RE that are not normally connected: (1) the lack of rigorous subject knowledge held by RE teachers in England; (2) the assumption that good RE in schools can promote community relations, a widely accepted assumption hitherto without much evidence to support it. Here we set out a justification for the project and the form it will take, based on established Shared Space principles of how best to support in-service teachers' ongoing professional development through knowledge exchange with academics, mindful of equal power relations. While appreciating aspects of the notion of 'powerful knowledge' on which 'theory-rich' Teacher Fellowships have been based, we cite thinking from the emerging After RE project to suggest a modified theoretical framework for our investigation which will innovate methodologically when evaluating its impact in partnership with teacher participants.

Keywords Religious education · Powerful knowledge · Community relations · Contact hypothesis · Qualitative comparative analysis (QCA)

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1 Introduction

While the ‘Shared Space’ project has been developing since 2014 in Bristol, UK, in its most recent phase it has been working with teachers to explore the relationship between developing ‘powerful knowledge’ of inter-religious dialogue in religious education (RE) through a teacher fellowship model for RE specialists, including specialist curriculum development with those teachers, and evaluation of the impact of the intervention on classroom practice seeking to promote ‘warmer community relations’ in RE (Miller, 2013). The structure and design of this later chapter in the Shared Space story combines insight from two existing subject-specific knowledge exchange projects undertaken by us (Orchard et al., 2021; Williams et al., 2019), with a view to refining current approaches to pedagogical and curriculum knowledge development taken on a ‘Teacher Fellowship’ approach in History and applying them to the RE curriculum context.

The project addresses two established concerns in RE that are not normally connected: (1) the lack of rigorous subject knowledge held by RE teachers in England; (2) the assumption that good RE in schools can promote community relations; a widely accepted view with little support in practice (Orchard, 2015). Often, these two issues are treated separately, a division underscored by recent recommendations in a research report for RE by Ofsted (2021) which separates substantive and disciplinary knowledge from a category defined as ‘personal knowledge’. This current paper sets out the justification for the project in terms of curriculum development theory in RE and understandings of how best to support in-service professional development through an approach to knowledge exchange, mindful of equal power relations.

The project is rooted in prior assumptions that the two lead researchers bring to the project (for extended information on individual researchers who have influenced the direction of Shared Space and its development in earlier stages, see Orchard et al., 2021). Hence, we begin with two short autobiographical sketches intended to enable those readers who do not know us personally to better understand our respective positioning, potential blind spots, or biases in relation to the topic and research design. Then we go on to consider in more detail the reasons why the two established concerns in RE with which we are most concerned—teachers’ subject knowledge; promoting warmer community relations in RE—tend not to be connected in research studies when, to us, both matter in equal measure.

1.1 Janet Orchard

I read Theology and Religious Studies at a research-intensive university in England in the mid-1980s. One hugely formative influence on me, personally as well as academically, was a first-year unit called ‘Conflicting Truth Claims in Inter-Religious Dialogue’. Inspired by the Hindu-Catholic theologian, Julius Lipner as my course tutor, I wrestled with the philosophical theology of Hick, Campbell-Evans, Newbiggin, Abishiktananda, Parrinder, Panikar and others. I had the chance to swap notes with a young, lively, funny, up-and coming post-doctoral researcher, Gavin Da Costa, who went on to a distinguished career in secular universities in the UK and as an advisor on interfaith relations for the Vatican.

Alongside this experience of studying the academic theology of interfaith dialogue as an undergraduate, an opportunity to engage hands-on with an interfaith project called ‘Summer in Southall’ pioneered by John Parry, a minister in the United Reformed Church, proved equally transformative, and at a key moment in my moral and personal development. In 1980s Britain, it was still possible for someone in their late teens, fascinated by

religion, never to have been to a religious building other than a church. Social change towards a more plural society over the intervening period is reflected in the development of a World Religions paradigm in the RE curriculum in schools. However, in the 1980s, with numbers of practicing Christians greater, the religion's influence on moral and ethical standards more dominant in society, exposure to religious pluralism could be ecumenical, interdenominational encounter within the Christian tradition only.

And so it was that I stepped for the first time into gurdwaras and temples, a mosque, and sharing meals in the homes of welcoming Southall residents from non-Christian backgrounds, as part of an initiative in Christian Education, rather than my experience of RE at school, bar a few lessons. Lived experience in Southall was one important step on my journey to becoming a Secondary RE teacher in non-denominational community schools. Another was studying academic theology at university, the academic and the personal were inextricably linked. No-one stands nowhere. I wouldn't have attended Summer in Southall had my interest and concern not been sparked by my academic study of the theology of seemingly incommensurable understandings of truth in religions. I have drawn on both lived experience and books to build my knowledge and understandings of worldviews across 'disciplines' and RE schools of thought in RE over thirty-five years.

1.2 Victoria Bowen

I have always wanted to work in education and therefore it was an obvious choice to do teacher training when I left school. Following this, I worked in a variety of schools, mostly in challenging circumstances, before taking my first leadership position in Leeds. After moving to Bristol, I became first a Deputy and then Headteacher in an urban Church of England primary phase school. During this time, I became interested in how church schools can develop an inclusive ethos and support the needs of the local community. Thus, it was my privilege to lead a school underpinned by a strong Christian ethos but rooted in the Somali and Afro-Caribbean communities. I left teaching in 2018 and returned to university to study for a PhD in Leadership and Policy. I became involved in the Shared Space project through my interest in a methodology with potential to assess impact in and on practice, rather than the substantive topic.

2 Background on the Shared Space project

Previous work on the 'Shared Space' project has focused on developing RE teachers' pedagogical or 'educational' knowledge rather than substantive knowledge, either of religions or 'worldviews'. We acknowledge that even in that sense it has been relatively narrow (Biesta & Hannam, 2021), a limitation we start to address in this latest, extended project. An initial economic and social research council (ESRC), impact acceleration account (IAA) exploratory award (£2951) in 2015 promoted the transfer of knowledge and understanding of 'contact theory' from the field of social psychology (the idea that positive interactions between conflicting groups can reduce prejudice; Allport, 1954) to teachers in a local secondary school. Teachers involved strongly agreed that the contact theory-based workshops developed through the project encouraged them to reflect on, and in some cases change, their practice to better promote diversity.

Building on this success, a two-phase national intervention took place between 2017 and 2019 (£6000 Westhill Trust + £19,991, ESRC IAA) + (£10,860 Westhill Trust and RE

Today Services), working in partnership with the National Association of Teachers of RE (NATRE). Knowledge exchange between University of Bristol researchers and members of the NATRE Executive provided continuing professional development (CPD) for primary and secondary teachers based on contact theory (Allport, 1954). Through this process academics learned how to better communicate their specialist knowledge of recent research findings from RE teachers, following contact principles ourselves in how we ‘shared space’ to break down barriers between us. Outcomes from the project have included publications for various audiences, including a teacher tool kit (Available at: <https://www.natre.org.uk/about-natre/projects/the-shared-space-project/>) and resources shared with others through the Learn, Teach, Lead RE initiative; invitations to contribute to policy making include a meeting at the department for education (DfE), a policy roundtable in London in 2019 and the appointment of two team members to a DfE expert panel on promoting the integration of children and young people (DfE, 2023). These findings are available in more detail through an Open Access paper available through the University of Bristol, published as a final version in the *Journal of Beliefs and Values* (Williams et al., 2019).

While the Shared Space project has developed ways to engage teachers of RE with research findings in social psychology, it has not yet addressed the potential contribution of substantive knowledge in religion and worldviews to warmer community relations at all, or indeed the possibility of a richer engagement with educational knowledge of the kind advocated by Biesta and Hannam. We take there to be a distinct body of religious knowledge (Hand, 2006) for RE within identified disciplines or fields of study from which, if children and young people engage with them, characteristic attitudes towards academic learning and enquiry will develop within its perimeters, promoting their ‘religious literacy’. We assume that knowledge, understanding and academic skills of this kind have potential value in promoting mutual self-awareness and in challenging prejudices and misapprehensions held of other people with different even opposing worldviews. For example, the ‘interpretive’ approach to RE (Jackson, 1997) has advocated RE in schools which enables pupils to appreciate diversity within religious traditions, equipping them to be better able to distinguish orthodox beliefs from heterodox ones. However systematic investigation to establish the validity and reliability of these observations has been limited (see Orchard, 2015 for an extended discussion). Furthermore, concerns have been raised in a series of reports (e.g., OFSTED, 2013; REC, 2018) regarding weaknesses in RE teachers’ subject knowledge.

Addressing the first point, regarding a stronger and richer engagement with substantive knowledge, in our latest work we propose to scale up and extend our previous work and those pedagogical materials already developed through exploring the potential of one well-regarded knowledge exchange approach established by the Historical Association (HA). Briefly on this Teacher Fellowship model (see Burn, 2021 for an extended account), schoolteachers are educated in cutting edge subject content through encounter with university academics engaged in innovative research on school curriculum topics. Moreover, in this form Teacher Fellowships have been framed by the notion of ‘powerful’ knowledge, building on the work of Michael Young. Young has argued that:

Powerful knowledge provides more reliable explanations and new ways of thinking about the world and can provide learners with a language for engaging in political, moral, and other kinds of debates.

Young (2008, p. 14)

Certainly, our subject-specific knowledge exchange project has been concerned to promote higher academic standards in teachers’ professional development, hence our attraction to and respect for the HA model. We note the requirements for professional development as

set out by the DfE (2016) which focus on improving and evaluating pupil outcomes in RE, utilising robust expert evidence and expertise provided by the University of Bristol in a collaborative manner over a sustained period of one year. Furthermore, by engaging teachers in our research, as co-researchers, with the purpose of furthering their own professional development, we anticipate such an opportunity “considerably enhances the possibility that the research will be well-informed by the daily realities of school life, and thus the outcomes will be relevant and useful to practice” (Cordingley, 2019, p. 142). This project builds on traditions of teachers contributing actively to the development of understandings of professional knowledge, a feature of the HA model, established practice in teacher development in RE (Baumfield, 2016), and something we have pursued in earlier phases of the Shared Space project (Orchard et al., 2021). However, we have a problem with framing our teacher fellowship around the notion of ‘powerful knowledge’ specifically, as we go on to explain in the next section.

3 Powerful knowledge and the problem for RE

It is common in curriculum development theory in the didactic tradition (which is well established in other parts of teacher education in northern Europe but under-represented in provision in England) to distinguish between two basic didactic categories, the general and the specific (Lewin et al., 2023). Powerful knowledge (PK) is an example of the general didactic approach. As a form of general didactics, PK can be applied across the curriculum because it makes ‘general’ claims about learning and teaching, in RE as much as any other curriculum subject. This contrasts with specific didactic approaches, including the ‘Big Ideas’ (BI) approach in RE (see ahead) which remains focused on and applied to RE, as the title indicates. BI might be more easily applied within the subject area, requiring less ‘translation’ work by curriculum producers and developers.

This ‘general/special didactics’ distinction provides insight into current didactic analysis of RE in England. Arguably the Shared Space project has focused on general psychological theories of learning so far (social psychology in our case), with some consideration of philosophical aims and purposes (Orchard, 2015). However, through the involvement of initially one team member (Orchard) in the ‘After RE’ project, we have begun to explore how the thinking being developed on that project might help this, particularly in addressing the tension between general educational aspirations to promote warmer community relations through RE lessons while respecting the ‘special’ didactical concerns of the RE subject community.

As a form of general didactics, it could be argued that Young’s PK approach helps to bridge certain gaps in RE as some have suggested (e.g., Kueh, 2020; Stones & Fraser-Pearce, 2022), following the lead of the HA Teacher Fellowship approach. The underlying assumption underpinning an emphasis on PK is certainly a fundamental question in didactics: What important knowledge should pupils be able to acquire at school? (See Young and Muller, 2013, p. 103). Rooted in an assumption that PK is both objective and reliable, it differentiates between the kind of knowing acquired from everyday experience and the disciplinary knowledge “developed by clearly distinguishable groups with a well-defined focus and relatively fixed boundaries, separating different forms of expertise” (Young, 2015). Indeed, acquisition of PK allows learners to expand their horizons beyond their own personal experience of the world, to “envisage alternative and new possibilities” (Young & Muller, 2013, p. 245).

However, there are several problems with the application of PK to RE. Firstly, there is not one specialist academic community responsible for the development of RE's disciplinary foundations (Biesta et al., 2019, p. 9). RE's multi-disciplinarity is both a virtue and a vice, but it does mean a central pillar of the PK edifice may not provide support for RE practitioners and so enthusiasm about the application of PK to RE seems misguided. Furthermore, as White (2018) points out, PK places knowledge front and centre of curriculum development without recognizing the central issue of aims. PK takes "the pursuit of theoretical knowledge as the first priority in school education" without recognizing that "school education has many legitimate goals" (White, 2018, p. 328). This is not a sufficiently persuasive argument for a subject-based (rather than aims-based) approach to curriculum design. Finally, if the purpose of RE includes promoting warmer community relations, rather than aspiring to academic excellence for its own sake, it should not prioritise acquisition of subject matter over meaning for the students (Willbergh, 2016, p. 116).

Big Ideas for RE (BI) is another significant development in curriculum design which we earlier characterized as 'special didactics'. BI addresses the concerns of meaning for students, by attending to the principles and criteria for content selection, rather than content as such. Six 'Big Ideas' have been identified as "crucial in understanding the content in the study of Religion and Worldviews" (Big Ideas for RE, 2022). Those Big Ideas include: Continuity, Change and Diversity; Words and Beyond; A Good Life; Making Sense of Life's Experiences; Influence and Power; and The Big Picture. They are constructively reductive (Lewin, 2019), tested for their capacity to prioritise subject knowledge selection, by providing organising principles that allow educators to interpret and present a complex mass of information. The curriculum takes great care to express the BI identified in ways that are both memorable and transferable to ideas outside the classroom, and in both the present and possible future. In short, there are clear elements of general didactic theory in BI, as would be true for the 'Big Ideas for Science' on which the model is based.

This is not the place for a full discussion of BI, but we would argue that it is oriented by a special didactics approach emphasizing disciplinary thinking (Cush et al., 2022) which may not then connect systematically with general didactic insights (see Lewin et al., 2023 for an extended discussion of this point). The resulting problem is a tension in this, and other lively curricular possibilities for RE discussions, between the priorities of the academic tradition(s) underpinning the subject and 'personal' knowledge for 'learners' who encounter that material. A general didactic account is needed to make sense of how the teacher should facilitate that exchange from their (educational) perspective as well. Might insights from a third knowledge exchange initiative, the 'After RE' project, prove insightful here? Might this Bildung-inspired curricular analysis help to square the academic rigour and lessons with a social purpose in RE circle? Apart from a few exceptions (Alberts, 2007, 2017; Stones & Fraser-Pearce, 2022), this German tradition of educational theory is under-represented in curriculum debates in England, including but not confined to those in RE.

4 A teacher fellowship model for religious education (RE) specialists

So, with these concerns about 'powerful knowledge' laid bare, how might we extend and deepen engagement with subject knowledge on the Shared Space project, building on the known strengths of the HA knowledge 'rich' Teacher Fellowship model while side-stepping the issues identified with the 'powerful knowledge' paradigm applied to RE? At the

same time, how might we extend and integrate existing insights about the application of contact hypothesis in RE, taken from theory developed in social psychology, recognising the need for 'curricula logic' and pedagogic reduction (Lewin, 2019, 2020) advocated by the After RE project? We note how through the lens of Bildung/didactics thinking about the curriculum, the tensions between popular public understandings of RE as a subject to promote warmer community relations, and concerns for a rigorous 'academic' pursuit of religious literacy, appear to be eased. Taking this alternative approach, which emphasises the need for learning to promote general educational purposes focused on self-cultivation, allows different aims and intentions to be aligned and harmonized.

4.1 Learning from the HA

Our project continues to mirror the History Association's model in several critical ways, not least in focusing on the academic field of inter-religious dialogue, given its alignment with our concern with community relations and RE; and its presence on the RE curriculum across all age ranges, including GCSE and A Level curricula. However, rather than partnering up with one university department specifically, we have partnered with TRS UK, the subject association for lecturers and researchers in Theology and Religious Studies in Higher Education. This has given us access to academic expertise more broadly than alignment to one department or research project would have afforded us, had we followed the HA Teacher Fellowship model more rigidly than we did, working across the HEI sector in the UK to offer the following knowledge rich academic programme during Year 2 of our project.

The fully funded, rigorous, in-depth CPD programme we curated ran over the course of one academic year (rather than the eight weeks of the HA programme). An intensive two day workshop was used in the first instance to form the professional learning community of Teacher Fellows and introduce them to the academic field of interfaith relations and issues of religious pluralism through presentations from a range of academics, many online and one in person. This was followed by four face-to-face 'supper clubs' each with input from an academic expert in their field. (The model was based on that of the HA who started with an intensive residential weekend followed by eight online sessions.) At the end of the course, like the HA model, participants are required and helped to develop practical teaching resources that will have an impact on their own and others' teaching and the outcomes of the project will be widely disseminated by participants through their own local networks (a criteria for the award of the Teacher Fellowship). Additionally, the project was supported by a website which gave the teacher fellows access relevant academic papers, reports and resources.

4.2 Learning from the After RE project

Our reasons for moving away from promoting a 'powerful knowledge' approach, to one taken in the After RE project, have been rehearsed in the previous section. 'After RE' has developed a series of seven pedagogic or didactic principles (see below) which informed our work on two levels: as principles for teachers to follow when developing their schemes of work; and as principles for the project team to follow in supporting the teachers' work. It should be kept in mind that curriculums don't just appear but develop out of the thinking (more or less reflective) that underpins them. The concern in After RE is to make that

thinking as explicit as possible through the articulation of the following principles to guide curriculum production:

Table: After RE draft principles, July 2023 (<https://www.afterre.org/framework>).

1. Primacy of purpose/aim: education always begins with an intention, purpose or aim. While there can be different intentions driving the influences of teachers in school, they ought to be derived from general educational purposes. A general educational purpose of holistic formation allows different aims and intentions to be aligned and harmonized.
2. Agency: acknowledging agency of teachers to develop RE based on having this knowledge/process (and supporting teachers in this). This means trusting the judgement of teachers.
3. Pedagogical reduction: we can't present everything. Selection, simplification and representation are fundamental to teaching. Reduction should not be accidental or prejudiced, but self-conscious and considered.
4. Exemplarity: examples are *of something* so there is nothing 'sacred' about the examples themselves. Teachers are freed from over specification of subject matter.
5. Resonance: curriculum that resonates with the 'lifeworld' of students.
6. Interpretability: methodological emphasis that subject matter (knowledge, skills, attitudes, values) is contextual and perspectival.
7. Decolonising: all knowledge has a history which is not neutral; explore the margins and the unfamiliar; choose examples that show diversity.

One overarching concern for After RE is the principle of 'pedagogic reduction': the selection, simplification, and representation of complex material as school subject matter (Lewin, 2019, 2020). Hence, Curriculum Studies expert David Lewin presented the Bildung theory previously unfamiliar to the group at one of their initial sessions, selecting Ilmi Willbergh's (2021) as a helpful distillation of Klafki that would be relevant to the teachers:

Table: Willbergh's (2021) Distillation of Klafki (2000)

1. What exemplary meaning can the content illustrate?
2. How do the students understand it at this point?
3. What might it mean for those students in the future?
4. To what extent is the content embedded in the broader structure of disciplinary content?
5. What concrete cases, aesthetic objects, and the like, would enhance the learning of the content for these particular students?

Meanwhile, Janet Orchard, learning from David Lewin by doing, co-researched and wrote a peer-reviewed journal article (Lewin et al., 2023) with two further After RE Project partners, one of whom (Kate Christopher) had previously worked on the Shared Space project. She then drew on her extended experience as a teacher and teacher educator to develop a curricular logic that enabled her to translate and teach the unfamiliar theory to the group of Teacher Fellows, aware of the need to simplify some of the purer academic rendering of the concepts. Based on her own professional learning there was a curricula logic behind the choices she made in her follow-up explanations and simplifications. Supporting materials were also made available on the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) (including a recorded presentation; Powerpoints and articles) so that the Fellows could follow up the sessions with open access to further references.

Table: After RE draft principles interpreted for Shared Space, July 2023.

1. Purpose/aim: our concern to develop RE lessons that promote warmer community relations i.e., has an in-built general educational purpose as well as anything specific to RE. Holistic formation characteristic of the *Bildung* tradition which allows social aims of RE to be aligned and harmonized with academic ones.
2. Agency: approach has been to support teachers to develop their own lessons rather than directing them too closely, based on the assumption of them having the professional knowledge and understanding to do this, especially following the knowledge rich CPD programme. Equal power-relations between team members. Trust teachers to make good choices for their own students in the Scheme of Work (SoW) developed; and for other teachers in how they used and adapted them, once made publicly available on a website for local teachers.
3. Pedagogical reduction: lessons posted on the website for the current project are illustrative and do not attempt comprehensive coverage of our theme we can't present everything. Nor can we create complete 'off the peg' solutions for other teachers who will need to select, simplify, and choose for themselves how to represent the topic in ways that meet the needs of their own pupils.
4. Exemplarity: used examples based on relevance to theme of inter-religious dialogue and available academic expertise without seeking to be fully comprehensive (impractical and unrealistic goal). Freed us, as teachers are themselves on this approach, from over specific subject matter.
5. Resonance: curriculum that resonates with the 'lifeworld' of students; again, trusting the teachers' judgement important here; within their realm of experience and not about the expertise of the researchers.
6. Interpretability: ensured we drew on the academic input from the subject experts to ensure that the subject matter (knowledge, skills, attitudes, values) was accurate and not essentialised; did deploy pedagogical reduction but used sound curricular logic in the process. Knowledge was contextual and perspectival as a result.
7. Decolonising: respected the history of the knowledge presented, in the sessions themselves and the SoW developed. Two groups went out of their way to ensure they chose examples that represented diversity within the two units (systematic approach in KS2; thematic approach in KS3) as well as being academically rigorous.

4.3 Retaining the established principles and practices of Shared Space

At the same time, the teacher fellowship project retained the principles and practices of Shared Space established in earlier phases of the project (see Orchard et al., 2021; Williams et al., 2019), and informed by the contact hypothesis principles (Allport, 1954). Contact theory is a field of social psychology interested in how contact between members of different groups can reduce prejudice which once again informed our work on two levels. First, as principles for the teachers to follow when developing their schemes of work; we recommended the teachers plan their lessons using the Shared Space Toolkit to address the wider educational aim of promoting warmer community relations through RE based on the four contact principles: equal status, working towards shared goals, completing tasks that require genuine co-operation, supported by wider institutional support. To this end, teacher fellows were encouraged to not only embed 'conversation' into their lesson plans, but also

incorporate ‘structured interaction’ and ‘encounter’, in line with the principles of contact theory set out in the Shared Space Toolkit (Christopher et al., 2019).

Secondly, the contact principles have continued to inform power relations on the Shared Space project. So far, the collaboration has continued to be largely very successful, with academic colleagues from a range of disciplines and academic institutions, teacher fellows and project team members working as equal partners committed to high academic standards in RE as well as its potential power of RE to make a difference to society. This has continued to disrupt more conventional theory–practice relationships, placing team members on an equal footing, which facilitated engagement in and sharing of knowledge (Fazey et al., 2014; Phillipson et al., 2012). This has relied on wider institutional support from schools being willing to release teachers from their classes, our funders The All Saint’s Trust, the Learn Teach Lead RE project in Bristol that has helped to co-ordinate, advise and publicise the initiative at the recruitment stage and the university for enabling and facilitating the project with a commitment to promoting research impact.

Finally, we have continued to promote collaborative professional development in a group setting in which ‘individuals develop and share the capacity to create and use knowledge’ (Wenger, 1998, p. 1) informed by Wright’s understanding of hospitality (Wright, 2017). We have literally ‘shared space’ together on day retreats at a convivial local conference facility with comforting home-cooked style meals and easy parking, styling the twilight sessions as ‘supper clubs’. We offered an opportunity to join online where in-person attendance was difficult. Critical reflection has continued to operate effectively in Shared Space as we continue to operate as a community of enquiry, in the Deweyan sense arising out of ‘a felt difficulty’ (Dewey, 1910, p. 72). Informed by Orchard’s work on parallel teacher education initiatives, we have also developed a web presence, including our VLE on the Rehumanising Teacher Education website Re-Humanising Teacher Education | Inclusive critical reflection by teachers on teaching (rehumanisingteaching.org).

5 QCA as a methodology for collaborative data analysis

A final priority for our project, beyond educating teachers and creating schemes of work informed by the most recent scholarship that can be shared with others; has been to evaluate the impact of the new lessons and intensively educated teachers on their classroom practice. While it is widely assumed that good RE in schools can promote community relations, this is unsupported in practice (Orchard, 2015). OFSTED (2021) recognise that “at both primary and secondary level, pupils should be taught by teachers who have secure subject and curriculum knowledge, who foster pupils’ interest in the subject and who are equipped to address pupils’ misunderstandings”. Key to this, they acknowledge, remains the ambition of providing high-quality subject-specific professional development based on RE pedagogy, content and knowledge supported by relevant research (OFSTED, 2021). However, we have a unique opportunity in the final year of our project to pilot ways of assessing whether, or not, such an intervention makes a difference to teachers’ perceptions of their teaching performance as well as pupils’ outcomes.

Thus, our initiative also includes data collection processes to assess teacher’s perceptions of the experience and its impact on their subject knowledge. We are interested in establishing a method for gathering evidence systematically across classrooms to establish whether better academic understanding of religion and belief impacts positively on inter-religious encounter. However, in the spirit of the Shared Space initiative so far, we are also

committed to exploring ways in which teachers and academics work together as co-creators of research. In this light we have decided to experiment with utilising qualitative comparative analysis (QCA) as a novel approach for enabling collaborative data analysis, building on a very limited pilot undertaken using data collected in an earlier phase of the Shared Space project. Potentially this joint approach to gathering qualitative data systematically could be used to evaluate other interventions as a form of professional development, for serving teachers of RE which could be extended to other curriculum areas.

Key concerns in this project would include: the kinds of knowledge teachers claim to have acquired through participation in the fellowship scheme; how they perceive that knowledge to have changed them and developed their professional practice. In addition, we are interested to test the potential impact of their teaching and learning materials on children in their classrooms, in particular, to map the impact of contact theory on inter-group relations in real life circumstances; as well as exploring how far the history approach translates helpfully to RE. We will consider any differences the approach appeared to make to RE teaching, how the approach might be shared more widely across the RE subject community, whether, or not, it has made a difference to the quality of community relations if a stronger academic dimension is included in lessons. One ethical consideration that has been preying on our minds is the potential harm we might do to RE's status as a curriculum subject were we to prove too definitely through our research that it makes no difference whatsoever to warmer community relations. We cannot falsify evidence as researchers but should frame our evaluation in terms of seeking to find positive evidence so as not to undermine the efforts of our partners and co-researchers.

A further feature distinctive to this current project is to develop QCA as a methodological approach for collaborative data analysis to assess the impact of the intervention and to bring together academic staff, teachers, and wider groups and communities to increase research impact. The research design encompasses a 'bi-directional relationship' that draws on the expertise of researchers and teachers (Wright et al., 2021). Throughout this collaborative data analysis process, QCA helps filter out the more important conditions from those that are less likely to make a difference among the cases that are investigated in relation to the same outcome.

In a recent review of QCA in education research, Cilesiz and Greckhamer (2020) highlighted that, to date, limited educational research takes advantage of the potential of QCA as a method that conceptualises and empirically examines potentially complex causal relations. Indeed, they note that "QCA expertise among education scholars is at a stage of relative infancy" (Cilesiz & Greckhamer, 2020, p. 340). However, a pilot study to explore the utility of QCA as a methodological approach for collaborative qualitative education research concluded that QCA presents an opportunity for education researchers to carry out small and medium-N studies with results presented in a format more akin to quantitative methodologies while retaining the in-depth case knowledge favoured by many qualitative researchers (Orchard et al., 2021—publication pending). In sum, "the potential of this innovative approach has yet to be fully harnessed in education" (Cilesiz & Greckhamer, 2020, p. 358).

To this end, teacher fellows would be trained as researchers to test the potential impact of their teaching and learning materials, using techniques pioneered by social psychologists to map the impact of contact theory on inter-religious dialogue in real life circumstances. QCA will be used as a tool for strengthening monitoring and evaluation of the project and central to this QCA analysis is the question: Which combinations of conditions lead to the successful use of inter-religious dialogue to promote community relations in real life circumstances? In other words, QCA methodology has the potential to understand

what conditions are necessary and/or sufficient for inter-religious dialogue to successfully promote community relations and find out what works for whom, where and in what circumstances?

6 Why this work is necessary

The proposed project has attracted support given the importance of developing RE teachers professionally, hence the experience of their pupils, by learning from theory and research. While eight experienced teachers of RE have already benefitted directly from the Fellowship programme, many more will benefit indirectly from access to resources shared freely online. Furthermore, once evaluated, the model developed could be replicated for different areas in the curriculum involving other RE teachers in England and in other jurisdictions, given the strong links our team enjoys with international teacher educators, particularly in Hong Kong and South Africa. That evaluation process will pioneer systematic data collection, which may help us better understand how religious literacy impacts positively on inter-religious and worldviews engagement in the short term, and longer term may suggest ways in which qualitative, close to practice data collection can be used to inform system-wide improvements currently dominated by quantitative data collection methods.

This project explores the positive potential of religious studies and theology as academic disciplines in the public square, seeking to enhance teachers' understandings of both and of religion/worldviews as these are experienced by ordinary people. It has enabled teachers of RE to engage with dialogue practices, creating space to explore questions of meaning and purpose relevant to supporting pupils' understanding of what it means to become a good citizen living life well through dialogue and conversation. The core emphasis of the project is the increased participation of teachers and their pupils in interactive dialogue with an emphasis on the development of positive relationships and learning from others. A central characteristic of the proposal is the creation of resources through conversation and partnership working with researchers.

It seeks to influence both public perceptions of the nature and purpose of RE as a school curriculum subject and professional educators' perceptions of how academic learning in RE and personal development can combine fruitfully. For while the place of RE is technically secure on the school curriculum, with no plans on the part of the Government to change this in the foreseeable future, this position is a double-edged sword for RE, which continues to decline particularly in community schools in England following the introduction of policy measures which privilege traditional academic subjects over subjects perceived to be 'soft' and non-academic. If perceptions of the subject do not change, the longer-term future of the subject is precarious.

The promotion of community relations is arguably the strongest argument RE has in the public imagination for retaining its place on the curriculum; furthermore, levels of religious literacy in the public square are likely to further decline if RE in schools continues to be squeezed. As Grace Davie (2017) claims,

The current state of religion in Britain is paradoxical. On the one hand, religion has re-entered the public square and demands a response. On the other, a largely unchurched population has difficulty dealing with these issues in the sense that it is rapidly losing the concepts, knowledge and vocabulary that are necessary to talk well about religion.

There is an urgent need, therefore, to find ways of presenting RE that are both academic and socially useful to affirm and support the need for RE as a social good while respecting the insights of specialist RE teachers determined to see their subject taught well with a rigorous and scholarly subject knowledge dimension.

7 Concluding remarks

The Shared Space project has now attracted funds, delivered value for money research for nearly a decade and been acknowledged by practitioners, policy makers and other researchers. With time and resources, we are confident of scaling the project up further, once the current pilot phase has been evaluated. Our work benefits from combining two areas of concern for public policy and RE: teacher engagement with research and what RE can do to promote warmer community relations. The model of CPD for in-service teachers being developed is proving sustainable, moreover, and capable of attracting support from a variety of interested parties including other academics working in TRS/Education and charities promoting the aims, purposes and best practice of RE.

Our objective then is no less than to think again about RE, moving beyond the separation of high academic aspirations for the subject and social ends to combine them drawing on the *Bildung* tradition in new ways and supporting experienced, highly competent teachers to work in the best interests of the children and young people they teach. Moreover, if our innovative approach to evaluation proves successful, the project could find not only new knowledge of the possible relationship between RE and community relations but a new way of using qualitative data to demonstrate impact working with teachers not 'on' them. Finally, a new theoretical account of the relationship between academic scholarship, religious literacy in the public square and moral behaviour is emerging with potentially lasting benefits on critical reflection/academic understanding in RE, feeding further scholarship and thinking and practice in teacher education.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest. The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

Ethical statement There are no ethical issues in relation to the content or methodology within this article.

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