

Research for RE

September 2017

A New Strategic Approach for Research in RE

Research in and for RE in the UK is at a crucial junction of possibilities. Culham St Gabriel's Trust (CSTG), a charity promoting excellence in RE through research, development and innovation, has been working with partners on a strategy called Research for RE (see <http://www.reonline.org.uk/news/research-in-re-a-strategic-approach-to-re-research/>). CSTG's strategy offers the possibility of real interaction and meaningful dialogue between researchers, practitioners and funders, and a proactive approach to identifying emergent RE research issues and building RE research capacity. It aims to: improve RE teachers' access to and engagement with relevant research; to raise research capacity in the RE world and provide appropriate career pathways to develop the next generation of RE researchers; and to improve the quality, relevance and rigour of RE research.

We are committed to ensuring that research interactions and new projects are relevant, robust and of high quality, with clear impact and dissemination and have therefore focused the Research for RE strategy on two key interventions:

Intervention 1: the design and development of a **digital and social knowledge exchange tool** housed in www.reonline.org.uk. This aims to overcome the barriers teachers face in engaging with relevant research by making emergent re-related research freely available in an easily accessible and relevant format that can be quickly understood and appropriately used. See <http://www.reonline.org.uk/news/research-in-re-a-strategic-approach-to-re-research/> for a full discussion of this tool.

We have been working with a wide range of stakeholders and partners, including NATRE and AULRE, to develop this tool and are anticipating that it will launch early this Autumn.

Intervention 2: the funding of research projects and positions (e.g. research assistant, doctorate and post-doctorate posts) investigating the next major research questions for RE. This work is focused on raising RE research capacity, improving RE research infrastructure and generating career opportunities for developing the next generation of RE researchers. In doing so, it aims to improve the quality, relevance, reach, and impact of RE research. Working with a number of different funders, the intervention will create a network of funded research projects, aimed at targeting the key research issues and questions for RE over the next five years. The projects will be distributed across the country and across a range of different institutions in order to grow and solidify centres of RE research excellence.

Following focus groups and conversations with key stakeholders and partners across the whole RE world, a list of the **next major research questions/ areas of importance for RE** has been developed. These are as follows:

Next major research questions for RE: brief description of seven pilot project ideas

1: The challenge of curriculum design in RE

Rationale: Curriculum design is the point at which teachers' understanding of RE's purpose impacts on their week-to-week planning and teaching. The RE professional community cannot agree on good curriculum design principles. Much energy and resource is wasted in experimentation. Syllabus documents tend to isolate RE from wider curriculum design thinking. These factors have a depressing effect on standards¹.

Potential research question: How could the principles of good curriculum design be applied to RE?

Potential methodology: The design (rooted in conceptual framework that draws on cross-disciplinary expertise), implementation and evaluation of three or four RE curriculum models. Evaluation is likely to include a mixed methods approach that takes into account teachers' attitudes to both the design process and the curriculum models and develops a measure for understanding effective curriculum design and implementation.

2: Religious literacy

Rationale: The RE professional community has become very interested in religious literacy, but has no widely understood definition or approach to implementing it, leading to language that is both vague and contested. There is, therefore, an urgent need to clarify this position in a way that takes into account both religious and non-religious world views and outlines curriculum and assessment expectations across different age groups.

Potential research question: What do religiously literate pupils look like?

Potential methodology: a systematic interdisciplinary literature review to develop an emergent conceptual framework that would be tested and further developed through a number of in-depth case studies of schools. Data collection in these case studies might involve semi-structured classroom and cross-school observations, semi-structured interviews with teachers, SLTs, mentors and pupils, and engagement with wider stakeholders (e.g. governors, parents, etc).

3: Emergent technologies and RE

Rationale: When the economy revives and public spending in schools picks up, there will be an appetite for spending on new hardware and software. RE teachers will need to know what is on offer and have a way of making smart choices aimed at improving teaching and promoting pupil progress in the subject.

¹ Ofsted (2013) *RE: Realising the Potential*. London: Ofsted.

Potential research questions: What do the emerging digital technologies offer to teaching and learning in RE? What might they mean for pedagogy, subject identity, and teacher identity?

Potential methodology: a participatory design-based approach that involves scoping emergent technologies and their affordances, co-designing tools and technology-focused interventions with RE teachers, analysing responses and implications, and generating further proposals and innovations.

4: Teachers and texts in the RE classroom

Rationale: The new GCSE and A level Religious Studies demand more exposure to longer extracts of texts. RE teachers have highlighted the challenge attempting this within severely limited time constraints and the limitations of existing pedagogical approaches for engaging with such extracts. There is therefore a need to provide exemplification of rich approaches to textual extracts to support teacher preparation and classroom delivery.

Potential research question: What contextual pedagogical factors are most conducive to the effective teaching of long theological and philosophical texts to pupils aged 11-18?

Potential methodology: Emergent flexible design that develops a theoretical framework through exploratory case studies and examine the selection and use of specific texts and their use in RE classrooms. This could be followed by the collaborative design and evaluation of an intervention that focuses on teacher CPD to support in depth engagement with relevant texts.

5: Children as scientific and religious reasoners

Rationale: In science and religion, pupils' progress can be impeded by scarcity of opportunities to think, wonder, and employ cross-disciplinary approaches. The work of the Learning about science and religion project (<http://lasarcentre.com/>) and theory of children's theologies

(<http://www.hts.org.za/index.php/HTS/article/view/2848/html>) highlight a need to examine how children, given sufficient stimulus and structured learning, are able to engage with and question the epistemic models of science, social science, and theology with humility and criticality, thus making progress in their understanding of each discipline's riches and limitations.

Potential research question: How can children aged 7-14 be supported to understand and use the epistemic frameworks of enquiry in science and RE? What can teachers and trainers in science and RE learn from this?

Potential methodology: Participatory co-design of a classroom based intervention. This could then be implemented and evaluated in a way that takes into account student learning and progress as well as teachers' perspectives.

6: Educational disadvantage, social mobility and religious identity

Rationale: Claims are frequently made about the role religion and belief and religious identity plays in social justice and social mobility. However, the narrative often presented in RE on how religious factors might shape attainment gaps and deprivation cycles is weak and limited. There is therefore an urgent need to examine discourses around social justice and social mobility, religion, and RE and explore new

models for the subject to support this in a way that develop greater links between schools and communities.

Potential research question: To what extent does educational disadvantage and under-performance have root causes in religious, spiritual or cultural identity factors? How might a reformed RE in schools and other contexts address under-performance and support social mobility?

Potential methodology: Secondary analysis of existing datasets on performance and demographic factors related to religious, spiritual and cultural identity. This could be triangulated with in depth case studies of a small number of schools, focusing on expectations and learning habits in specific demographic communities. An emerging theoretical framework could be shared through a range of knowledge exchange events with RE teacher organisations and social improvement agencies. These events would form the basis of participatory co-design of learning points and proposals for RE.

7. RE teachers' engagement with research.

Rationale: CSTG's Research for RE strategy as well as wider discourses on CPD have all emphasised the valuable role research can play in teachers' professional practice. However, deeper understanding is needed about the range of ways RE teachers engage with research, access it, mediate it, interpret it, and use it to inform practice within school contexts. Similarly, more work is needed to understand the ways in which research can be used to mediate professional relationships in school contexts (e.g. with peers, SLT and parents).

Potential research questions: How do RE teachers engage with and use research in their professional practice? What kinds of research outputs are being accessed and what are the main sources for these? What are the intended and unintended consequences of RE teachers' engagement with research?

Potential methodology: Sequential exploratory mixed method design. In the first phase qualitative interview data would be used to develop a conceptual framework for engagement. This would lead to the development of measures to be tested through a quantitative survey of a stratified sample of RE teachers.

Culham St Gabriel's hopes to fund collaborative, rigorous projects focused on these areas that are relevant to classroom teachers, impactful, raise research capacity, and are capable of being scaled up. We would welcome conversations with any individuals, organisations, or partnerships interested in developing a proposal in any of these areas. In the first instance please get in contact with Dr James Robson, Lead Consultant for CSTG's Research Strategy, james@cstg.org.uk