

THE SHIFTING LANDSCAPE OF VALUES EDUCATION IN SCHOOLS

A reflective resource for teachers of RE

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INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND TO THE RESOURCE

In July 2020, a group of eight RE teachers from across England came together virtually to consider the current and future landscape of values education in schools and the role of RE within it. The opportunity to gather for this purpose came as part of a research and development project in RE, funded by the Keswick Hall Trust.

The project was led by Dr Jane McDonnell at Manchester Metropolitan University and was delivered in collaboration with Michelle Green, a freelance creative writing practitioner. The project began with conversations about some key features in the current values education policy landscape, including the promotion of 'fundamental British values' (FBV), the revival of 'character education' and the potential shift from Religious Education to 'Education in Religion and Worldviews'. We then progressed to explore the possible future(s) of values education in schools and the role of RE within it. The project involved two key activities, which took place a week apart:

1. Focus groups, facilitated by the researcher, to discuss the findings of a recent pilot study on teachers' responses to FBV, involving teachers of RE, PSHE and Citizenship Education and values education more broadly.
2. Creative workshops, facilitated by the creative writing practitioner, to allow teachers to narrate their current experiences and imagined futures as values educators within RE.

This resource has been compiled from writing produced in the creative workshops and is intended as a starting point for critical reflection and conversation around values education and RE.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

How the resource has been produced

The resource has been produced collaboratively by the lead researcher and three of the teachers who took part. The exercises remain the intellectual property of the creative writer.

How the resource is organised

The resource outlines the exercises undertaken during the workshops and provides examples of writing produced by some of the teachers in response to these. Following each example, a series of questions are posed, which could act as prompts for personal reflection and / or shared conversations.

How to use this resource

The narratives, commentary and reflective questions provided in this resource are intended as a starting point for reflection and conversation. You may want to use them alone as a way of reflecting on your own experiences, thoughts and feelings surrounding values education and your relationship to it as an RE teacher. Equally, you may want to use this as a starting point for conversation with other teachers of RE. This could be in your department, your school or your professional network. As well as reflecting on the examples shared, you may wish to carry out the exercises yourself. We hope that you find the contributions of these teachers illuminating and that the resource acts as a helpful way of engaging with questions about the current and future landscape of RE and values education in England.

Background to the creative workshop exercises

Themes from the project focus groups informed the creative workshops. In the focus groups, participants discussed a number of recent policy shifts in values education, including FBV, Character Education and Religion and Worldviews.

Fundamental British Values (FBV) first appeared in education policy in the revised Teachers' Standards document, implemented from 2012, as values that teachers 'must not undermine' and are defined as, 'democracy, the rule of law and mutual respect and tolerance for those with different faiths and beliefs (DfE, 2011). However, they originated in the revised Prevent Strategy (Home Office, 2011), part of the government's counter-terrorism policy. In 2014, the government asked schools to 'actively promote' FBV across the curriculum (DfE, 2014). Ofsted inspects schools on how well they are promoting FBV as part of their overall provision for pupils' social, moral, spiritual and cultural development (SMSC).

Character Education consists in promoting specific virtues, values and traits amongst pupils such as resilience, determination and neighbourliness. The government has been promoting character education in schools since 2015 via various voluntary initiatives. In 2019, the government published a non-statutory Character Education Framework for schools (DfE, 2019). This framework outlines six benchmarks for character education and outline sways in which schools can promote character through leadership, curriculum and co-curricular activities. The Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues at Birmingham University has carried out much of the research underpinning the government's framework.

Religion and Worldviews is the proposed new name for Religious Education in schools. This shift is one of the recommendations of the report of the Commission on Religious Education (CoRE, 2018), which sets out a new vision for religious education in schools and provides a plan for a national entitlement for all pupils. One of the guiding principles behind this proposal is that all children should learn about a range of worldviews (including both religious and non-religious perspectives) in order to help them better understand the way they and others make sense of the world.

Some themes that emerged in these conversations included:

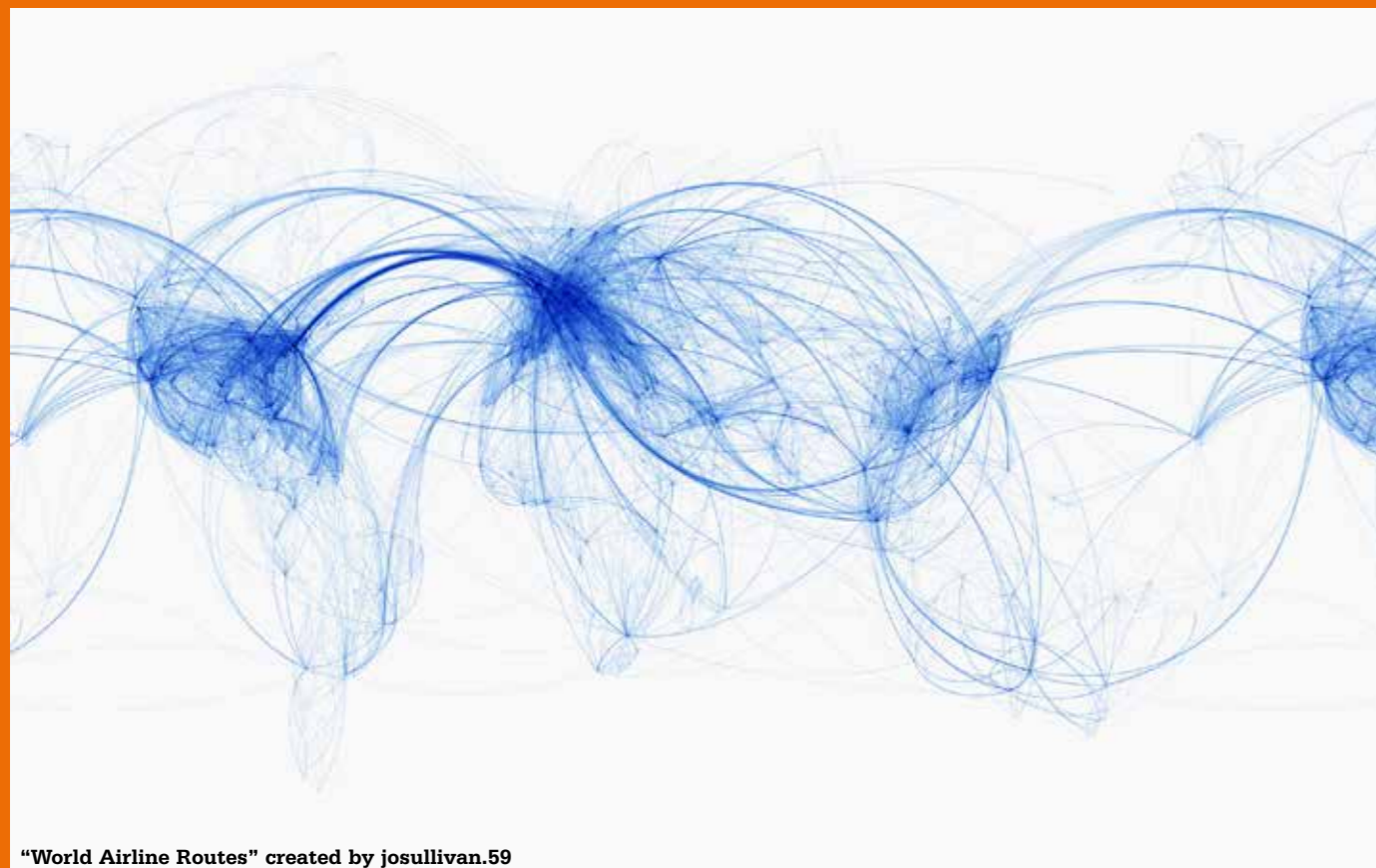
- Enthusiasm for values education, even when teachers had reservations about 'FBV'
- Contrasting ways in which teachers had received and perceived FBV as a new policy
- Creative ways of building FBV into the RE curriculum – including going beyond 'Britishness'
- The positioning of values education within school life, including via character education

- Shifting conceptions of 'good' values over time and implications for values education
- The importance of RE pedagogies in values education, e.g. dialogic RE and role models
- Empowering pupils to make a difference in the world and affect change
- Emphasising the work of religious communities within values education
- The space afforded for the exploration of values within new RE GCSE syllabuses
- Advocating for the place of RE within the school curriculum

Clearly, this policy area and the themes that emerged around it during our focus group conversations cover contentious and controversial ground. The teachers' contributions reflect a diverse range of perspectives on this policy climate. Rather than aiming to resolve tensions around this contentious policy area, this resource presents the writing work that came out of the project as creative and critical points that can actually aid reflection on complex issues.

EXERCISE 1: MAKING A WRITER'S MAP

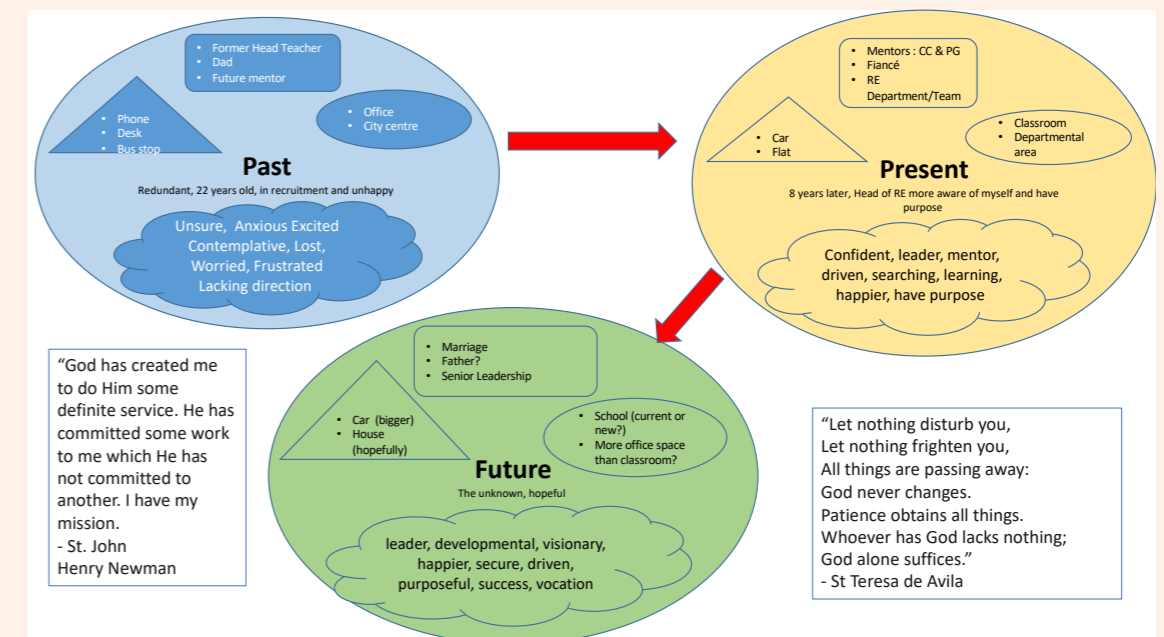
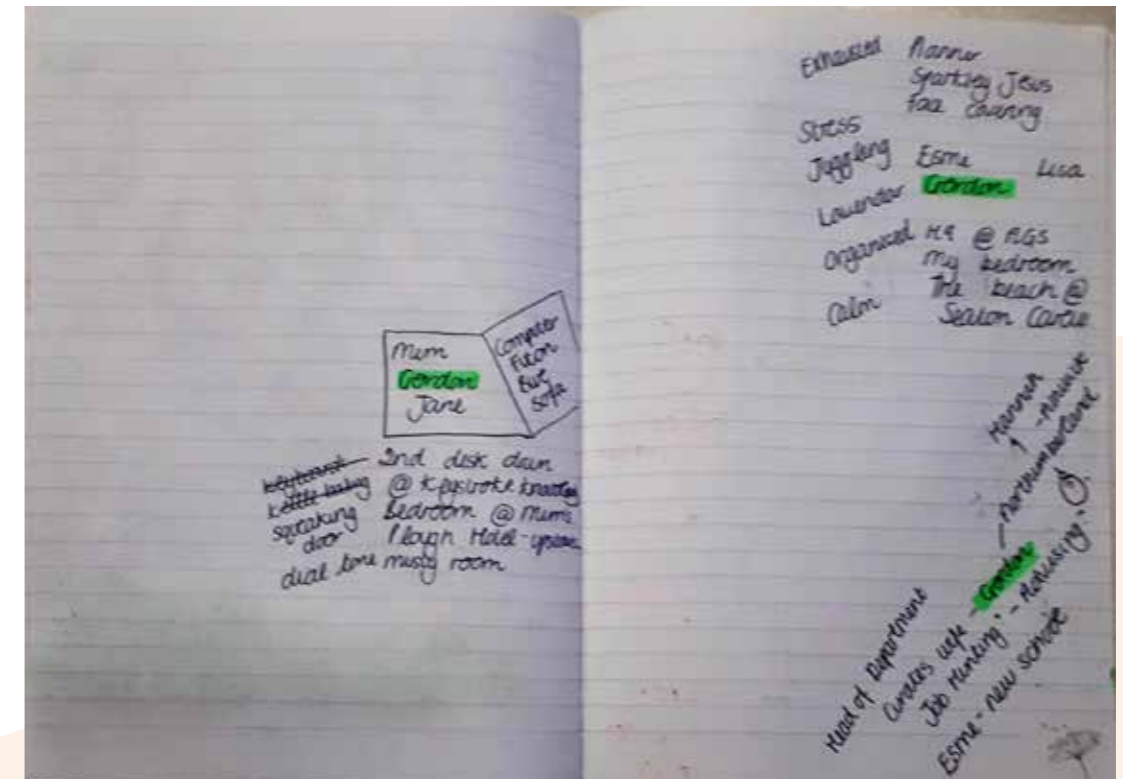
Michelle began by sharing a series of artists' maps and encouraged participants to see these as stories that communicate what the map-maker deems important and relevant (and what not!).



The creative practitioner shared a range of artists' maps before asking participants to create their own maps as a start point for creative writing.

Participants were then asked to create their own maps, starting with reflections on the past (when they first decided to become a teacher of RE), then moving to the present and finally towards imagining what could be in the future.

For the past, present and future, participants chose a specific memory / imagined moment and drew three items, relationships and locations associated with this time. They then wrote three descriptive words for each of these items, relationships and locations. Some of the participants maps are shown on the following page.



EXERCISE 2: TURNING POINTS AND FORKS IN THE ROAD

Following the map activity described above, Michelle asked participants to think back to their conversations in the focus groups the previous week and to use their maps to begin writing.

Participants were reminded, for example of their discussions around advocating for RE in the curriculum and the introduction of FBV as both a challenge and as an opportunity - both in faith and non-faith schools. Participants were asked to start with phrase 'The change came...' or 'It changed when/with/at...' and then write what comes next.

In the following contribution, resulting from this exercise, Susan considers the impact of recent policy changes in values education, its implications for RE and what the proper role of values education in schools might be.

"It changed when the Conservatives won the General Election. After 7/7 it felt like values like tolerance and respect were high on the educational agenda. Citizenship was a distinct subject from Religious Studies. With Gove came the Ebacc, British Values but what went was the time and money to deliver a meaningful curriculum as Citizenship was shoehorned into Religious Studies and PSHE. The waters are muddied, the curriculum disjointed, and students are uncertain: what are they learning and why?

Values aren't an add on, they should be integrated into all areas of the curriculum and the ethos of a school. Our students aren't machines or robots designed for a narrow place in society. As well as having a truly broad and balanced curriculum they must learn how to disagree agreeably.

They need to have the knowledge, the skills, and the space to think so that they aren't challenged by difference in a way that causes conflict. The challenge should prompt curiosity. They should want to seek answers and not just shout people down.

People do not see a value in values education and therefore it's not given the space it deserves, and it has negative consequences for society."

Joanna

Questions for reflection/ conversation

1. What has changed for you in values education and RE?
2. To what extent do your experiences resonate with Joanna's and where do they differ?
3. Looking at the metaphors in Joanna's narrative (highlighted in bold in the text), consider:
 - How would you interpret these?
 - What metaphors might you use to capture your own experiences of values and RE?
4. Why is values education important for our younger generation?

The following contribution from Maryam reflects another participant's response to this exercise. A heartfelt contribution that does not shy away from the ugly realities of racism, this writing alludes to the connections between some recent policy initiatives in values education and the counter-terrorism agenda, exploring the impact of this on people, particularly British Muslims.

It is worth remembering that FBV first appeared in the revised Prevent Strategy (Home Office, 2011) and that alongside promoting FBV, schools are required to refer pupils they consider as risk of being drawn into radicalisation (Home Office, 2015). Figures show that schools make such referrals most often for concerns related to 'Islamist extremism' (Home Office, 2017). The media have reported on examples of behaviour that has drawn attention under Prevent, including one very young child mispronouncing the word 'cucumber' and staff mistaking this for 'cooker bomb' (Quin, B., 2016).

"The change came when 9/11 happened. It became a reality that was unexplored; from being culturally seen to judged according to beliefs. What some experienced before could not be articulated into words and pictures. The name calling that happened on the streets. The word 'Paki' was used; it was disturbing for many children. Why are they being called by another person's culture?

It was almost a negative term. Giving a message that you don't belong! 9/11 made it even worse; from "Paki" to "Muslims". There was a shift from cultural perception to beliefs. Now the world was viewing Muslims! It wasn't just a local term.

It became an international phrase. Those who didn't know who or what Muslims are started to connect with the awful pictures from the twin towers. The lens' were filtered. Everyone's lens' colour was the same if they weren't Muslims.

So, what was the colour? Be wary! Muslims may act irresponsibly. It was like there was no difference! Those who carried out such heinous crimes cannot be called Muslims. Islam promotes saving lives not taking innocent lives!

It was at that time when one's identity was in question. What does it mean to be a Muslim? Do Muslims have to work extra hard to show that they are not the same?"

Maryam

Questions for reflection/ conversation

1. Through what colour lenses do we see the world?
2. What are the broader contexts behind our work in values education?
3. To what extent does values education in school currently challenge or support these?
4. Where does the balance lie between values education policy and values education practice?*
5. What would values education need to look like to challenge negative perceptions and messages?

*N.B. Values education, in its broadest sense, can mean any education that helps pupils to consider and develop their own and others' values. Recent policy interventions relating to values education in England include FBV, Character Education and Religion and Worldviews. All these were discussed in the focus groups that took place prior to the creative workshops (see above).

In the following contribution, produced from the same exercise, Peter considers the possibilities for adapting and incorporating FBV within the whole school ethos. This contribution raises important questions about the role of interfaith work for values education, both in faith schools and beyond

“It all changed when I became a head of Religious Education and British Values became synonymous with Gospel values...

At the start of my teaching career, I was always reminded to reflect upon what aspects and concepts in my lesson gave rise to discussion or analysis of SMSC (Social, Moral, Spiritual and Cultural) and British Values. British Values were also a part of PSHE curriculum and ‘Whole School’ vision, but it was used sporadically; given special focus every now and then.

However, values can't be taught like this, if they are, they hold little meaning, become something separate, belonging to someone else and depending on its delivery it can even alienate. Are British values for everyone in Britain freely available and open to all, are they linked to universal values? Or are they values for ‘British’ people that only British people believe in? I always thought the prior,

indeed this understanding can lead to foreign pupils feeling more a part of their wider community; but that is only one interpretation. Is it enough that these values are merely understood and taught, or do we want more? Values must be understood fully if they are to be adopted, they must become part of your own world and embedded into the everyday, accessible to all and common to all so that are engrained in every moment.

It all changed when I first became Head of Religious Education at a new school, a Roman Catholic school in a deprived area, where most pupils are Muslim and come from multi-ethnic backgrounds. I naturally found myself changing the way I approached the teaching of British Values and embedding them in a common language that linked the students and people of our community; that being faith. We are a community of many faiths but are spiritually literate and understand the key beliefs and teachings of each faith that binds us together.

This approach made British Values seem less superficial as they were now rooted in something and had more substance, they became universal and human values. As a school we have been able to create an ethos and philosophy which has the Gospel values at its foundation and the British Values as part of our everyday universal ‘Catholic Life’. Pupils still know all the British Values, they understand

what they mean and why they are important in our society but when asked by visitors to express what they mean to us here in school they are most likely to quote the Bible and Quran when articulating their response. ”

Peter

Questions for reflection/ conversation

1. Does it matter how we describe the values we teach – British, human, universal?
2. How does your school context affect how you approach values education?
3. How can values education draw on pupils' existing moral frameworks (both faith and non-faith)?
4. How might faith act as a common language?
5. What other common languages might be helpful to connect school communities?

EXERCISE 3: GOING WITH THE FLOW AND SWIMMING AGAINST THE TIDE

Next, Michelle asked participants to consider the following extract from an essay by the writer, David Foster Wallace

‘There are these two young fish swimming along and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says “Morning, boys. How’s the water?” And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes “What the hell is water?”’

This is water’ by David Foster Wallace

Again, thinking back to the conversations in the focus groups, participants were asked to consider the question ‘what is water?’, i.e. what is so pervasive that if we don’t pay attention to it, seems inevitable, invisible? Prompts from the focus groups included discussion of the idea that RE as a responsive subject, one that is responding to the current moment and empowering children, particularly those who are marginalized.

Participants shared their responses and some wrote these up. The following is an example:

“Water is... Life, it is the world in which we find ourselves, it is what we depend upon for life and it is that which shapes our perception of the world, yet we are so often blind to it. Instead, we get caught up in the moment, or wish the days away and become blind to the rest of the picture, the world and our life as a whole.

In education it is the same, as teachers we have so many boxes to tick, topics to cover in our subjects, small tasks to do and we must ensure that our pupils do the same. With the new GCSE specifications and the increase in written examinations the danger and temptation has been to simplify our approach, to streamline or teach what is needed and potentially lose the critical thought, discussions, debates and other great things that can naturally happen in our subject.

In all this the individual can become lost, we learn and know about classes and groups, but do we know the individuals in them? Do we form meaningful relationships? Do we teach the whole picture or just what is needed?

The most important key you will possess to a child’s success is the relationship you have built and nurtured with them. The most pervasive possibility facing education is that we forget this important truth; that the individuals become invisible and we teach the same thing, the same way to all pupils and we miss out on ‘character education’ and developing our pupils holistically which should always be our first aim.

Peter

Questions for reflection/ conversation

1. Can you relate to the idea that ‘box ticking’ the ‘water’ of education?
2. What, for you, are some of the ‘other great things that can happen naturally in our subject’?
3. How central are relationships in our work as values educators?

EXERCISE 4: WRITING TO THE FUTURE

For this exercise, participants were asked to take their favourite line, sentence or phrase from their earlier writing and use this to begin a new piece of writing aimed toward the future, weaving in their response to the above question, ‘ what is water?’

The following contribution from Maryam is one response to this exercise:

“Everyone’s lens’ colour was the same until they started seeing distorted messages. These came as an awakening. Those who see it as individuals start to unpick what their frameworks are and question using: ‘What if?’ and ‘Are we there yet?’

Why do they use these questions? Is it because they are thinking or visioning of an alternative? Or is it because it’s their childhood question in wanting to know if they have reached a certain place or goal.

Well, it is good that some are asking those questions. Does it mean those who don’t ask are stuck in some bubble?

Will this bubble burst? Or will it move them floating into an unknown field? It could be the power of the water density within the bubble that may make the difference. Is there going to be a line that defines when the bubble has reached its highest point? Does it need a movement to remind enough of racism?

Don’t need to think that long; actions are important to guide your thinking. Perhaps the first step is to ‘stop, look, listen then take action’

Each one of us has shoulders that are broad enough to engage in different ways. Whether you are a child, a parent, a sibling or a professional you start to map your journey. Words are important, they paint our picture.”

Maryam

Questions for reflection/ conversation

1. What questions are we asking as values educators and RE teachers?
2. What bubbles need bursting?
3. How would you respond to the challenge to ‘stop, look, listen then take action?’

The contribution below, from Peter, is another response to this exercise

“To my future self...

“Water is... Life, it is the world in which we find ourselves, it is what we depend upon for life and it is that which shapes our perception of the world, yet we are so often blind to it.”

Water also nourishes us, as truth nourishes the soul. Truth also shapes our perception of reality.

There are many things you have taken to be true during the last few years, as holding value. I hope you have continued to find value in these. Remain steadfast in what you believe to be true.

Remember the mantra of your mentor “Treat each child as if they were your own” If it is not good enough for yours it is not good enough for them.

Remember you are here to serve the pupils and community in which you find yourself, you do this best my remaining true to yourself, continue to develop the whole person, build the character of the individual, look for the opportunities of critical exploration and enrichment, move beyond teaching what is needed and aim to inspire. Perfection is never reached, but never stop grasping for it.

Remember you were placed here for a reason, a purpose that you have realised, wherever you are in the future the same is true again; if you have not found that purpose yet then it’s time to reflect and take stock, to focus again on these truths and find that new purpose. “God has created me to do Him some definite service. He has committed some work to me which He has not committed to another.” John Henry Newman”

Peter

Questions for reflection/ conversation

1. What have you ‘taken to be true...as holding value’?
2. What would it mean, in practical terms to, ‘treat each child as if they were your own’?*
3. How do we grasp for perfection in our work as values educators?

FROM REFLECTION TO ACTION

RE has the potential to play an important role in developing tools that will address human rights and social equality, including tackling stereotypes of religious adherents. The exercises and conversations we had as part of the focus groups and workshops may have particular relevance to themes D (Religion, Peace and Conflict) and F (Religion, Human Rights and Social Justice) of the new AQA GCSE in RE. One of the participants who took part in the project noted that it had helped in planning a course around 'Human Values' at KS4.

Following your reflections and conversations about the above contributions, you may want to take time to consider how you would start planning for work in values education in your own settings that build on some of the ideas and questions explored in this reflective resource.

You may wish to use the following framework to help you with your planning. You might want to start with identifying which topics and areas you consider most important, following the reflective activities above. These could then be mapped on to areas of your RE syllabus before setting smart goals.

Priority area: <i>e.g. challenging stereotypes...</i>	
Connection to RE syllabus: <i>e.g. human rights and social justice...</i>	
Specific	What do I want to accomplish? Why do I want to accomplish this? What are the requirements? What are the constraints? Where and with whom will you accomplish this? <i>e.g. at KS4 with GCSE RE group as part of...</i>
Measurable	How will I measure my progress? How will I know when the goal is accomplished? <i>e.g. via informal discussions at the beginning and end of scheme of work...</i>
Actionable/ achievable	How can the goal be accomplished? What are the logical steps I should take? <i>e.g. via a lesson plans on.../ inviting a guest speaker on...</i>
Relevant	Is this a worthwhile goal? Is this the right time? Do I have the resources? Does this fit my/ my school's overall objectives? <i>e.g. this will help address my school's key commitment to.../ my own personal and pedagogic commitment to...</i>
Time-bound	How long will it take to accomplish this goal? When is the completion of this goal expected? When am I going to work on this goal? <i>e.g. over the course of one half term/ term/ academic year...</i>

FINAL THOUGHTS

The questions posed throughout this reflective resource are challenging ones. Exploring these issues together as an RE community can help to highlight some shared understandings as well as some points of difference – particularly in how policy is received, perceived and acted upon by different educators in different contexts.

We hope you find these extracts, commentary and questions helpful for you and your colleagues in addressing values education with consideration, reflection and care.

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FURTHER RESOURCES

The following websites offer helpful resources and ideas for values and values-related education:

valuesbasededucation.com

humanvaluesfoundation.com

the-big-think.org



mmu.ac.uk