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Powerful Knowledge or Big Ideas in Religious Education? Aims and Classroom Approaches

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Context

Few school subjects arouse such strong passions as Religious Education, with some arguing that it should be banned from schools—as it is in many countries—and others that we have never had a greater need for high quality Religious Education than nowadays. Unsurprisingly, there has therefore been a long history of attempts to redefine the aims of the subject and critique classroom approaches to teaching it (e.g., Watson, 2012; Conroy et al., 2013; Gates, 2016).

A recent review of research on Religious Education in England is provided by Ofsted (2021). It begins:

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In religious education (RE), pupils enter into a rich discourse about the religious and non-religious traditions that have shaped Great Britain and the world. RE in primary and secondary schools enables pupils to take their place within a diverse multi-religious and multi-secular society. At its best, it is intellectually challenging and personally enriching. It affords pupils both the opportunity to see the religion and non-religion in the world, and the opportunity to make sense of their own place in that world.

The review then goes on to point out that since Ofsted's previous review in 2013, a number of reports had been produced with a range of recommendations about the position of Religious Education either with specific reference to England or more generally. In 2013, the RE Council of England and Wales proposed a non-statutory national curriculum framework for RE, with three curriculum aims for pupils, namely that they should:

- Know about and understand a range of religions and worldviews.
- Express ideas and insights about the nature, significance and impact of religions.
- Gain and deploy the skills needed to engage seriously with religions and worldviews. (Religious Education Council of England and Wales, 2013, pp. 14–15)

In 2015, a pamphlet was authored by The Rt Hon Charles Clarke, the former Secretary of State for Education, and Professor Linda Woodhead, a well-respected British academic specialising in religious studies and the sociology of religion. In it they argued, *inter alia*, that:

- The current requirement in statute for an Act of Collective Worship should be abolished, and the decision about the form and character of school assemblies should be left to the governors of individual schools.
- Consideration be given to using the phrase 'Religious and Moral Education' rather than 'Religious Education' in describing this part of the statutory curriculum. (Clarke & Woodhead, 2015, pp. 63–64)

In 2018, the Commission on Religious Education produced a substantial report, the result of two years of consultation and debate. The first of its eight pages of recommendations was that the name of the subject should be changed to ‘Religion and Worldviews’. It went on to argue that the subject should be statutory for learners in all publicly funded schools up to and including year 11, to make recommendations about its content and how it is inspected and to call for reforms in initial teacher education and continuing professional development.

I could go on. Depending on how you read the above, one can either see signs of vibrancy, of a subject with the confidence to ask deep questions about itself, or signs of desperation, of a subject that is floundering, prepared to envisage changing both its name and some of its core practices.

Powerful Knowledge

Much of the academic work on curricula is subject-specific, as in the case of the various reports about Religious Education mentioned above. However, one piece of curriculum theorising that has spawned a great deal of debate and has had considerable influence over the last couple of decades, Michael Young’s thinking about powerful knowledge, cuts across subjects. His later arguments about the school curriculum have been coherently and powerfully expressed in a number of publications, of which perhaps the core text is his sole-authored *Bringing Knowledge Back In* (Young, 2008). In this book, Young argues for a social realist approach to knowledge that advances on two fronts: first, it is ‘social’ in that it takes seriously the fact that human knowledge is produced by people; secondly, it is ‘realist’ in that “A social theory must recognize that some knowledge is objective in ways that transcend the historical conditions of its production (e.g., Euclid’s geometry and Newton’s physics)” (Young, 2008, p. 28). This social realist approach allows Young to reject both relativism and postmodernism and also to avoid a naïve version of positivism (Reiss, 2018).

Drawing on both Durkheim’s sociology of knowledge and Vygotsky’s appreciation that “whereas a child’s relationship to the world through his/

her everyday concepts is through what he/she sees or experiences directly, with scientific concepts, the relationship is mediated by these concepts, and is not dependent on direct experience” (Young, 2008, p. 51), Young then reaches two key conclusions. First, that “The curriculum cannot be based on everyday practical experience. Such a curriculum would only recycle that experience” (Young, 2008, p. 89), and, secondly, that “It is important to be cautious about replacing a curriculum based on specialist research and pedagogic communities with one based on the immediate practical concerns of employers or general criteria for employability such as key skills” (Young, 2008, p. 89).

An Aims-Based School Curriculum

A somewhat different approach that again cuts across the whole curriculum in arguing what schools should teach is provided by John White and me in our *An Aims-Based Curriculum* (Reiss & White, 2013). This publication attempts to provide a framework for the development of a coherent set of aims for the school curriculum, some for implementation at national level, others at the level of each school. The argument begins with the premise that the aim of the school curriculum is two-fold: to enable each learner to lead a life that is personally flourishing; and to help others to do so, too. It is then argued that a central aim of a school should therefore be to prepare students for a life of autonomous, whole-hearted and successful engagement in worthwhile relationships, activities and experiences. This aim involves acquainting students with a wide range of possible options from which to choose. However, one needs to recognise that students vary in the extent to which they truly are able to make such choices, as these are often in large part determined by the students’ family circumstances (think who chooses to study music or a second language) or the views of their teachers (who gets to study separate sciences as opposed to combined science course being a notable example).

John White and I go on to argue that we want children to want other people, as well as themselves, to lead fulfilling lives. This means not

hurting them, not lying to them, not breaking one's word or in other ways impeding them in this. It also means helping others to reach their goals, respecting their autonomy and being fair, friendly and cooperative in one's dealings with them. Schools can reinforce and extend what parents and others in families do in developing morality in children. Schools can widen students' moral sensitivity beyond the domestic circle to those in other communities, locally, nationally and globally. They can encourage students to reflect on the basis of morality, including whether this is religious or non-religious.

Michael Young's arguments about powerful knowledge and John White's and my arguments about human flourishing are often put in opposition—our own institution delights in doing so and Michael Young and I lead separate sessions on UCL's MA in Education course where each of us expounds our ideas. In reality, the two approaches complement one another well. John White and I see ourselves as asking a fundamental question about the aim of education. If one agrees that education is about maximising human flourishing—and that itself is a shorthand given that humanity is only one species on our planet—then Michael Young provides a very helpful set of arguments about what the *distinctive* contribution of a school might be. His answer, of course, is that it is to enable as many learners as possible to gain access to powerful knowledge, knowledge that will help them to understand themselves and to see the world in new ways and to provide them with access to new avenues of thought and practice, including in the world of work.

The next stage is to begin to apply these high-level arguments about the aim of schooling to specific subjects. Before getting on to Religious Education (continue to using this as an umbrella term, given the alternatives indicated earlier), I want to turn to the subject of science, partly because it enjoys a far more assured position within the school curriculum, partly because it is a subject with which I am very familiar and partly because, perhaps surprisingly, one particular set of arguments about how the content of the school science curriculum should be decided has had some influence on arguments about how the content of Religious Education should be decided.

Big Ideas in Science Education

Although science typically occupies a central spot in countries' school curricula, there has long been debate as to the aims of school science (Mansfield & Reiss, 2020). This debate is currently taking place when there is increasing realisation that scientific and technological developments long presumed to be entirely desirable—such as increased crop yields, falls in infant mortality and more general medical advances—have led to such increases in human population size that these, combined with ever-greater consumer demands, are leading to unsustainable pressures on the natural environment, as evidenced in global biodiversity declines and anthropogenic climate change. At the same time, there is a widespread assumption, particularly among governments, that national success—which is what governments are largely focused on, rather than global issues—is intrinsically linked with national advances in STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) (Bencze et al., 2018).

Accordingly, school science education is often seen as having the aim of meeting a country's demand for scientists (scientists here can be interpreted broadly to include doctors, nurses, electricians and others). The main problem with this as *the* aim of school science is that even with a broad definition of 'scientists', it is evident that most people do not require much if any science for their employment. Accordingly, it is often argued that we need to teach science in school to enable 'scientific literacy'—the somewhat hopeful belief being that if school leavers understand more about science they will behave wisely when it comes to making decisions, either individuals or collectively, about such important matters as energy generation, the amelioration of anthropogenic climate change, vaccination and so forth.

Whatever the precise aim(s) of science education, it is widely agreed among science educators that too many students just don't get the big picture. Science lessons consist of an atomistic series of topics that don't join up in a student's mind. Jonathan Osborne puts it well:

School science is suffering from a delusion that the science we offer must be both broad and balanced. The result is an attempt to offer a smattering of all sciences and to cram more and more into an oft-diminishing pot. Quite clearly, as the bounds of scientific knowledge expand from

evolutionary biology to modern cosmology, more and more knowledge vies for a place on the curriculum. However, just as those teaching literature would never dream of attempting to cover the whole body of extant literature, choosing rather a range of examples to illustrate the different ways in which good literature can be produced, has the time not come to recognise that it is our responsibility to select a few of the major *explanatory* stories that the sciences offer? And surely it is the *quality* of the experience, rather than the quantity, which is the determining measure of a good science education? (Osborne, 2007, p. 175)

In an attempt to address this problem, there has been a growing move among curriculum developers to argue that science education should consider ‘Big Ideas’, namely ideas (or concepts) that are able to explain a wide range of scientific phenomena. These “ideas enable learners to see connections between different scientific ideas”, and when these ideas are connected, it becomes easier to use them in new scenarios than other, unconnected ones (Harlen, 2015a, p. 97).

The Big Ideas movement in science education—for so it has become—had modest beginnings: a two-and-a-half-day residential seminar for 12 participants in a remote venue on the shore of Loch Lomond. This was paid for by Wynne Harlen using the money she was awarded for winning the 2009 Purkwa Prize. The resulting document *Principles and Big Ideas of Science Education* (Harlen, 2010) was followed by a companion document *Working with Big Ideas of Science Education* (Harlen, 2015b). Within a decade, the principle behind big ideas in science education had been incorporated into curricula in South Korea (Choi et al., 2011), Australia (Mitchell et al., 2016) and Chile (Bravo González & Reiss, 2021) and influenced science curricula and draft science curricula in a number of other countries.

Big Ideas in Religious Education

The effects of the Big Ideas movement in science education have spread to other subjects. This move has been facilitated in England by advice given to the National Curriculum Review Group by Tim Oates (2010) that students should study fewer things but in greater depth in order to

secure deeper learning in subjects (Reiss, 2023). In Religious Education, Barbara Wintersgill organised a three-day symposium, which I was asked to Chair, on the possibility of developing the notion of big ideas for Religious Education; this resulted in *Big Ideas for Religious Education* (Wintersgill, 2017).

Big Ideas for Religious Education discusses what Big Ideas are (including the notion that they provide criteria for the selection and prioritising of subject knowledge in the curriculum, are transferable to events outside the classroom, are memorable, and capable of differentiation so that they may become the basis of progression) and are not (including that they do not provide a philosophy of education, do not presume any particular pedagogy, do not prescribe any specific content, are not themes or concepts found in individual subjects, are not intended to be a prescriptive programme, and do not assume which or how many religions and non-religious worldviews are being studied). It then goes on to identify six Big Ideas:

- Big Idea 1 Continuity, Change and Diversity
- Big Idea 2 Words and Beyond
- Big Idea 3 A Good Life
- Big Idea 4 Making Sense of Life's Experiences
- Big Idea 5 Influence, Community, Culture and Power
- Big Idea 6 The Big Picture. (Wintersgill, 2017, p. 15)

To give some specific examples, here is what is recommended for 5–7-year-olds and 14–16-year-olds for Big Idea 3, 'A Good Life':

5–7

Most religions and non-religious worldviews introduce children to stories from the lives of their exemplary people as examples of the qualities and characteristics they might try to achieve. They also teach about specific actions that are right and wrong and about good and bad attitudes. This guidance can help people treat each other fairly and live together without upsetting or hurting each other or damaging the environment.

14–16

Religious and non-religious groups agree on some moral issues and disagree on others. They may have different reasons for their views and they may disagree with each other and among themselves about how to inter-

pret their ideas of right and wrong, good and evil, and how to apply these ideas to difficult moral questions of today. People have different theories, which may be religious or non-religious, about how and why we ought to live a good life. Some teach 'virtue theory'. They say that in order to lead a moral life we should concentrate on developing a good character and good personal virtues such as generosity and compassion, which would then make us behave generously or compassionately. Others teach deontological theories. They say that the way to lead a moral life is to do one's duty or to follow the rules which tell us what is good or bad, right or wrong. A third group teach consequentialism. They say that we ought to act in the way that brings about the best overall results, no matter what those acts are. When people discuss contemporary moral issues from these perspectives, they may come up with very different answers. One of the big moral questions which is relevant for religious and non-religious worldviews alike is whether or not there are unchanging moral rules. Are there rules that apply to all people and at all times, irrespective of culture and regardless of circumstance, or does right and wrong depends on context and circumstance? Many moral conflicts result from clashes between these two points of view. This is partly because ideas about morality are closely connected to a group's core teachings about Ultimate Reality, what it is to be human and how we should relate to our planet. Various religious and non-religious organisations have tried to identify rules and principles that should apply universally. (Wintersgill, 2017, p. 19)

One interesting question is the extent to which these recommendations cohere with the notion of powerful knowledge. The recommendations themselves will not be unfamiliar to those who know what is typically taught in Religious Education in England at these ages. One of the notable features is the use of the phrase 'non-religious worldviews', in line with, though pre-dating, the recommendation, mentioned above, of the Commission on Religious Education (2018).

The recommendations for 5–7-year-olds do exhibit a number of instances of powerful knowledge, namely that we can learn from the lives of exemplary people, that there are specific actions and attitudes that are right and wrong, and that using this knowledge can help us live together in community—and there is a brief nod to broader environmental concerns. The recommendations for 14–16-year-olds similarly exhibit a number of instances of powerful knowledge, notably that both religious

and non-religious groups agree on some moral issues and disagree on others, that virtue ethics, deontology and consequentialism are three major theories that can help us decide how and why (though this axiological claim seems somewhat ambitious) we should live a good life.

What, though, I think is interesting is the way in which what the recommendations seem, as students get older, to illustrate is not so much assured knowledge but the need for reflection and discussion—cf. “When people discuss contemporary moral issues from these perspectives [virtue theory, deontology and consequentialism], they may come up with very different answers” and “Are there rules that apply to all people and at all times, irrespective of culture and regardless of circumstance, or does right and wrong depends on context and circumstance?” These suggest not so much big ideas or powerful knowledge as big questions and open-minded approach to knowledge.

There is a similarity here with science education in that science, in its epistemology, prides itself on its openness to new ways of thinking and of understanding the world. Think of how humanity moves from a range of ancient views about the structure of the cosmos to a Ptolemaic understanding, to a Newtonian concept, to one determined by Einstein’s theory of relativity in which space, time and gravity are no longer independent but intimately connected. Something of this is reflected in Harlen’s Big Idea 12, ‘Scientific explanations, theories and models are those that best fit the facts known at a particular time’:

A scientific theory or model representing relationships between variables or components of a system must fit the observations available at the time and lead to predictions that can be tested. Any theory or model is provisional and subject to revision in the light of new data even though it may have led to predictions in accord with data in the past. Every model has its strengths and limitations in accounting for observations. (Harlen, 2010, p. 23)

However, when it comes to the recommended content of what Harlen refers to as ‘Ideas *of* science’ (as opposed to ‘Ideas *about* science’, such as Big Idea 12), the proposals are much more definite than they are in Wintersgill’s Big Ideas for Religious Education. Here, for example, is the recommendation for Big Idea 1, ‘All material in the Universe is made of very small particles’:

Atoms are the building blocks of all materials, living and non-living. The behaviour of the atoms explains the properties of different materials. Chemical reactions involve rearrangement of atoms in substances to form new substances. Each atom has a nucleus containing neutrons and protons, surrounded by electrons. The opposite electric charges of protons and electrons attract each other, keeping atoms together and accounting for the formation of some compounds. (Harlen, 2010, p. 21)

So, this would seem to suggest an important difference between powerful knowledge in science and powerful knowledge in religion. Put at its bluntest, for all that science is open to the possibility of changes in what we know about reality, some knowledge about the material world is very robust. We can safely teach in school science such scientific conclusions as matter is made up of atoms, objects can affect other objects at a distance, changing the speed or direction of movement of an object requires a net force to be acting on it, energy is conserved, organisms are organised on a cellular basis, genetic information is passed down from one generation of organisms to another, and the diversity of organisms, living and extinct, is the result of evolution. The last of these conclusions is a reminder that there are some students for whom science can be controversial but that is not a reason not to teach such knowledge in school science but rather to use appropriate pedagogical strategies in such teaching so that students are respected while accepted science is taught (e.g., Reiss, 2019).

In Religious Education, however, much of what we want students to know is not so much to do with reality but with people's perceptions or interpretations of reality. Nowadays, certainly in places with the sort of liberal democracies that we still just about have in Europe and a number of other countries, any student who comes to their Religious Education lessons hoping definitively to find out whether God exists, whether miracles take place or whether scripture can be relied on as an arbiter in moral matters is likely to be disappointed. Rather than such questions being answered directly, our student is more likely to learn about the arguments for and against the answers that might be given to such questions, and how these answers relate to the cultural, historical and faith circumstances of those answering them.

This is not, of course, the fault of Religious Education or of Religious Education teachers—it is more to do with the nature of knowledge in religion as opposed to in science. Indeed, science is somewhat out on a limb here. One doesn't learn literature or even history to learn unambiguously whether Joyce or Proust is the greater writer (and the question is pretty meaningless anyway) or what definitively caused the start of the First World War. It may be that Michael Young's powerful knowledge arguments—and we should remember that Young started his professional life as a chemistry teacher—apply more straightforwardly to some subjects than to others.

The Importance of the Site of Learning

A final issue to do with Religious Education that applies to a much greater extent than with other school subjects is how what is taught might depend on the nature of the school. In addition, issues to do with schools' admission policies and collective worship have featured strongly in England in recent policy documents to do with Religious Education, religion and schools. Here, though, I continue to concentrate on issues to do with aims and classroom approaches.

The Common School

I use the term 'common school' as it is generally used, deriving from common schools in the USA in the nineteenth century that existed as community-funded (i.e., parents did not pay school fees) instruments of education for all (or at least the great majority of) children in a region or neighbourhood (Curti, 1935). The central point here is that in the common school, assuming (though many would argue that the conclusion of this paragraph holds even if one does not make this assumption) that a diversity of religious positions exists among the students and/or their parents/guardians, Religious Education cannot validly favour one particular religion, denomination or non-religious worldview. The education that needs to be provided, given that religion is a contestable subject (i.e.,

epistemically controversial—Hand, 2006), has to be both balanced and pluralist, introducing learners to a range of faith and non-faith positions. This is not, of course, naively to presume that school students are capable of choosing between these various religions, denominations or non-religious worldviews, as they might choose between different meal options at their school canteen, but rather to acknowledge that the favouring of one position over others is unacceptable.

There are many who would hold that this conclusion holds whatever the type of school but it is possible to argue that this is not the case.

Independent Schools

In the case of independent (i.e., fee-paying) schools, one material difference is that whereas in some common school systems, parents have little or no choice as to where their children are educated, independent schools generally operate within a market economy. At its crudest, therefore, just as I can choose to send my child to a school on the grounds of its musical excellence or other aspect of its curriculum or ethos (such as an emphasis on the development of the ‘whole child’ rather than a focus on academic excellence), so I should be able to send my child to a school that presumes/teaches the validity of the religion, denomination or non-religious worldview that I espouse.

This argument has received some support from those who argue that the developing child cannot initially question everything. In the case of religion, they may benefit, if they come from a religious family, by attending a school where there is congruence between the school’s and their family’s position. A school might therefore nurture (Nelson, 2019) the faith tradition of a child, always remembering that precisely the same argument holds for atheist/humanist parents who want to send their children to schools that are congruent with their non-faith tradition(s).

Faith Schools

Much of the above argument about independent schools applies also to faith schools, given that payment for education is not really the relevant

issue here. However, what is important is parental choice, and here geography matters. If one lives in London and wants to send one's child to a Jewish school, freedom of choice indeed obtains, given the relative ease of public transport within London and the number of different types of schools that are available. However, if one is a parent who lives in a village and the one village school is a Church of England primary school (as is not infrequently the case in England, given that just over a quarter of all primary schools are Church of England, with almost an additional one in ten being Roman Catholic), one may have considerably less freedom of choice, especially if one does not own a car and cannot afford to.

The charge here is that faith schools are indoctrinatory. On the other hand, there are those who would argue that society more generally can be indoctrinatory (or worse) and school may provide a refuge from that. Parker-Jenkins et al. (2014) present case studies of Jewish and Muslim faith schools. They argue that these schools help sustain their own religious heritage while also engaging with, and providing a place of safety from, the wider community, given the widespread existence of anti-Semitism and Islamophobia.

Home Schooling

A final type of schooling we can consider is home schooling. While in a number of countries either in law or in practice schools can act *in loco parentis*, home schooling obviously enables parents to exercise particular control over the education that their children receive. Although there are clear dangers with home schooling—it can cover up parental abuse (Bartholet, 2020) and lead to a distorted education (Scaramanga, 2017)—countries are frequently reluctant to prohibit it (though it is illegal in a number of countries including Costa Rica, Cuba, Iran, Germany, Greece, Hungary, the Netherlands, Sierra Leone, South Korea, Sweden and Turkey), no doubt in part through fear of alienating parents.

There is a range of reasons why parents home educate; but a common one is to do with religion (de Waal & Theron, 2003). In a study in USA, religious and moral reasons were commonly given, as instanced by the parent who responded, “I have had a child in public school for one year.

Oh my!!!! They are not anywhere on our planet. We desire to raise our children to honor God and to love and serve others” (Thomas, 2019, p. 30).

The reality is that it is unfeasible, and some would even argue undesirable, to require parents who home educate their children to provide a balanced Religious Education. It’s hard enough to get certain schools to teach evolution even in countries that require it to be taught as part of the curriculum—for an example, see the account in Franken and Levrau (2020) of how Haredi school (ultra-orthodox Jewish schools) in Belgium avoid teaching evolution and other ‘controversial’ issues.

Lifelong Learning

Learning does not end once we leave school, further or higher education. Although the notion of lifelong learning may seem a little strange with respect to Religious Education, the reality is that all of us continue to learn about religion throughout our lives. There is a large literature on how religion is portrayed in the media. In a content analysis of local and national news articles, Nickerson (2019) analysed the US media’s portrayal of selected terrorist events in France and Turkey. He found that:

news media framing utilizes biased, negative imagery, portraying the events in these countries in a way that reinforces current prejudices against Muslims, even when Muslims are themselves the victims. This unequal reporting increases viewership while simultaneously allowing current perceptions about terrorism and Muslims to continue. (Nickerson, 2019, p. 547)

Nowadays, of course, almost all of us learn from social media as well as from conventional media. In a systematic review of the representation of Islam within social media, despite Muslim preachers and scholars running blogs, Facebook Pages and Twitter groups that endeavour to deliver comprehensive information about Islam, the authors concluded:

Although the representation of Islam in social media is wide-ranging, more empirical studies found that social media users represent Islam negatively than studies which revealed positive view of Islam by social media users. (Hashmi et al., 2021, p. 1962)

Such findings along with widespread uncritical endorsement or rejection of religion indicate the important role that formal education can and should play in enabling school leavers critically to examine the claims they hear, while remaining open to new ideas about religious and non-religious worldviews and their potential to enhance human flourishing and a sustainable planet.

Conclusions

Michael Young's ideas about powerful knowledge have had a strong influence on school curricula in a number of countries, despite the danger that they can be high-jacked by those with a narrow, outdated, naïve and even discriminatory approach to education. Independently, there have been parallel movements advocating an aims-based approach to the curriculum (Michael Reiss and John White) or an approach that begins with the Big Ideas of Religious Education (Barbara Wintersgill and colleagues).

By comparing the nature of knowledge in science and in religious studies, I conclude on epistemological grounds that it seems likely that Young's arguments about powerful knowledge cannot be applied to Religious Education in the way they can to some other school subjects. What we need Religious Education in schools to do is to enable school leavers critically to examine the claims about religion that they hear, while remaining open to new ideas about religious and non-religious worldviews and their potential to enhance human flourishing and ensure a sustainable planet.

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