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Measuring Attitude toward RE: Factoring pupil experience & home faith background into assessment

Phra Nicholas Thanissaro

Abstract

Recent studies have increasingly favoured contextualization of RE to pupils' home faith background in spite of current assessment methods that might hinder this. For a multi-religious, multi-ethnic sample of 369 London school pupils aged from 13 to 15 years, this study found that the participatory, transformative and dialogical activities of church visits, computer use and classroom debate improved attitude to RE. It revealed more readiness in girls to apply RE to their own religiosity and particularly negative attitudes to RE in pupils with no religious background. Besides indicating the validity, reliability and unidimensionality of a new short quantitative measure of pupil attitude to RE which acknowledges pupil experience and home context, the findings suggest ways to move beyond 'banking' paradigms to which RE remains prone.

Keywords

adolescents; attitudes; religious education; assessment; pupil experience; home context

Introduction

The purpose of this article is to present research evidence that supports contextualization of Religious Education (RE) to home religious background and pupil experience. It will indicate possible reasons for differences in attitude toward RE between boys and girls, and between those with and without religious affiliation. It argues ways to move beyond 'banking' approaches to which RE remains prone. It introduces a new short scale of attitude to RE – 'ScAttRE-S' – which has proven valid, reliable and unidimensional for the experimental sample. The article is divided into three parts. Part one examines the advantages of an alternative form of assessment in RE. Part two describes the research agenda, methodology and findings in the construction and application of a new scale of attitude to RE. Part three discusses implications of measuring attitudes to RE for contextualization and pupil motivation – making suggestions for future research.

Part 1: The advantages of alternative forms of assessment

In spite of warnings from researchers that content-based teaching is stunting pupils' creativity (NACCCE 1999, 126) and motivation to learn (O'Grady 2003), rising pressure on schools to improve levels of student performance in public examinations causes teachers to waver between accountability and what might be better for the pupil (Martin 2010). Although no-one would

admit encouraging a ‘banking model’ of education, in the UK there would appear to be increasing incidence of curricula being ‘taught to the tests’.

The attraction of ‘cut-and-dried’ content that can be delivered to pupils with a minimum of participation on their behalf, is that scores on summative evaluations will fall neatly on the bell-curve (Wimberly 2007, 382). The higher up in education a pupil climbs, the greater the probability that ‘banking’ will dominate their experience of learning (Crain 2007, 246). Even RE where the subject matter is potentially so liberating, is not immune to becoming a ‘mechanical act of transferring knowledge’ by the teacher – especially if instruction is dogmatic, if questions are discouraged or if the authority and total competence of the teacher is asserted (Hull 2004).

The inadequacy of the banking model for RE is that it may leave pupils with a ‘fatalistic’ mentality – especially if pupils are not furnished with an awareness of the socio-cultural reality that shapes their lives (or their capacity to transform it). For minorities, it does not invite pupils to believe in themselves, dispel myths about their own inferiority or protect against cultural invasion that is ‘anti-dialogue’ (Bellett 1998, 136-7). Thus European initiatives have drawn attention to the value of promoting contextual forms of religious education that link the student’s ‘inner space’ with the ‘outer space’ of family, school, locality and society (Jackson 2011, 203).

Although Paulo Freire's critique of the 'banking model' was developed in relation to literacy, his advocacy of alternatives such as contextualization, 'problem-posing' and 'conscientization' (1972, 57) has to some extent received the interest of religious educators in theory and practice. In theory, it has been learning within a participational framework (Lave and Wenger 1991, 15; Galindo 1998) and the social 'problem-posing' aspect (1991; 1998) that have drawn particularly on Freire's ideas. Application of the 'participatory' aspect of religious learning through performing arts (Smith 2008) or letting pupils tell their own stories (Crain 2007) has been found liberating and holistic. Application of 'problem-posing' through an 'ethical choices' workshop also succeeded in engaging pupils (Clare 2006).

An additional perspective of RE which offers an alternative to 'banking' is to make RE relevant to each individual child's spiritual homeground. Effective linking of faith, nurture, home tradition and school in a child's education, echoes an approach taken in other subject areas such as literacy, where family background has been shown to count in language and socio-economic competence (Hartas 2010). Qualitative research with Sikh children growing up in Britain shows that if there is a match between the way religion is portrayed at school and how it is practised in the home, such teaching can boost pupil self-esteem (Jackson and Nesbitt 1993, 162, 171) – not that it is important for the children merely to 'feel good' about

themselves, but evidence from the United States suggests that drawing upon the social capital possessed by ‘bicultural’ children may help them succeed academically rather than dropping out (Feliciano 2001). Attention has also been drawn to the complex nature of the inter-relations between nurture, religious education, collective worship and social encounters at school (Nesbitt 1998, 111).

In spite of rigorous assessment in other curriculum areas, the subtlety and depth of the effects of teaching about religion in school do not easily lend themselves to quantification (Rudge 2000, 107). In spite of pleas for ‘authentic assessment’ (Blaylock 2000) and a lack of pointers to the features of good interfaith education, especially in the light of the Freire critique (Byrne 2011, 48), pupil self-assessment as a solution may be of limited reliability concerning technical aspects of the RE learning experience (Fancourt 2005, 124). It might be more helpful if the pupils limit their self-assessment to their own attitude to RE (Fancourt 2010). My argument is not that assessment should be neglected in education – since quantification is as necessary to maintain ‘accountability’ to stakeholders in RE as it is for other subjects. Nevertheless, the question remains whether the current means of evaluation has become biased toward knowledge of *content*. This article seeks to demonstrate how quantitative methods *can* be applied without the shortcomings mentioned above, to give an alternative assessment of the quality of RE as experienced, in context, by pupils.

RE particularly needs a ‘liberating’ approach to study in view of religious apathy previously described in British adolescents (Savage et al. 2006). Moreover, the overall subject placement has long found RE consistently below Geography in the subject ‘league tables’ (Williams and Finch 1968; Ormerod 1975; Harvey 1984; Colley and Comber 2003, 66) and with a continued lower status in the curriculum (Hendley et al. 1996). A general survey of adolescents’ attitude to RE by Kay (1996) found that only 33% thought RE should continue to be taught in school and only 6% thought daily collective worship should continue. Nonetheless, Lewis and Francis (1996, 234) found a more positive attitude to RE in girls than for boys without being able to offer a reason, and in Holland ter Avest et al. observed that regardless of their own faith, girls had a more positive attitude to religion in school because they saw this as leading to the respect of others. They also understood learning about religion as helping them in learning about themselves and so to live harmoniously in a multi-faith society (2010, 388). Previous research tells us that several factors may variously affect attitude toward RE. Since mapping the influences on these attitudes might pave the way to a more transformative interpretation of the subject, the brief of the present study was to explore *attitude* toward RE in a sample of London adolescents – benefitting from the established advantages of ‘asking the pupils’ (Flutter and Ruddock 2004).

Part 2: Evaluation of an alternative form of assessment

The measure chosen was that of pupil experience of RE, their attitude to the subject (rather than simply whether pupils wanted RE taught at school or their examination knowledge of it) and their perception of how RE fitted with various aspects of their home nurture and practice. The measures were correlated with sex, teaching style, classroom factors and religious affiliation. Descriptive statistics incidental to the study were also included to put the study in context in terms of range of religions studied, teaching style and activities used for lesson delivery. The presentation of the study here describes firstly how a scale of measurement was constructed – and continues by showing how it can be applied.

Method

Sample

Research was undertaken upon a convenience sample of 369 young people – 237 boys and 132 girls – aged between 13 and 15 years attending London schools. Of the participating schools, one was co-educational and voluntary-controlled, a second was a girls' voluntary-aided Catholic school and a third was a boys' community school. All three schools followed the Local Authority's Agreed Syllabus for RE, teaching according to a style detailed in Table 2 (*below*). Ethnically the sample consisted of 150 whites (41%), 103 blacks (30%), 58 Asians (16%), 41 of mixed race (11%) and 7 Chinese

(2%). The religious composition of the sample was 149 Christians (41%), 120 of no religion (33%), 45 Moslems (12%), 17 Hindus (5%), 15 Buddhists (4%), 5 Sikhs (1%), 3 Jews (1%) and 13 of other religions (4%).

Instrument

A multi-purpose survey (detail of which can be found in Thanissaro 2010a, 184-191) was deployed as part of a wider research project. The survey contained biographical questions adapted from Francis's (2001) adolescent values inventory and 10 attitude questions using a Likert five-point response scale: *strongly agree, agree, not certain, disagree* and *disagree strongly*. Attitude questions focused on attitude toward RE and were partially adapted from previous quantitative adolescent attitudes research in the UK (Francis and Kay 1995; Kay 1996).

Procedure and Analysis

Schools volunteered their participation in response to a circular letter from their local Standing Advisory Council on RE. Surveys were delivered to participating schools in the quantities they required and administered to pupils by Year 9 and 10 teachers under examination conditions in their regular RE classes in the period January and February 2010. In keeping with

constraints of ethical approval non-consenting pupils had the option of destroying their questionnaires after completion instead of submitting them and completed surveys were kept anonymous to protect participants from having their views traced back to them. The resulting dataset was analyzed by means of the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) statistical package (SPSS_Inc. 1988) using the correlation, partial correlation, non-parametric test of related samples, dimension reduction and reliability routines.

Pupil Experience

Table 1 Activity incidence in RE Teaching

<i>RE activities</i>	<i>% incidence</i>
RE textbooks	88
Work sheets	76
Watched video	63
Discussion	60
Copied notes	51
Reference Books	43
Reading scripture	40
Debate	34
Dictation	24
Church visit	20
Computers	19
Visiting a Sikh Gurdwara	18
Listened audio	16
Meditation	13
Buddhist temple visit	8
Christian speaker	7
Sikh speaker	3
Buddhist speaker	2

Activities the pupils reported as having been included in their RE lessons are shown in Table 1 in decreasing order of frequency. Activities which more than half the pupils reported during their RE lessons included use of RE textbooks (88%) and worksheets (76%), watching a video presentation

(63%), classroom discussion (60%) and copying notes (51%). Between a quarter and a half of pupils reported using reference books (43%), reading scripture (40%) or engaging in a classroom debate (34%). Rare activities, reported by less than a quarter of pupils included dictation (24%), visits to churches (20%), use of computers (19%), visits to a Sikh Gurdwara (18%), listening to an audio presentation (16%), meditation or stilling exercises (13%), visits to a Buddhist temple (8%) and visits into the classroom by Christian (7%), Sikh (3%) or Buddhist (2%) speakers.

More than ten years on from the last time teaching activities in RE were surveyed, this research shows that textbooks, work-sheets, videos, classroom discussion and copying notes are the most common activities used for teaching RE – and it seems that none of these tasks cause any particular resentment towards the subject on the part of the pupils, since this research measured twice as much enthusiasm (60% agreement) about RE and six times as much enthusiasm about Collective Worship (39% agreement) as found in Kay's (1996) aforementioned statistics, fifteen years previously. Comparing classroom activities of the present with the time ten years ago when Kay and Smith (2002) performed their research, RE teaching now appears to make *more* use of religious scripture (e.g. the Bible), visits to churches, computers, video (now presumably having replaced slides, television and film-strips) and classroom discussion. Less use was made of reference books, dictation and non-Christian speakers. The

incidence of visits to non-Christian places of worship, audio presentations, copying notes from the blackboard, Christian speakers and reference books seems to have remained the same.

Table 2 Style of RE Teaching

<i>RE style</i>	<i>% incidence</i>
Systematic	52
Thematic	23
Both	25

As for the style of RE teaching, as shown in Table 2, more than half of the pupils estimated that they studied one religion at a time [systematic approach](52%), a little less than a quarter studied religions through the thematic approach (23%) and a quarter used both approaches.

Table 3 Number of religions studied in a year of RE

Religions studied	% incidence
1	19
2	28
3	12
4	11
5	10
6	19
7	2

As shown above in Table 3, the most common number of religions pupils reported having studied in the past year of RE was two (28%). The next most common was to have studied one religion alone (19%) or all six of the

main religions (19%). In practice this means that 47% of pupils had studied no more than two religions in RE (19+28%).

Table 4 Priority of inclusion of religions for study in RE

No. religions included in past school year	% pupils who had studied					
	Buddhism	Christianity	Hinduism	Islam	Judaism	Sikhism
1	0	74	2	22	3	0
2	19	97	5	76	0	1
3	35	100	40	70	20	38
4	84	94	68	62	19	73
5	100	94	100	91	38	94
6	98	98	97	100	100	100

In practice this meant (*noting the second row of Table 4*) that half of the pupils studied very little more than Christianity and Islam if religions were taught in a systematic style. The omission of Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism and Sikhism from RE lessons could be rectified easily by teaching RE thematically from time to time.

Attitudes to RE

Table 5 Attitudes to RE

	Agree	Not	Disagree
	%	Certain	%
	%	%	%
Religious Education should be taught in school	60	15	25
Religious Education is an essential part of a broad & balanced school curriculum	42	33	25
Religious Education in my school helps me understand my religion	46	25	29
Religious Education helps people in my school respect other peoples' beliefs	66	14	20
Religious Education in my school helps me understand different religions	66	20	14
I learn new things about my own religion in Religious Education	40	23	37
Collective Worship (e.g. assemblies with a theme) should be held in school	39	34	26
Getting good marks in Geography is more important than succeeding in RE	27	41	31
Getting good marks in Maths is more important than succeeding in RE	65	22	13
What I learn about my religion in school differs from what I learned at home	35	36	30

An overview of the responses of all participants to the ten questions concerning attitude to RE is provided in Table 5. Although the survey used a five-point continuum, for clarity of presentation, the 'agree strongly' and 'agree' responses were collapsed into one category styled 'agree' and the 'disagree strongly' and 'disagree' responses were similarly collapsed into one category styled 'disagree'. An overview of the results reflects a resoundingly *positive* attitude to RE on behalf of the pupils as a whole – although no significance was attached to this statistic. Two-thirds of the respondents thought that RE in their school helped people respect others' beliefs (66%) and understand different religions (66%). The majority (60%)

also agreed to the classic assertion that RE should be taught in school although a smaller proportion considered RE an essential part of a broad and balanced curriculum (42%) and less still thought Collective Worship should be held in school (39%). Although, as already described, pupils acknowledged the value of RE for learning about *others'* religions, when it came to understanding their own religion, respondents acknowledged less of a contribution from RE, with less than half thinking RE helped them to understand their own religion (46%) and only two-fifths considering RE taught them something *new* about their own religion. Little over a third of respondents (35%) indicated a difference between the way religion was portrayed at school as compared to what they learned at home. As for the relative perceived importance of RE as a subject, almost two-thirds (65%) considered getting good marks in Mathematics *more* important than doing well in RE whereas 31% *disagreed* that getting good marks in Geography was more important than doing well in RE – placing RE between Mathematics and Geography in perceived order of importance as a subject.

Comparisons

Sex Differences

Table 6 Comparison between male and female pupils

	Male % agree	Female % agree	χ^2	p<
Religious Education in my school helps me understand my religion	39	56	8.93	.05
I learn new things about my own religion in Religious Education	32	51	11.08	.01
Getting good marks in Geography is more important than succeeding in RE	35	18	8.95	.05
Getting good marks in Maths is more important than succeeding in RE	71	56	12.51	.01

Only significant Chi-squared test-scores included.

As shown above in Table 6, on four of the ten items, a significant correlation was found between pupil sex and attitude to RE – broadly that on certain aspects girls had more positive attitude to RE than boys. Girls were more likely than boys to agree that RE helped them understand their own religion and that they learned new things about their own religion in RE. Boys were more likely than girls to perceive RE as a subject of little importance – ranking it lower than *both* Mathematics and Geography.

Age Differences

Table 7 Comparison between Year 9 and Year 10 pupils

	Y9 % agree	Y10 % agree	χ^2	p<
Religious Education should be taught in school	67	48	9.35	.01
Religious Education is an essential part of a broad & balanced school curriculum	48	30	17.54	.001
Religious Education in my school helps me understand my religion	52	36	6.74	.05
Religious Education helps people in my school respect other peoples' beliefs	72	55	8.82	.05
I learn new things about my own religion in Religious Education	50	22	21.17	.001
Collective Worship (e.g. assemblies with a theme) should be held in school	47	25	20.01	.001

Only significant Chi-squared test-scores included.

As shown above in Table 7, on six of the ten items, a significant negative correlation was found between age and positive attitude to RE. This is a well-established finding borne out by the work of Hyde (1990, 153f.) and Kay and Francis (1996, Chapter 3).

Differences by degree of religious involvement

Attitude to RE was correlated with different forms of religious involvement including the traditional measures of frequency of prayer and attendance of a place of worship.

Table 8 Comparison by frequency of praying

	% agree Occasional praying	% agree Weekly praying	χ^2	p<
Religious Education should be taught in school	51	74	14.94	.001
Religious Education is an essential part of a broad & balanced school curriculum	32	57	21.57	.001
Religious Education in my school helps me understand my religion	34	66	25.36	.001
Religious Education helps people in my school respect other peoples' beliefs	56	80	15.71	.001
RE helps me understand different religions	59	77	9.05	.05
I learn new things about my own religion in Religious Education	26	62	31.46	.001
Collective Worship (e.g. assemblies with a theme) should be held in school	29	54	25.11	.001
What I learn about my religion in school differs from what I learned at home	26	48	11.69	.01

Only significant Chi-squared test-scores included.

Differences by frequency of prayer: In this comparison, for clarity of presentation, although the survey used a six-point continuum, the 'daily' and 'weekly' prayers were reduced to 'weekly praying' and the 'never', 'yearly', 'six times a year' and 'monthly' categories were reduced to 'occasional praying' giving just two reference points. As shown above in Table 8, on eight of the ten items, a significant and uniform positive correlation was found between the frequency of prayer (including meditation etc.) and positive attitude to RE.

Table 9 Comparison by frequency of attendance of a place of worship

	% agree occasional attendee	% agree weekly attendee	χ^2	p<
Religious Education should be taught in school	53	77	13.16	.001
Religious Education is an essential part of a broad & balanced school curriculum	36	56	14.92	.001
Religious Education in my school helps me understand my religion	38	70	21.93	.001
Religious Education helps people in my school respect other peoples' beliefs	61	79	10.22	.01
RE helps me understand different religions	61	79	7.35	.05
I learn new things about my own religion in Religious Education	32	60	16.53	.001
Collective Worship (e.g. assemblies with a theme) should be held in school	31	58	21.29	.001
What I learn about my religion in school differs from what I learned at home	28	52	13.19	.001

Only significant Chi-squared test-scores included.

Differences by frequency of attendance of a place of worship: In this comparison, for clarity of presentation, although the survey used a six-point continuum for attendance of a place of worship, the 'daily' and 'weekly' attendance were reduced to 'weekly attendance and the 'never', 'yearly', 'six times a year' and 'monthly' categories were reduced to 'occasional attendance' giving just two reference points. In the case of attitude to RE, the frequency of attendance made no significant difference for two of the ten questions. As shown above in Table 9, on eight of the ten items, a significant and uniform correlation was found between the frequency of attendance of a place of worship and positive attitude toward RE.

Trustworthiness of the new scale

Validity

If the validity of this scale of attitude to RE were to behave in the same way as scales of attitude toward religion previously described (Kay and Francis 1996, 191), it would be expected that a more positive attitude toward RE be observed for girls than boys, that the attitude become less positive with age and that it would correlate with degree of religious involvement. Indeed, for all three criteria – sex, age and religious involvement (as measured by frequency of prayer and attendance of a place of worship), the scale proved valid.

Reliability

Table 10 Reliability of a Short Scale of Attitude toward RE

	Item Rest of Test Correlation
Collective Worship (e.g. assemblies with a theme) should be held in school	.864
RE helps me understand different religions	.852
I learn new things about my own religion in Religious Education	.849
Religious Education helps people in my school respect other peoples' beliefs	.845
Religious Education is an essential part of a broad & balanced school curriculum	.843
Religious Education in my school helps me understand my religion	.837
Religious Education should be taught in school	.836
Alpha coefficient for all 7 items together =	.866

The reliability of the internal structure of the questionnaire was verified using Cronbach's alpha coefficient (DeVellis 1991). The alpha coefficient for all 10 items of attitude to RE together was .827. This included the

slightly confusing negatively-coded questions comparing RE with Geography and Mathematics and comparing home and school portrayal of religion. When items were reduced down to a set of the most unambiguous items – which I have hereafter dubbed the ‘Short Scale of Attitude toward Religious Education’ (ScAttRE-S) – with the top 7 highest-scoring alpha-coefficients for ‘Item Rest of Test Correlation’ [7 also being chosen to match the number of items used in the short form of the Francis Scale of Attitude toward Christianity (Francis 1993)] the result arranged in decreasing order of reliability is as shown in Table 10, with an improved alpha coefficient of .866 – a score within the bounds of acceptability since Kline indicates that an alpha-coefficient of over .8 is acceptable in psychological testing (1999). Since no single item rest-of-scale correlation dropped below .836 and the first factor of the unrotated solution proposed by principle component analysis accounted for 62% of the variance, it can be concluded that the instrument is characterized by homogeneity, unidimensionality and internal consistency reliability within this sample.

Applications

In experimental situations, scores from the ScAttRE-S instrument can be correlated against pupil individual differences or to assess interventions in RE teaching pedagogies to explore experimentally significant effects. I have included two examples here of how the scale can be applied in an

instructive way – the first being an example of an intervention (classroom factors and teaching style) and the second an example of pupil individual differences (religious affiliation).

Effect on attitude to RE of classroom factors

Table 11 Effect on Attitude to RE of Classroom Factors

	Attitude without		Attitude with		t	df	p<
	M	SE	M	SE			
Church visit	22.40	.33	24.08	.54	-	71.5	.01
computers	22.31	.33	24.30	.52	-	79.2	.01
debate	22.16	.37	23.64	.44	-	217	.05
						2.490	

Only significant t-test-scores included.

When ScAttRE-S scores were cross-correlated with student reports of classroom factors and teaching style, by means of an independent t-test, as shown in Table 11, pupils expressed a more positive attitude to RE in cases where a church had been visited, computers had been used, or there had been a classroom debate. None of the other classroom factors, including teaching style, made any significant difference to attitude toward RE.

Differences by religious affiliation

Table 12 Comparison by religious affiliation

	No religion % agree	Christian % agree	Non-Christian religion % agree	χ^2	p<
Religious Education should be taught in school	48	70	61	19.57	.001
Religious Education is an essential part of a broad & balanced school curriculum	25	54	44	26.08	.001
Religious Education in my school helps me understand my religion	15	70	48	63.21	.001
Religious Education helps people in my school respect other peoples' beliefs	50	74	73	14.22	.01
RE helps me understand different religions	45	73	82	26.46	.001
I learn new things about my own religion in Religious Education	7	64	41	66.46	.001
Collective Worship (e.g. assemblies with a theme) should be held in school	28	44	45	19.31	.001

Only significant Chi-squared test-scores included.

Where ScAttRE-S questions were cross-correlated with pupils' self-ascribed religious affiliation (limited numbers allowed only a three-way division into 'no religion', 'Christian' and 'non-Christian religions'), as shown above in Table 12, the results showed a strongly significant polarization of opinion in all seven questions asked – and that the pupils of no religion had significantly less positive attitudes to RE on all seven items

Part 3: Implications of attitude to RE for contextualization and motivation

The research for this article comes at a time in the UK, when the data source for evaluation of school RE has, within the space of two years, moved from Section 10 Her Majesty's Inspectorate (HMI) reports, through self-

evaluation by School Improvement Partners (SIPs)(e.g. NASACRE 2009, 4-5) to voluntary self-assessment by school heads of RE (REonline 2010). It also comes at a time when the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority which previously received Standing Advisory Council on RE (SACRE) reports has been dismantled and, in line with Local Authority economies, funding to SACREs is being reduced. Even at the best of times, data available to each SACRE, which is legally responsible to ensure the quality of RE teaching, is frequently restricted to the numbers of entries and exam success rate for GCSE and A-level Religious Studies. Since the age range of schoolchildren in this research stands *outside* that of examination RE, it is hoped that the ScAttRE-S instrument will help facilitate data collection to inform stakeholders of the nature of RE being taught in the schools of England and Wales – especially in terms of contextualization to home background, which as discussed in the introduction, is an assurance that pupils are learning something *from* RE rather simply than learning something about it.

Adolescents growing out of RE

The study highlighted a dramatic change of attitude that takes place between Year 9 and Year 10 concurring with the findings of Kay (1996) and also Lewis and Francis (1996, 234) in finding an attitude to RE which became more negative with age. It is easy to surmise that affinity for RE decreases

with age because of a need to rebel or avoid being patronized, but further research of a qualitative nature would be needed to pinpoint firm reasons why there should be *such* a sharp downturn in attitude toward RE within a single school year.

RE catering for a particular type of pupil

Trying to visualize RE as a subject through the eyes of the adolescent respondents, it would appear that although a subject considered unimportant by adolescents, it is a subject they enjoy. Cross-correlation of attitude toward RE against religious involvement has given some indication of the sort of students who like learning RE the most. It tends to be younger girls belonging to the more numerously represented religions who pray and attend a place of worship weekly. The more pupils prayed, the more likely it was that they would perceive a difference between how religion was portrayed in RE as compared with their experience of it at home.

Strategies to motivate adolescents in RE

Kay and Smith's (2002) expectation that a child should come away from RE with not only a factual understanding of a religion, but also a positive impression of it seems to be borne out in the pupils' attitude toward RE. It would be worrying if an RE pupil studied a religion and was left with only apathy towards it – an apathy that has elsewhere been distinguished from its

near-equivalent of ‘neutrality’ (Thanissaro 2010b, 72) – and this concern is a substantial reason to advocate measure of attitudes to the *process* of studying about religions rather than merely noting examination results – since attitudes to learning about religion may stay with young school-leavers for life. It is also important to link to wider aspects of spirituality in pupils’ home life and not simply cater for praying and churchgoing. Although Kay and Smith (2002) put a lot of store by having the Bible in the classroom, this was a factor no longer found to affect attitudes toward RE – nonetheless, this research concurs with Kay and Smith that church visits continue to correlate with more positive attitudes to RE, as did use of computers and classroom debate – the participatory and dialogical nature of these activities corresponding with features identified by Freire as liberating education from the ‘banking model’. Similarly, links between use of computers in RE and adolescent formation of identity and self-concept has been noted previously as ‘transformative’ for pupils in German schools (Dinter 2006).

Accommodating secularism

There was significantly more negativity by those of no religion toward RE as compared with those affiliated to a religion. The non-religious compared RE unfavourably even to Geography. Also worthy of note was that a disparity between the religious teaching at school and home was more

noticeable to those who *were* affiliated to a religion. The question of how RE should approach children who have no religion of their own is at the centre of an ongoing debate on the role of RE in late post-modernity. Should the home nurture of atheists too, who arguably have a distinct spiritual identity (Caldwell-Harris et al. 2011), be acknowledged more in RE? Should atheism, as suggested by Newby (1996) be treated as a worldview in its own right rather than the lack of one? If religious divisions in RE are artificial, should they be abandoned altogether as suggested by Erricker and Erricker (2000)? Answers to these questions exceed the scope of this article, but are potential topics of research that could now be tested empirically for an impact on ScAttRE-S scores for those pupils of no religion.

From the banking model to acknowledging home faith background

Evidence presented here suggests that educators need to move away from any vestiges of the ‘banking model’ in RE, instead considering the qualities of RE that link with pupils’ faith background. The ‘whole’ in RE should be more than just a sum of the parts – and this study suggests that home religious background has still not fully been considered a part. Before considering whether changes need to be made in a subject which seems ostensibly popular, thought needs to be given to what an improved RE might be aiming to provide for the pupils. Certainly, it would appear, as Bellett (1998, 139, 141) suggests, that better RE would offer the pupil the

opportunity to tell their own stories – and this might in some measure stem the downturn in attitude towards RE that takes place between Year 9 and Year 10. A ‘problem-posing’ RE that is more participatory, transformative and dialogical and less content-based could easily be developed and evaluated for upper-secondary RE students through the suggestions of this research. This study is not recommending that fixed syllabuses be rejected, but that in assessment of effectiveness of teaching and learning of RE, the way syllabuses are *interpreted* and *pupil response* to this should be factored into the equation of quality. To this end, the present study recommends possible ways forward through increased inclusion of home tradition (valuing of prayer and home nurture) in RE, more church visits, debate and computers – together with offering a practical means of evaluation.

Suggestions for future research

Since the resulting instrument, which I have dubbed the ‘Short Form of the Scale of Attitude toward Religious Education’ or ‘ScAttRE-S’ has been demonstrated both valid and reliable, it is commended to researchers for further use. It will bring a more nuanced understanding of attitude toward RE in a field of study complaining of the lack of appropriate measures and which has previously relied on results from only one or two key questions, while having the additional advantage of connecting with the child’s home faith background. Since each question is usually coded ‘1’ for *disagree*

strongly through '5' for *agree strongly*, for each respondent the scale will yield an attitude to RE score on a continuum from 7 (strongly negative) through 35 (strongly positive).

It should be borne in mind that in the absence of further testing, reliability across a broader age-range than the 13- to 15-year-old target group can still not be guaranteed. Since the sample of schools is relatively limited, it may mean that conclusions are no more than indicative for RE students more generally in the UK or beyond. Also as not a great deal is known about the way RE is taught in the sample schools besides the style of teaching and Agreed Syllabus followed, it would be edifying to test the scale further across different types of syllabus where such details are available. It would also be suggested that apart from extending the age-range of validity and reliability tests of the scale, a 24-item scale (foreseeably 'ScAttRE' with no '-S') could also be developed, perhaps including some of the additional attitude questions employed by ter Avest et al. (2010) and including at least two reverse-coded items. For a 24-item scale an increased alpha-coefficient for reliability would be expected.

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