The 2011 census counted 247,743 Buddhists in England and Wales – of whom 238,626 were in England – a number that has not only grown by over 100,000 since the 2001 census, but which has, in a decade, increased in its proportion of the British population by 0.1%. Buddhists are not evenly spread in the UK as evidenced by both census and distribution of temples. According to the census, the mostly urban areas where Buddhist population density is highest include boroughs of Inner London where the average figure is 1.1%, Outer London boroughs of Greenwich, Hounslow, Brent, Barnet, Harrow, Kingston on Thames (1.1-1.7%), Cambridge (1.3%), Brighton and Hove (1.0%) and Rushmoor, Hampshire (the highest density in the country at 3.3% owing to the proximity of Aldershot garrison with a high proportion of Nepali Buddhists in the Gurkha regiments). Fifty-one Theravāda Buddhist temples were counted in 2013, most numerous in the major cities – London, Birmingham, Manchester and Glasgow. There were 229 Buddhist charitable organizations registered with the charity commission in 2015.

Since to some people’s apparent surprise, Buddhists have children too, a rough idea of the likely Buddhist denominations teachers will encounter in the classroom can be surmised from a recent teenage research sample where just over two-thirds described themselves as Theravāda (69%), over a quarter were Mahāyāna (29%) and the remainder Vajrayāna (3%). Describing their affiliations instead, in terms of geographic Buddhist traditions (and it should be noted that ethnically western children may follow Buddhist traditions that are not western), the same teenagers described their tradition as: Sinhalese (23%), Thai (16%), Tibetan (12%), Burmese (11%), Vietnamese (9%), Japanese (5%), Bangladeshi (3%), Western (2%), Chinese (2%), Nepalese (2%) and Cambodian (1%). Buddhists are loosely organized in England – as there is no national hierarchy – but an umbrella organization, the Network of Buddhist Organizations (NBO), was formed in response to the government’s insistence on having a single point of contact for community relations with Buddhists. To date no free school has been established with specifically Buddhist character, however an independent primary school, called the ‘Dharma School’ has been active in Brighton since 1994.
With regard to the nature of Buddhism in Britain, some have ethnic roots in the countries of Asia while others have converted to Buddhism independent of their family’s influence. The twofold provenance of Buddhists in western society was first highlighted by differences between the religious styles of ‘convert’ and ‘heritage’ recognized in studies of North American “parallel Buddhist congregations”\(^8\). The ‘convert’ style of Buddhist religiosity is practised mostly by Caucasians or by those who do not have ancestry from Asia. It is a style of Buddhist practice that emphasises meditation and tends to eschew monasticism, devotions, Buddhism’s ethical precepts, the worldly benefits of Buddhism and its social activities.\(^9\) The ‘heritage’ style of Buddhist religiosity by contrast (also known as ‘immigrant’, ‘migrant’, ‘ethnic’, ‘cradle’, ‘old-line’ or ‘indigenous’ Buddhism), is the religious style of Buddhists connected ethnically with Asian countries where Buddhism has a majority presence. Typical practices for heritage-style Buddhists include generosity, chanting, meditation, listening to Buddhist teachings at a temple, bowing to the monastic community, taking temporary ordination as novice monks, showing respect towards parents, Buddhist iconography of shrines in the home, support for the monastic community, ceremonial marking of rites of passage and dedication of merit for deceased ancestors.\(^10\) Since the 1980s there has been significant influx of heritage Buddhists to Britain overtaking ‘convert’ Buddhists as the majority\(^11\) with correspondingly more Buddhist-raised children studying in British schools. In 2015 the proportion of heritage Buddhists to converts was about 3:2. Census figures of 2011 suggested that Buddhists in schools average 0.2-0.4% of the total schoolchildren.\(^12\)

The inclusion of Buddhism in RE in England was largely confined to 16- to 18-year-olds until the 1970s, though Geoffrey Parrinder’s Book of World Religions\(^13\) was accessible to a wider readership of younger pupils. In successive editions from 1972 onwards the Shap Working Party’s World Religions: Aids for Teachers included bibliographies and resources on Buddhism.\(^14\) Several agreed syllabuses encouraged some attention to Buddhism and this became widespread following the 1988 Education Reform Act,\(^15\) although at that time the basis for selection of ‘principal’ religions was unclear.\(^16\) Subsequently, the SCAA Model Syllabuses\(^17\) elaborated Buddhist content as a curriculum option and 10 years later in the National Framework for RE the DfES and QCA recognised Buddhism as belonging to those principal religions to be studied in RE.\(^18\) In terms of representation in RE,\(^19\) the Buddhist

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\(^12\) Document CT0016 from [http://www.ons.gov.uk](http://www.ons.gov.uk)

\(^13\) London (1965).


\(^16\) TERENCE COPLEY Teaching Religion: Fifty Years of Religious Education, Exeter (1997) p.188.


Society, Clear Vision Trust and the NBO are member organisations of the RE Council; interestingly, all are predominantly ‘convert’ organisations.

RE teaching materials and Agreed Syllabuses for Buddhism, as for other religions, have a tendency to present images of religion that are tidier and less diverse than they are in reality.\(^{20}\) From the mid-1980s to the 1990s, when the first curriculum materials on Buddhism were being written, convert Buddhists formed the majority of the demographic\(^{21}\) with a consequent tendency for curriculum materials to portray Buddhism in terms attractive to westerners\(^{22}\) but overlooking the ‘perpetuating structures’ of Buddhism often prioritised more highly by the heritage Buddhist community.\(^{23}\) More recent Buddhist RE teaching materials, by the Clearvision Trust and others, have sought to redress the heritage-convert balance. The process of depicting Buddhism more recognizably to pupils in RE was also undertaken by the Warwick RE Project through an ethnographic process with Buddhist participants described by Judith Everington,\(^{24}\) and eventually producing a Key Stage 1 textbook.\(^{25}\) In another example, a Sri Lankan Buddhist family, including their children, were interviewed and the edited transcript included as an extended reading resource for GCSE students.\(^{26}\)

Research on Buddhism in British RE has focussed largely on how Buddhism is presented in the classroom and the religious home lives of Buddhist pupils. Research with 13- to 14-year-old pupils on Buddhism in the classroom indicated the likelihood that Buddhism would be presented as part of their RE, but the degree of inclusion was variable.\(^{27}\) Backus and Cush have described difficulties that prevent more widespread teaching of Buddhism in the RE curriculum.\(^{28}\) The extent to which a convert Buddhist organization promoted convert-centric perspectives in its interaction with schools has been researched.\(^{29}\) With 68% agreement that RE should be taught in school, Buddhist adolescents were found significantly more positive in their attitude to RE than non-Buddhists.\(^{30}\) In contrast, Buddhist attitudes to Collective Worship (CW) were found less positive than for classroom-taught RE; theistic language in

\(^{19}\) Thanks to Dr Joyce Miller of the REC and Patrick Hampshire of NASACRE for providing up to date Buddhist representation data at short notice.


\(^{22}\) BACKUS & CUSH, op. cit., pp 231-46.


\(^{28}\) BACKUS & CUSH, op. cit..

\(^{29}\) MARK JONES An evaluation of the extent to which a Friends of the Western Buddhist Order Centre promotes a FWBO-centric strand of Buddhism, or contributes towards an understanding of Buddhist diversity, through educational visits. MA Dissertation: University of Warwick (2010).

CW may detract from an otherwise positive Buddhist attitude towards RE. Preliminary qualitative research also suggested dissonance between educational theory and home practice may apply to Buddhism.³¹

Research on the religious home background of Buddhist pupils has included the study of a Buddhist temple in Britain as part of Warwick Religions and Education Research Unit’s ethnography³² and ethnographic studies have also been made of the Cambodian³³ and Vietnamese³⁴ Buddhist communities in Britain.

Generally in education, Buddhists are enthusiastic learners. Despite there being education in Buddhist temples, including well-organized Sunday schools (especially the dhamm pasala at Srilankan temples), religious sanctity is attached traditionally even to the process of public education for secular subjects. The earliest Buddhist scriptures advocate respect for education [sikkha-gārava] and characterize education as a gift from the teacher [vidhayadāna], encouraging teachers to be held in respect (and sometimes awe). Such values have been transmitted down to the present day as traditions such as Vietnamese Buddhist love of learning [tân học]. Teaching, especially of RE, is thus a Right Livelihood profession welcoming of Buddhist men and women – with Buddhists having much to offer as a committed but neutral facilitators in matters of inter-religious dialogue.³⁵

Recommendations more specific to the teaching of Buddhism in RE, derived from some of the research described above include the importance of representing Buddhism in the classroom in a way which prioritises practice rather than ‘beliefs’ and ‘scripture’. The tendency to regard Buddhism as a glorified form of spirituality or New Age practice should be avoided. Teachers should also respect Buddhists’ atheism as an informed choice rather than a lack of faith, since irrespective of denomination, over three-quarters of Buddhists claim not to believe in God. Teachers need to familiarize themselves with the informal nurture that goes on in Buddhist home practice and try to couch CW activities in a vocabulary that avoids inadvertent reliance on theistic vocabulary to convey religious values.

Phra Nicholas Thanissaro was awarded doctoral status by the University of Warwick’s Centre for Education Studies on the strength of a PhD dissertation entitled ‘Templegoing Teens: the Religiosity and Identity of Buddhists growing up in Britain’. A Buddhist monk affiliated with the Dhammadāya Foundation (a revivalist Buddhist organization in the Thai Theravāda Buddhist tradition), he holds a Master’s degree in Religious Education from the University of Warwick and a Postgraduate Certificate of Education from Manchester Metropolitan University.

³² MILLER op. cit.