

**Friedrich Schweitzer, Rob Freathy,  
Stephen G. Parker, Henrik Simojoki (Eds.)**

# Improving Religious Education Through Teacher Training

**Experiences and Insights From  
European Countries**



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# Introduction

*Rob Freathy, Friedrich Schweitzer, Stephen Parker, Henrik Simojoki*

This book brings together two topics which have both been of increasing interest in different countries. The first refers to the quality of Religious Education (RE) as a school subject in general, the second is about the education of teachers of RE and its possible contribution to better quality RE. There have been many public, and often controversial, debates concerning both of these topics. The chapters contained in this volume, however, are not meant to continue such debates (even if it is inevitable that they will contribute to these debates as well), but to make use of research, especially research on teacher education in the field of RE, in order to provide insights based not just on political or personal opinions, but on rigorous academic scholarship.

## 1. Teacher education and the quality of RE

The question of the ways in which the education of teachers of RE should be shaped has come to be seen as a key issue for the future of the subject. In Germany, for example, the Conference of Ministers of Education (KMK) as well as the so-called Joint Commission which brings together high-level representatives from the church and from theological faculties and other teacher education institutions, have published a number of frameworks upon which the education of teachers of RE should be modelled (KMK, 2008; EKD, 2008). In England, the acknowledged paucity of specialist RE teachers in secondary schools and qualified teachers of RE in primary schools has been met by various initiatives. These include the introduction of a practice code for RE teaching focused specifically on how requirements of teachers to demonstrate respect for diversity and promote equality might relate to a teacher's own beliefs and sense of integrity (Religious Education Council, 2009). They also include an RE-specific exemplification of otherwise generic teacher standards published by the government's Department for Education (National Association of Teachers of Religious Education and Religious Education Council for England and Wales (NATRE/REC), 2013; see also Department for Education, 2011). Yet notwithstanding the official, and sometimes legally binding, nature of such statements, they are usually not backed by research in the field of RE, but are primarily based on political decisions which, given the general progress made in researching teaching and learning, as well as research-based forms of teacher training, cannot be considered a sufficient basis in the long run.

In a number of studies and political statements, in recent times especially from the United Kingdom, the quality and effectiveness of RE has been criticised, not only concerning particular approaches or aims, but very much in general. The most well-known example probably is the study *Does RE work?* (Conroy et al., 2013) which shows that in many cases the effectiveness of RE is not to be taken for granted. More recently, the Commission on Religious Education (2018), established by the Religious Education Council of England and Wales (REC), has even come to the conclusion that the subject is beyond hope concerning its quality, and that a new and richer vision of the subject is required, including the proposal to call the subject 'Religion and Worldviews' to reflect its new emphasis. As a comparator, in Germany, parallel debates about the quality of RE and its reception by pupils can be found, especially in the wake of the international PISA studies (cf. Schweitzer, 2020). These studies do not include RE but they have raised a number of questions concerning the quality of school teaching from which no subject can be exempt. Consequently, efforts to improve the quality of RE (as well as the quality of other subjects) are high on the agenda of academic religious educators as well as of politicians.

## 2. Approaches to research on RE in international context

Again in the wake of the international studies on competences and educational achievements which have been carried out over the last 25 years – and PISA is only the most well-known example of many studies of this kind – empirical research on education and teaching has become one of the most influential disciplines or fields in education. This does not only apply to issues of evaluation and assessment, but also to different forms of teaching and, last but not least, to teacher education and teacher competences. More and more, empirical research results are considered the main presupposition for educational improvements. In fields like RE, where empirical research on teaching and learning, on classroom processes and learning outcomes, as well as on teacher education, have only recently begun to play a more prominent role (for an international overview cf. Schweitzer & Boschki, 2018), this development must be appreciated as an important step forward. It would indeed be helpful if statements on the quality of RE, like the one from the Commission on Religious Education quoted above, would no longer be based on so-called 'experiences' and 'insights' gained from representatives from the field, but on serious research carried out according to the general standards of empirical research in education.

Yet at the same time, especially concerning the education of teachers of RE, empirical research should not be the only approach expected to be able to contribute to its improvement. As a recent study on the development of teacher education in Germany and, in part, on teacher education in England in the second

half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has shown (Simojoki, Schweitzer, Henningsen & Mautz, 2021), the quality of teacher education does indeed depend on the processes of individual professionalisation studied in contemporary empirical research. However, at the same time and in certain respects even more, it depends on structural presuppositions concerning the various institutions responsible for teacher education as well, including the requirements for entering the teaching profession, but also advanced teacher education in later years. Such structural presuppositions, which have strongly affected the professionalisation of the profession of teachers of RE as a whole (so-called collective professionalisation, cf. Horn, 2016), are the result of historical and political developments and consequently, they need to be studied and researched historically. This implies that there is a need for both empirical as well as historical studies concerning teacher education as a factor in the development of the quality of RE.

A historical perspective, combined with an understanding of the political control, organisation and funding of education, may be particularly important in education systems where there is considerable central or local government control of schools and teaching training provision. Teachers' Standards in England, for example, are defined nationally by the government's Department for Education, and the implementation of these standards in teacher education is monitored rigorously by the inspectorate, OFSTED (Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills), following the *Initial Teacher Education (ITE) Inspection Framework and Handbook* (Department for Education, 2022). Amongst many considerations, the inspection framework seeks to ensure that the 'core content framework' is being taught. This specifies the ITE curriculum and was made compulsory by the Department for Education from September 2020. Inspectors make judgements on overall effectiveness, leadership and management, and the quality of education and training. Inspection of the latter considers (i) the knowledge and skills that providers plan that trainees will gain at each stage ('intent'); (ii) the way the curriculum developed or adapted is taught and assessed in order to support trainees to build their knowledge and to apply that knowledge as skills ('implementation'); and (iii) whether trainees know more and remember more of the intended curriculum and apply that knowledge to their practice ('impact'). It is, in a certain sense, an empirical exercise, but not the kind of critical, open-ended and (politically-)independent research we are presupposing and advocating in this volume. It limits the influence that any research might have on teacher education practice without first changing the narrowly-defined policy parameters in which it occurs. Similar developments can probably be found within teacher education in many other (European) countries as well. State-driven attempts to standardise teacher education based on political perspectives and convictions, instead of research-based insights, may even be a hallmark of the present situation in general, although no international or comparative research concerning such tendencies in the field of RE has become available so far.

In addition to empirical, historical and education policy-related research, other approaches could be mentioned as well, most importantly theoretical approaches which are needed for clarifying the aims of education and, even more importantly in the present context, the criteria for determining the quality of RE – a task which unavoidably implies normative issues beyond the empirical (cf. Schweitzer, 2020). However, such normative issues should not be left to the field of politics and political decision-making alone. Instead, they should be discussed and negotiated between the philosophy of (religious) education and political representations.

It is also important to note – as mentioned above – that the developments described so far have not been limited to particular countries like England and Germany where the editors of this book live and work. Instead, as a number of the contributions to this volume show, similar debates, interests and initiatives can now be found in many countries especially in Europe and the Western world as well. Such parallels are in line with the new interest in internationalisation and international knowledge transfer in the field of RE (cf. Schweitzer & Schreiner, 2021) but at the same time, they also are resulting from the growing influence of globalisation and global competition in general. The effects on RE from within, as well as from without, are one of the reasons why debates concerning the quality of teaching in general and of teaching RE in particular tend to be characterised by a basic tension between educational motives on the one hand and economic motives on the other. To offer pupils the best teaching possible is a perennial interest and responsibility of educators and teachers – to do ‘better’ than colleagues in other countries and to achieve better results than those achieved in other countries corresponds to the logic of economic competition. Since there appears to be no way out from this situation it seems best to remain conscious of this tension in order not to naively follow the promises of alleged improvements guided by the logic of outdoing others. In this respect, the international cooperation behind this book, not only of the authors from England and Germany, but also of the authors from other countries contributing to it, should be viewed as an expression of cooperative (instead of competitive) motives and interests.

### **3. Aims and intentions of the book**

Against this background, the overall aim of this book can be explained. It is the attempt to bring together experiences and research-based insights concerning the education of teachers of RE from different European countries. The guiding question of all contributions to this volume is how the praxis of RE can be improved through teacher education. Moreover, the idea is to generate new ideas and perspectives for research projects in international cooperation.

Consequently, the focus is on two aspects:

- (1) The reality of teacher education for RE in the different countries represented in this volume.
- (2) Research-based evaluation of the different forms of teacher education for RE and their effects concerning the quality of RE.

While the question of improving teacher education in general as well as in different subject areas – in the present case, concerning RE – has received increased public attention in many countries, the research situation concerning teacher education for RE and the quality of RE has remained limited at least in two respects. First, research within the different countries (as far as it has become available so far) has had its focus on learning effects with the pupils and on different forms of teaching RE, but not on teacher education in the field of RE (overview: Schweitzer & Boschki, 2018). Second, at least to our knowledge, there has never been an attempt to bring together respective experiences and insights from different countries concerning research on teacher education for RE which implies that there has been very little international cooperation or even awareness in this respect. At this point, theoretical demands for such international cooperation have been set forth in the name of international knowledge transfer in RE (cf. Schreiner & Schweitzer, 2021), but so far the picture has not changed. Teacher education for RE has remained a lacuna in the international RE discussion.

One reason for the lack of international cooperation can certainly be seen in the many different ways in which teacher education is understood and carried out in different countries, even within the European Union. This is why the first step must be to consider and to evaluate the reality of teacher education for RE in the different countries. Given the preliminary state of research on teacher education for RE, the next step must be to identify and to evaluate possible research approaches which have proven to lead to valid results at least in one or more of the different countries represented in this volume and which, due to the research results achieved with their help, appear to be promising for future research in other countries as well. However, it must be noted that asking about the possible effects of teacher education for improving RE, intentionally adds a normative perspective to this discussion as well as to the contributions in this volume. Referring to 'improvement' implies that criteria for the quality of RE have to be identified, clearly described and also justified, since such criteria can always be contested and challenged by naming alternative criteria. Given the very preliminary state of the RE discussion concerning teacher education for RE, it is obvious that more theoretical and empirical work is needed for elaborating this normative perspective on teacher education for RE and its implications for the quality of RE itself. In this respect, the present volume is to encourage future work by indicating some directions for respective initiatives.

Based on the insights and results of a consultation held at the University of Exeter in March 2015 concerning the historical process of professionalisation of the profession of teachers of RE which received remarkable international attention (the results were published in a joint issue of the leading journals for RE in the UK and in Germany which was the first such issue ever, *British Journal of Religious Education/Zeitschrift für Pädagogik und Theologie* 2016), the plan was for the present volume to consider both individual as well as collective forms of professionalisation (cf. Freathy, Parker, Schweitzer & Simojoki, 2016). This intention presupposes a clear understanding of this distinction which has already been mentioned above. In our view, *individual professionalisation* should be understood as the process of teacher education through which professionalism is reached, for example, within courses of higher education. *Collective professionalisation* refers to the institutional presuppositions which allow for the professional shape of the work of teachers (of RE) as well as of teacher education (for RE), for example, in terms of different legal and institutional regulations setting requirements for teachers and their education. Both aspects are obviously closely related but require different research strategies, more empirical in the first case, more historical and analytical in the second case. It is one of the innovative aspects of the different contributions to this volume that many of them attempt to bring together and combine different research strategies which otherwise tend to be used in isolation from each other.

The present volume includes presentations on specific research projects carried out by the authors themselves as well as summary accounts of the pertinent research in their countries. The aim is:

- to consider different models of teacher education for RE including their strengths and weaknesses;
- to present the state of the art concerning research on teacher education for RE in different countries;
- to critically review existing research;
- to gain insights into contextual factors that shape teacher education for RE;
- to bring together insights into this field of research that might be valid beyond particular countries;
- to develop (methodological) criteria and perspectives for future research in this field; and
- to stimulate national and international research on teacher education for RE.

#### **4. Disciplinarity, definitions and differences in RE**

Religious education is a field which is still on its way towards becoming a research-oriented discipline of its own. Like many other similar fields which in some countries are called subject-oriented didactics, religious education used to be mainly based on research from other fields, like theology and religious

studies on the one hand, and general education and psychology on the other. At present, there is a strong international tendency towards strengthening research in religious education itself. It is this tendency which has also motivated the editors of this volume to compile a publication with a clear emphasis on questions of research and methodology concerning RE. At the same time and in certain respects, the present volume builds upon the research project on teacher education and professionalisation in the field of RE mentioned above (Simojoki et al., 2021). Moreover, it can also be considered a continuation of the attempt to review research in the field of RE, especially with earlier publications on *Researching Religious Education: Processes and Outcomes* (Schweitzer & Boschki, 2018), on *Researching Non-Formal Religious Education in Europe* (Schweitzer, Ilg & Schreiner, 2019) and on *International Knowledge Transfer in Religious Education* (Schweitzer & Schreiner, 2021).

In this context, an explanation concerning terminology is in place. Many languages use two different terms for the school subject RE on the one hand and, on the other hand, for the academic discipline related not only to a school subject (RE) but to the whole process of religious upbringing (nurture), socialisation and education. In English, however, there is only the one term RE (Religious Education). In the present volume, religious education (in the lower case) refers to the second meaning (the academic discipline) while RE is used as designation of the school subject.

International cooperation in researching teacher education for RE is considered difficult not only because of different approaches to teacher education in different countries as mentioned above, but also because of the different models of RE used in different countries. In some of the countries, the traditional denominational model is dominant, in others the subject is based on religious studies and consequently on supposedly religiously neutral perspectives. In some countries, for example in England, there is a mix of both models, even if not much attention has been given to the implications of this mix, especially concerning teacher education. Yet since all forms of religion-related teaching are dealing with the same subject matter – religion(s) and, using the concept which has become popular in some countries, worldview(s) – it seems desirable that there should be more international cooperation in this respect. One of the questions pursued in this volume is if and how the different forms of teacher education for RE, or for religion-related teaching, can learn from each other. In this respect the contributions to this volume are a continuation of the work done in the more practice-oriented Erasmus+-project READY (carried out by teacher trainers in cooperation with the Comenius Institute, cf. Schreiner, 2021) which allowed for international exchange between practitioners of school-based teacher trainers from countries with different models of RE, by extending such exchange onto the level of academic research.

One of the respects in which the countries differ concerning teacher education is the organisation of different stages within this training. In some cases,

this organisation only includes the two stages of (higher education-based) initial education and advanced training (also known as continuing professional development), in others there is an in-between stage serving the transition from academic to practical teacher education. Even if the different stages are understood – and related to each other – in different ways in different countries, there is wide agreement that teacher education must be understood to comprise all of the three forms or stages even if they are viewed and organised in different ways, and that research should not be limited to just one of them. This is why the contributions to this book investigate the education of teachers of RE in terms of initial teacher education, of the transition to practical school-based education, and of advanced education, but always with a focus on how this education may contribute to improving the quality of RE.

## 5. The relationship between teacher education and teaching quality

In general education the insight has been established that, for methodological reasons, it is actually very demanding to identify and research the possible links between teacher education and good teaching (for respective discussions cf. Terhart, 2001). The assumed link between teacher education and the actual teaching in school is based on a number of hypotheses which, given the complexity of possibly intervening influences, are difficult to capture empirically. As is to be expected, this challenge also makes itself felt in the case of RE. It is by no means easy to identify and to establish respective connections in a research-based manner. Yet it nevertheless seems indispensable to broaden this discussion into the field of the specific subject area of religion and RE in order to become clearer about the question of how different forms of teacher education for RE will, or will not, contribute to quality RE.

Concerning future research, it would be important to break down RE teacher education and RE teaching in schools into more granular components, and to seek more specific links between them, so as to recognise the complexity of the activities under scrutiny and the relationships between them, instead of seeing both as homogeneous singularities consisting of an undifferentiated bundle of aims, curriculum content, pedagogical strategies, assessment approaches, etc. In this respect, one of the classics in this field may still be of interest, i.e., the work of John Goodlad and associates (Goodlad et al., 1979). Goodlad identified five different forms of curriculum. The *ideological* curriculum is the ideal curriculum determined by researchers and teachers. The *formal* curriculum is that officially approved by relevant authorities e.g. central or local government. The *perceived* curriculum is that which teachers, parents, and others think the curriculum to be. The *operational* curriculum is what actually goes on in the classroom. Finally, the *experiential* curriculum is what the learners actually

experience. There are many models of curricula; just as there are pedagogical approaches. It would be possible to analyse what goes on in teacher education through such analytical lenses and it would be possible to do the same with teaching in schools. These two ‘ecosystems’ interact and overlap, but in order to understand the relationships between them we might need to get up really close to specific elements/dimensions in order to test empirically what is going on. For example, teacher education might influence how a teacher conceives of their role, but fail to bring about the concomitant changes in pedagogical practice. RE teacher education might seek to bring about change in how teachers conceive of their roles, but fail to do so in practice. The intended messages have not been implemented and have not had an impact, so teacher education does not change classroom practice.

## 6. Overview of the book

The choice of contributors to this book was based on general criteria like international scope (researchers from nine European countries), gender, religious background (Protestant, Catholic, Muslim), different models of RE (for example Germany and Finland vs Sweden and England) as well as pertinent research experience and expertise available in certain countries. Moreover, special challenges like the education of teachers of RE for vocational schools which plays an important role in some countries but is often neglected in the religious education discussion, were not to be omitted.

As pointed out in this introduction, research on teacher education for RE must be called a neglected field, at least in most countries and certainly in terms of international cooperation which has been lacking so far. While the key role of teacher education for RE and for improving the quality of RE has been widely recognised, research has been slow to develop in this field. The present volume could become a starting point for the future development of this research by reviewing the current state of research (and by exposing where it is lacking) and by giving new impulses to researchers in different countries. It offers a forum for summarising the state of the art, for a critical review of existing research as well as of current research projects, for developing (methodological) criteria and perspectives for future research in this field, as well as for bringing together insights on teacher education for RE from different countries and contexts that might be valid beyond particular countries.

Important steps in preparing this book were two international symposia held in 2020 and 2021. The German Research Foundation was willing to sponsor these symposia to be conducted at the University of Tübingen – a generous offer which, in the end, was not needed because due to the global Covid-19 pandemic, both events could only take place digitally. Yet this book does not offer a summary of conference proceedings. Short presentations at the two

symposia were only the beginning of a longer process of developing the chapters in this book. The editors were responsible for reviewing the draft versions and are grateful for the authors' willingness to rework their chapters upon the reviews.

*Part one* of the book focuses on historical approaches and includes three chapters.

The chapter by *Rob Freathy* and *Stephen G. Parker* offers historical insights into the education of teachers of Religious Education in England, focusing on the goal of subject specialisation and how this relates to broader and more contentious questions of subject definition. The chapter uses a selection of documentary sources, such as government-sponsored reports on education and Religious Education to identify and analyse numerous issues relating to the supply of, and demand for, subject specialist teachers of RE in England from the late 1920s. The chapter shows that teacher education is just one aspect of an interconnected ecosystem of variables impacting upon (i) the quality of RE, (ii) conceptions of the knowledge, skills and other attributes required by specialist teachers of RE, and (iii) decisions about the most appropriate forms of RE teacher recruitment and development.

In their chapter, *Henrik Simojoki* and *Friedrich Schweitzer* focus on the development of teacher education for RE in Germany in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Drawing on a major research project on the professionalisation of RE teachers, they develop a conceptual framework and describe the research design used in this project. Moreover, they present main results from a number of case studies on RE teacher education in West Germany between 1949 and 1990 which are then discussed in the light of current debates on teacher education for RE. The article concludes by highlighting some advantages and limitations of using the concept of professionalisation as a lens for understanding and improving RE teacher education.

The chapter by *Stephen J. McKinney* focuses upon the origins of models of teacher education in the UK – focusing upon Scotland – which he argues can be traced to the 19th century, and the need to prepare teachers for the increasing number of day schools. It examines the problematic role of the universities in teacher education, especially the outcomes of the mergers of colleges of education with universities in the late 20th century. The chapter, in particular, examines the role of such colleges in preparing teachers of RE, and the implications of the move from a Christian-based teacher education to more secular models. The chapter concludes with a concise survey on the contemporary research on RE and teacher education.

*Part two* of the book contains seven chapters which can be described as country-related overviews.

In her contribution, *Gerdien Bertram-Troost* first introduces the specific conditions of RE in the Netherlands. The internal plurality characteristic of the Dutch school system is also reflected in teacher training. Against this back-

ground, Bertram-Troost presents important results from recent studies on RE teacher education in the Dutch context. In doing so, she emphasises the need to explore the practical knowledge of experienced RE teachers and to use it for the further development of RE teacher education.

*Melanie Binder* and *Martin Rothgangel* provide a detailed overview on existing studies on teacher training for RE in Austria, including a critical discussion of the procedures and methodologies used in these studies. Since interreligious competences have come to play an important role in Austrian teacher education for RE, the article also is of particular interest concerning the acquisition of such competencies in teacher education at different locations (universities and teacher colleges) within the Austrian system of higher education.

*Didier Pollefeyt*'s focus is on a particular model of RE which was developed by the University of Leuven (Belgium) and is now incorporated in the (Catholic) RE curriculum in the Flemish-speaking part of Belgium, the so-called hermeneutical-communicative model. This model combines three major goals: 'discovering the diversity in society, exploring the richness of the Christian tradition, and developing a personal philosophy of life'. At the same time, the model also serves as framework for the education of teachers of RE. Moreover, data are presented concerning how former pupils evaluate the RE they experienced at school. In turn, the research results are used for improving both RE itself as well as the education of teachers of RE.

In his chapter, *Thomas Schlag* explores the concept of neutrality in connection with religion-related teaching and teacher education in the context of Switzerland. Whilst it is widely accepted that Swiss religion-related education is programmatically designed to be non-denominational and committed to the legal principle of neutrality, Schlag argues that the complexity, ambiguities and implications of the concept of neutrality are far from self-evident and sufficiently understood. Challenging the taken-for-granted nature of this concept and calling for further reflection in teacher education and beyond, the chapter explores the political and theoretical background of the concept, before advocating a broader, yet more precise, understanding of active neutrality, in which school education and religion-related teaching are characterised by an explicit acknowledgement of, and sensitivity towards, the values and attitudes underpinning constructive classroom dialogue about religion, and its meaning, in contemporary society.

The chapter by *Athanasiос Stogiannidis* and *Evangelos Pepes* describes the principal aspects of a model for RE teacher training and its contribution to improving the quality of RE. Setting this in the context of the relationship between Church and State in Greece, the authors examine how models of teacher training in RE have been applied in the two Theological Schools of the Faculty of Theology at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki over the last decade. The focus in their chapter is on an integrated model of RE teacher training which provides both a high level of academic training in relation to theology and, at

the same time, a high level of training in relation to the educational process and pedagogy.

In the only chapter of this book which refers to Islamic RE, *Fahimah Ulfat* considers the needs arising from Islamic RE in Germany and Austria for teacher education. She identifies a special need for critical reflection of the teachers concerning their own religious positions to which she refers as 'self-relativising reflexivity'. This kind of reflexivity should be supported in teacher education for RE, but also in other fields, for example, the sciences. Moreover, Ulfat gives a detailed report on existing studies on teachers of Islamic RE and considers their implications for the future shape of teacher education.

*Alexandra Wörn, Hanne Schnabel-Henke* and *Friedrich Schweitzer* refer to a special case of RE which is taught in German vocation-oriented schools. In this case, RE is offered to pupils who are being trained for a profession as opposed to attending college or university. The training of teachers of RE in this case takes on special forms as well, but it has been widely neglected in the religious education discussion. The authors make a number of suggestions for what kind of research could be helpful in this field and should be pursued in the future.

The five chapters in *Part three* of the book constitute a collection of empirical studies.

In their chapter, *Vivienne Baumfield* and *Karen Walshe* explore the opportunities and barriers to making provision for professional knowledge formation in the context of the initial and continuing education of RE teachers in England. They focus on orientative knowledge as one of the constituent elements of professional knowledge in RE based on the COACTIV model (Freathy et al., 2016), and how this relates to the epistemic beliefs of beginning teachers and how teachers engage with research to inform their practice. In doing so, they make reference to a number of small-scale research projects undertaken with both pre-service and in-service teachers.

For several decades, the question of what professional competences RE teachers should possess is being discussed at national and European level. However, the discussion has been and still is strongly normative. The focus is on the expected competences, while the actual competences of RE teachers have been researched far less. Against this background, the chapter by *Michael Fricke* deserves special attention. Highlighting the FALKO study, which included teachers of RE as well as teachers of six other school subjects, Fricke shows how the professional knowledge of RE teachers can be conceptualised and empirically researched. Among the findings presented, those on the relationship between subject-specific content knowledge and pedagogical knowledge are particularly insightful. Finally, Fricke discusses possibilities to utilise the design of the study for international comparative research.

In her chapter, *Claudia Gärtner* writes about teacher education through the lens of collaborative research on teaching, and specifically with reference to an empirical project, hekuru, that followed a Didactical Design Research approach.

This is characterised as intertwined, iterative, process-focussed, and content-focussed. The study explores adaptive learning with art in RE that is sensitive to heterogeneity. It concludes that such learning cannot be differentiated based solely on basic categories such as weak or strong learners, illustrative-creative, conceptual-abstract, creative or cognitive approaches. Nevertheless, learning with art is considered to be useful overall, even if it requires more individual assistance, and Didactical Design Research shows itself capable of being used by teachers and researchers to combine their theoretical reflections with practical implementations.

The chapter by *Friedrich Schweitzer, Mirjam Rutkowski and Evelyn Schnaufer* describes an ongoing project from Germany on quality and quality development in RE (QUIRU) which started three years ago. The project entails three sub-projects referring (1) to the development of an instrument for determining the actual quality of RE by measuring its outcomes in terms of three indicators (knowledge, understanding, perspective-taking) as well as process-related variables, (2) to teachers' experiences with advanced teacher education for RE (survey in four German states) and (3) to an evaluation of initial teacher education for RE in retrospect. The procedures in these sub-projects are described and their relationship to improving RE is discussed. First results relating to the experiences of teachers of RE concerning advanced teacher education are reported.

In their chapter *Kaisa Viinikka, Martin Ubani, Arto Kallioniemi and Tuuli Lipiäinen* discuss the foundations of RE subject teacher education in Finland and summarise the main existing empirical research into the subject. After this, they describe the research-based development project '21st century skills, multiple literacies and developing RE teacher Education' which was conducted at the University of Eastern Finland and the University of Helsinki. They also focus on the main new empirical results and other outcomes from the project concerning RE teacher development. In practical terms, the chapter concludes by presenting recommendations for 21st century RE teacher education.

In their *Conclusions*, the editors of this volume try to summarise some of the results achieved in this book concerning the questions formulated in this introduction. Moreover, they set forth a number of perspectives for future research concerning teacher education for RE.

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## **Historical approaches**



# Insights from the history of the education of teachers of Religious Education in England

## Subject specialists and specialisation

Rob Freathy, Stephen G. Parker

### **Abstract**

*In this chapter, we offer insights into the history of the education of teachers of Religious Education (RE) in England, focusing particularly on the alluring, but persistently illusory, goal of subject specialisation. This is discussed in relation to the broader and more contentious question of subject definition, so as to illustrate the inextricable link between the two, and the extent to which clarity over subject specialisation is dependent on clarity over subject definition. The chapter uses various national, and sometimes government-sponsored, reports on education generally and RE specifically to identify and analyse numerous issues relating to the supply of, and demand for, subject specialist teachers of RE in England from the late 1920s until the present day. This includes understanding how changes and continuities in the formulation and application of the concept of subject specialisation may have contributed to inadequacies in the supply of, and support for, quality RE teachers and RE teacher education. Moreover, the chapter shows that teacher education provision is just one aspect of a complex interconnected ecosystem of contextual variables impacting upon (i) the quality of RE, (ii) conceptions of the knowledge, skills and other attributes that specialist teachers of RE should attain and exhibit, and (iii) decisions about the most appropriate forms of RE teacher recruitment and development.*

**Keywords:** religious education, historical research, subject specialist, subject specialisation, England

### **1. Introduction**

Historical inquiry can make a significant contribution to educational studies, adding depth and range to our understanding of education, including Religious Education (RE), and illuminating important longer-term, broader and philosophical issues. Historical studies grounded in the appropriate historiographical literature and utilising a wide range of original primary sources may make fruitful contributions to contemporary educational debates (Freathy & Parker, 2010). As an example, over recent years, we have written about the historical and institutional process of the professionalisation of teachers of

RE in England (Freathy & Parker, 2021; Freathy, Parker, Schweitzer & Simojoki, 2016a; Freathy, Parker, Schweitzer & Simojoki, 2016b; Parker, Freathy & Doney, 2016; Freathy, Parker, Schweitzer & Simojoki, 2016c; Freathy, Parker, Schweitzer & Simojoki, 2014). The professionalisation of teachers of RE is an important historical issue with significant contemporary relevance. Prior to our investigations, it had been a much-neglected topic in research about English RE, even though there have been long-standing concerns about (i) the shortage of specialist teachers of RE, and (ii) the insufficiency of initial and in-service RE teacher education, in the context of continual crises about the subject's poor status, position and funding (Copley, 2008). Consequently, we have been especially interested in identifying factors that have helped and/or hindered the professionalisation of such teachers.

There have been many recent calls in England for significant investment in developing high quality, well-qualified specialist teachers of RE, and addressing the lack of adequate initial and continuing professional development, as well as advice and guidance, for RE teachers (e.g. NATRE, 2017; Clarke & Woodhead, 2015). Two such calls include the final report of the Religious Education Council's Commission on Religious Education (CoRE), *Religion and worldviews: the way forward* (2018), and the All Party Parliamentary Group inquiry, *The Truth Unmasked – The supply of and support for Religious Education teachers* (APPG, 2013). Both drew attention to (i) the amount of RE being taught in primary schools by someone other than the class teacher, and by teachers who lack confidence, expertise and experience; and (ii) the high proportion of RE lessons in secondary schools taught by non-specialists with no qualification or appropriate expertise in the subject. CoRE (2018) highlighted the decreasing curriculum time allocation for RE as pupils progress through secondary school (albeit noting greater quantity of provision in publicly-funded schools *with* a religious affiliation than in those *without*), and how the recent shift to more school-led models of teacher training meant that patchy provision of RE in schools is mirrored by patchy availability of initial and continuing professional development opportunities. Recommendations of the report included: minimum amounts of school curriculum time for RE; bursaries for RE teacher trainees; and funding for initial and continuing professional development courses and resources in RE. The APPG (2013) report contained related suggestions with implications for the work of Local Education Authorities, providers of initial and continuing professional development, the schools inspectorate (Office for Standards in Education – OFSTED), and the government's Department for Education and associated quangos with responsibility for school workforce supply.

One of the lessons to be learned from these reports is that there is a reciprocity between the quantity and quality of RE being taught in schools and the quantity and quality of RE teachers required to teach it. A downward spiral can be created: diminishing RE provision in schools means less need for specialist RE teachers. Where there is no RE being taught, there is no requirement for

RE teachers. On one level it is a simple matter of supply and demand. However, the quantity and quality of RE teaching in schools and RE teacher education, as well as the quantity and quality of RE school pupils, (prospective) RE teacher trainees, and RE teachers, are all intertwined and have been persistently so. The benefits of large-scale and high-quality RE teacher education provision, for example, can only be realised if there is a sufficient supply of appropriately-qualified prospective RE teacher trainees to take advantage of it. The supply of prospective RE teacher trainees is in turn impacted by the opportunities they have had to study RE in schools, their willingness and ability as pupils to avail themselves of that provision, and by the characteristics and qualities of those who taught them. This, of course, leads us back to consideration of the amount and quality of RE teaching in schools, and the opportunities available to those who teach it to undertake relevant and adequate initial and continuing professional development. For these reasons, concerns about the future supply of appropriately qualified teachers of RE may be exacerbated by the recent Higher Education Policy Institute report, *The Humanities in Modern Britain: Challenges and Opportunities* (Roberts, 2021), which noted that the percentage change in Religious Studies A-Level examination entries from 2016 to 2020 (adjusted for the change in the 18-year old population) was -27 per cent, with only Welsh Second Language and Other Modern Foreign Languages faring worse amongst Humanities subjects. If fewer pupils undertake school public examinations in RE, Religious Studies or similar subjects, then the quantity of students entering higher education to study Theology, Religious Studies or cognate disciplines may decline, and the supply line of potential RE subject specialists may diminish. These inter-dependencies illustrate that interventions to improve the quality of RE teaching should not be restricted to teacher education alone, but should also tackle the quantity and quality of RE provision in schools, student recruitment to relevant disciplinary studies in higher education, as well as broader issues, including, but not limited to: school inspection regimes; curriculum expectations in official policy and legislative frameworks; and teacher recruitment policies of the government, Local Education Authorities and individual schools.

If teacher education is one aspect of a complex interconnected ecosystem of contextual variables impacting upon the quality of RE, then attempts to improve the quality of RE teaching by researching and understanding the historical and institutional process of the professionalisation of teachers of RE should seek to look both *at* and *beyond* RE teacher education. In this regard, using a theoretical and methodological framework co-created with Friedrich Schweitzer and Henrik Simojoki (Freathy et al., 2014), our previous historical studies have focused on: (i) the establishment of professional and subject associations *of*, and/or *for*, teachers of RE in England (e.g. Institute for Christian Education at Home and Abroad, Christian Education Movement, and the Religious Education Council of England and Wales, see Parker et al., 2016);