

Impact case study (REF3)

Institution: University of Exeter		
Unit of Assessment: UoA 23 Education		
Title of case study: Religious Education in Schools: Changing Conceptions of Curriculum Design, and Improving Policies and Practices		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: January 2010 - ongoing		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Professor Rob Freathy	Professor of Education	2003 - ongoing
Period when the claimed impact occurred: January 2014 - ongoing		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		
<p>1. Summary of Impact</p> <p>Improving curriculum design in schools is a priority for policy makers and practitioners. This is evident in current reform of national curricula, provision for teacher education, and frameworks for inspection. The emphasis on clarity of intention, depth and breadth of knowledge, and co-construction with practitioners is particularly challenging in the context of Religious Education (RE) in schools. RE is criticised for low standards arising from its confusing aims and fragmented curriculum (Ofsted 2013). A contributing factor is that teachers lack confidence in negotiating the diversity of disciplinary and methodological lenses through which religion(s) and worldview(s) can be explored. Addressing these concerns, Professor Freathy's research has:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Helped change conceptions of curriculum design and improve practice in school RE; 2. Influenced changes in practice in national and international teacher education; and 3. Influenced RE national policy debates and national curriculum design. 		
<p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p>The key insights underpinning the impact of Professor Freathy's research emerged from multi-disciplinary collaborations with theologians, anthropologists, psychologists and educationalists in an interconnected series of four externally-funded research projects.</p> <p>2.1 RE-flect: A programme to foster metacognition in the RE classroom (Co-I) (Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, £60,126, September 2010 – November 2011). This project drew upon expertise in theories of learning developed in cognitive psychology (Larkin) combined with philosophical perspectives on the aims of RE (Freathy, Doney and Walshe) and classroom practitioner experiences (Giles Freathy leading six teacher participants). The research demonstrated the potential of a metacognitive approach to address religious diversity, in the classroom and beyond, and to support the professional development of teachers by adopting an inquiry stance in teaching and learning [3.1].</p> <p>2.2 The Art of Narrative Theology in Religious Education: Phases 1-4 (PI) (Bible Society (England and Wales) / Westhill Endowment Trust, £49,801, March 2010 – June 2016). Sustained collaboration with researchers in theology (Reed, Davis and John) informed a project in four phases, including production of a school textbook, <i>The Art of Bible Reading</i> (2014), and culminating in resources for teachers on <i>Who is Jesus?</i> (2019), which examined the figure of Jesus through a variety of different cultural, religious and disciplinary lenses (e.g. artistic, visually-impaired, Muslim, feminist and cross-cultural) [3.2].</p> <p>2.3 RE-searchers: A critical dialogic approach to Religious Education in primary schools (PI) (Culham St Gabriel's Trust, £9,903, January 2014 – December 2014). This project addressed the problem of competing pedagogies in RE by advancing an inquiry-led approach. The research demonstrated how teaching and learning in RE could be advanced by students exploring different interpretations, disciplines, methodologies and methods for studying religion(s) and worldview(s). The 'RE-searchers' are cartoons of fictional scholars advocating</p>		

contrasting research methods (e.g. observing and recording, questioning and arguing, interviewing and empathizing, and participating and experiencing). They therefore exemplify diverse strengths and weaknesses about which pupils can learn when pursuing different understandings of religion(s) and worldview(s). The RE-searchers approach supports teachers as curriculum makers by encouraging and enabling the evaluation of a plurality of perspectives through practical, participative and inter-active methods. This enables students to learn about religion(s) and worldview(s), whilst also learning *how* to learn about them [3.3, 3.4].

2.4 Identifying Principles and Big Ideas for Religious Education (PI) (St Luke's College Foundation, £7,077, September 2016 – July 2017). Working with a former HMI [Her Majesty's Inspector] (Wintersgill), Freathy demonstrated how the 'Big Ideas' approach – already influential in Science Education (Harlen 2010, 2015) – could be applied to policy and practice in RE. Specifically, he exemplified how RE subject matter could be chosen and ordered in accordance with overarching theories and generalisations about religious and non-religious worldviews. This was extended to include 'Big Ideas *about* the study of religion(s) and worldview(s)', encouraging pupils to think about (i) contested definitions and contexts; (ii) reflexivity, reflectivity and positionality; (iii) interpretations, methodologies and methods; and (iv) relevance and transferability. The research makes a key contribution to the debate in RE on subject-knowledge and curriculum content; highlighting the relationship between knowledge, knowing and knower, and taking account of the importance of context, identity, empathy and critique [3.5, 3.6].

The impact of Freathy's research is underpinned by innovative curriculum development principles and processes that support teachers in exercising professional judgement and articulating clear intentions when selecting and sequencing knowledge-rich content and practising inquiry-led pedagogy. The principles and processes are based on an original theoretical framework, coalescing critical, dialogic and inquiry-based pedagogical assumptions, in support of hermeneutical, reflexive and metacognitive classroom learning. The overarching intention is to induct pupils into the communities of inquiry dedicated to the academic study of religion(s) and worldview(s) (e.g. Theology, Religious Studies and cognate disciplines).

3. References to the research

- 3.1** Larkin, S., Freathy, R., Doney, J., and Freathy, G. (2019). *Metacognition, Worldviews and Religious Education a Practical Guide for Teachers*. Oxford: Routledge. DOI <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429274350>
- 3.2** Freathy, R. and Davis, A. (2018). Theology in Multi-Faith Religious Education: A Taboo to be Broken? *Research Papers in Education*. 34(6): 749-768. DOI [10.1080/02671522.2018.1550802](https://doi.org/10.1080/02671522.2018.1550802)
- 3.3** Freathy, G., Freathy, R., Doney, J., Walshe, K., and Teece, G. (2015). *The RE-searchers: A New Approach to Religious Education in Primary Schools*. University of Exeter. DOI <http://hdl.handle.net/10871/18932>
- 3.4** Freathy, R., Doney, J., Freathy, G., Walshe, K., and Teece, G. (2017). Pedagogical Bricoleurs and Bricolage Researchers in Religious Education. *British Journal of Educational Studies*. 65(4): 425-443. DOI [10.1080/00071005.2017.1343454](https://doi.org/10.1080/00071005.2017.1343454)
- 3.5** Freathy, R., and John, H. (2018). Religious Education, Big Ideas and the Study of Religion(s) and Worldview(s). *British Journal of Religious Education*. 41(1): 27-40. DOI [10.1080/01416200.2018.1500351](https://doi.org/10.1080/01416200.2018.1500351)
- 3.6** Freathy, R., and John, H. C. (2019). Worldviews and Big Ideas: a Way Forward for Religious Education? *Nordidactica*. 2019(4): 1-27. <https://journals.lub.lu.se/nordidactica/article/view/21891/19703>

4. Details of the impact

Professor Freathy's research provides solutions to recurrent problems in determining the intention, implementation and impact of the curriculum for RE as highlighted in many recent academic, professional and governmental publications. Freathy has provided criteria for selecting and sequencing curriculum content, and a multi-disciplinary, multi-methodological pedagogy which has resulted in impact both nationally and internationally.

4.1 Changing conceptions of curriculum design, and improving practice in schools

An initial trial and subsequent implementation of the RE-searchers approach in the school curriculum at Sir Robert Geoffrey's School, Cornwall, in 2013, led to the award of the 2014 TES Humanities Award, with judges noting that *"engagement was increased, children were more understanding of other viewpoints and most importantly they became more adept at analyzing information from multiple stances"*, and as a result *"the children make correspondingly excellent progress across classes and age groups because of the innovative approach to RE"* (5.1). A subsequent Statutory Inspection of Anglican and Methodist Schools took place in 2017, concluding that: *"an exciting and innovative approach to the teaching of Religious Education is well established across the school"* (5.1). Eleven primary and secondary schools in England have now implemented, or confirmed intention to implement, the RE-searchers approach in full, operationalizing all associated pedagogical principles and procedures.

Alongside 'Understanding Christianity' (Christian Education Movement) and 'Primary 1000' (National Association of Teachers of Religious Education), the RE-searchers is one of three *"individual projects"*, that is *"making a considerable impact at school level"* (5.2). Since 2016, resources which support teachers in implementing the RE-searchers approach have been hosted on the RE: Online website. This is sponsored by the influential provider of RE professional development, the Culham St Gabriel's Trust. The present CEO of the Trust endorses Freathy's research, particularly the Big Ideas framework, as the means by which pupil *"misconceptions"* in RE can be tackled. *"It is clear that the contributions to thinking within the religious education field are significant. Recent moves towards a paradigm shift from 'world religions' to 'religion and worldviews', and in particular to a better understanding amongst the RE community of different 'ways of knowing' and interest in epistemic insight can be partly attributed to Freathy's work"* (5.3). By way of illustration, the *Challenging Knowledge in RE* series of 12 curriculum resources being produced by REToday Services, for distribution to over 3,000 NATRE members across primary and secondary schools, adopts a *"pedagogical approach ... strongly influenced by Professor Freathy's work ... in particular in being more deliberate and explicit about identifying and applying different methods of study"* (5.4).

Professor Freathy's pedagogical principles and processes are included in initial and continuing professional development courses across England, influencing the practice of novice and experienced teachers. In 2020, as a rapid response to the COVID-19 pandemic, an open-access handbook, *Working with Big Ideas About the Study of Religion(s) and Worldview(s)*, produced by Professor Freathy and colleagues for teachers, teacher educators and trainee teachers, was used as part of the online learning strategies by the University of Worcester and Edge Hill University (both in the top ten largest providers of teacher education). The RE lead for Birmingham City University, the third largest teacher education provider, states: *"the research of Professor Rob Freathy has had a significant impact on the students that I have taught to understand the diversity of disciplinary and methodological lenses through which RE can be taught. Their feedback shows a growth in their confidence"* (5.5).

4.2 Practice change in international teacher education

Professor Freathy's approach has also been implemented internationally, particularly in Norway and Finland. The University of Helsinki has adopted the RE-searchers approach and adapted its resources to be used within an online Theology and Religious Studies course. From Autumn 2020, the course became mandatory for all 177 students undertaking the Theology and Religious Studies degree. The course leader explains her rationale for choosing to base her teaching on the RE-searchers approach as follows: *"the online course is designed to teach undergraduates about how knowledge is acquired within Theology and RS. ... [T]he RE-searchers approach helps them to think about different research methods in the study of religion(s) by giving them the opportunity of identifying with the RE-searchers characters and viewing the religious content they study through their individual disciplinary lenses"* (5.6).

The Norwegian University of Science and Technology established a research and development project with Charlotten Lund Lower Secondary School, Trondheim, during which teachers

adapted RE-searchers to the Norwegian context and applied the approach both in Religion and Social Studies, “as a potential tool for answering [the] demand for more interdisciplinary work in schools”. This work is currently being extended to provide CPD to other schools (e.g. Lunde Lower Secondary School in Stavanger) and to promote ‘deep learning’ in accordance with the new Norwegian national curriculum (5.7).

Oslo Metropolitan University (OMU) has the highest number of trainee-teachers in Norway and a large RE department. Since 2019, the RE-searchers approach has been used within teacher education at OMU and was even incorporated into final-year oral examinations. According to an Associate Professor, in the Faculty of Education and International Studies, OMU, an important benefit of using the RE-searchers model is to “help student teachers to understand the multifaceted nature of the phenomenon of religion by suggesting ways of exploring both religion as a phenomenon and specific religions in a very intuitive, practice-orientated manner” (5.6). This evaluation has shown that top-performing students are able to clearly evidence their use of the RE-searchers both in practice (to plan activities) and behind the scenes as ways of thinking about religion(s).

4.3 Influencing RE national policy debates and national curriculum design

The emphasis on enabling teachers as curriculum designers through evidence-informed principles and processes in Freathy’s research is congruent with the aspirations for RE reform. The RE Council of England and Wales (REC) funded a Commission on RE (CoRE) to gather evidence to which Freathy contributed. The National Entitlement, promoted by the CoRE, argued that pupils should be taught “the different ways in which religion and worldviews can be understood, interpreted and studied, including through a wide range of academic disciplines”, (5.8) including anthropology, hermeneutics and theology (pp.13, also 36-37). The CoRE’s Interim Report (2017) acknowledged the extent to which the National Entitlement was indebted to the Big Ideas project (p.9), and described the RE-searchers project as “a successful and influential example of school-university collaboration exploring the use of different disciplines and methodologies in RE” (p.88). In a recent THEOS report, the Chair of the REC, cited examples of what “an approach based on a worldview paradigm” might look like from the perspective of different disciplines. Three of the four examples were drawn from Freathy’s projects. Elsewhere, the report stated that the RE-searchers approach “has pioneered resources ... that enable pupils to experience some of the different disciplinary approaches that can be used in studying worldviews” (5.9).

Between 2017 and 2018, because of their research to address long-standing practical issues concerning curriculum content selection, curriculum coherence and subject relevance in RE, Freathy and former HMI Barbara Wintersgill were approached about the Humanities Area of Learning and Experience (AoLE) section of the new Welsh National Curriculum (5.10). Their key contribution to this curriculum development was to advise on how the ‘Big Ideas Framework’ could be implemented within the Humanities AoLE generally and in relation to RE specifically, and how Humanities/RE could support the curriculum’s four major purposes: to enable pupils to become (i) ambitious, capable learners; (ii) enterprising, creative contributors; (iii) ethical, informed citizens of Wales and the world; and (iv) healthy, confident individuals and members of society. An important piece of advice given in this instance was to strengthen the focus on inquisitive learning, problem-solving and metacognitive skills; furthering methodological and disciplinary awareness in both pupils and teachers, specifically in RE (5.10).

The characteristics of Big Ideas, as described in the final report of Freathy and Wintersgill’s project (*Big Ideas for Religious Education*, 2017), were used by the AoLE writing groups to develop each Statement of What Matters. The work of the AoLE groups also stressed inquiry, and critical appraisal of methods and contexts to gain deeper understanding of the concepts, thereby further demonstrating receptivity to, and close congruence with, the principles and processes advocated by Freathy and Wintersgill through their AoLE consultancy (5.11).

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

5.1 TES School Awards, Sir Robert Geffrey's school using the RE-Searchers approach wins Humanities Award 2014, and The Statutory Inspection of Anglican and Methodist Schools (SIAMS) Report for Sir Robert Geffery's Church of England Primary Academy - September 2017.

5.2 Whitworth, L. (2020). Do I know enough to teach RE? Responding to the Commission on Religious Education's recommendation for primary initial teacher education. *Journal of Religious Education*. 68:345–357. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40839-020-00115-5>

5.3 Letter of Testimony from CEO of Culham St Gabriel's Trust – December 2020

5.4 Letter of Testimony from National RE Advisor, RE Today Services – December 2020

5.5 Letter of Testimony from a Senior Lecturer in Religious Education and Professional Studies, Birmingham City University – December 2020

5.6 Testimonial interviews with (i) University Researcher, University of Helsinki, Faculty of Theology, and (ii) Associate Professor Faculty of Education and International Studies, OMU Norway.

5.7 Letter of Testimony from the Professor of Religion and Worldviews Didactics, Department of Teacher Education, Faculty of Social and Educational Sciences, NTNU – December 2020

5.8 CoRE. (2017). *Commission on Religious Education Interim Report*. London: REC

5.9 Cooling, T. (2020). *Worldviews in Religious Education*. London: THEOS p.46 - <https://web.archive.org/web/20201208152109/https://www.theosthinktank.co.uk/cmsfiles/Worldview-in-Religious-Education---FINAL-PDF-merged.pdf>

5.10 Email from Welsh Government to Rob Freathy followed by 5.13 Curriculum update – developments to May 2018

5.11 Statements of What Matters, Welsh Government
<https://web.archive.org/web/20201208151737/https://hwb.gov.wales/curriculum-for-wales/humanities/statements-of-what-matters/>