

Curriculum design for religious education in a post-commission world Mary Myatt 2020

[The Commission on RE \(CORE\)'s report](#) made the case for religious education to have a national entitlement, along the same lines as the national curriculum subjects. The reason for religious education being part of the basic curriculum, and having its content determined locally via locally agreed syllabuses, is a complex one rooted in history. But suffice it to say that the variability and confusion (in aims, content and quality) through having so many different locally agreed syllabuses across the country, has led to a confluence of energy to have a national entitlement, while still maintaining a role for the local input. This proposal has been contested and often for good reasons: what might be lost from a move from local to national determination? Would a national entitlement reflect the localities faith and world views; would opportunities be lost for faith groups and educators to work together? There is much to be considered here, but my own view is that the subsidiarity of RE provision has not led, in every part of the country, to the provision high quality structures, resources, training and high-quality materials for classroom use.

As things stand, the legal and policy recommendations in the CORE report are not likely to be implemented soon, but they remain in the forefront of national discussions about the future of our subject. And so, in the absence of a national entitlement, the work I am doing with schools is guided by the following principles:

- RE planning for religions and world views is underpinned by concepts
- RE planning is powered through stories
- RE planning is supported by high quality materials including artefacts

These principles might change in the future, but these are where I am staking my current thinking until I find a more refined way of going about the business of curriculum planning. I give myself this permission, because I don't want to fall into the trap of believing that curricular thinking is a one-off process; I want to be open to critique and criticism and open to better ways in the future. For the time being, this work is provisional.

Why concepts?

Concepts and big ideas are like 'holding baskets' – they are the cradle for a lot of information; they help to make sense of disparate knowledge and potentially unconnected facts. Through anchoring the subject's planning in concepts, we provide a route through for pupils to get to grips with the foundations of key beliefs and practices in religions and world views. The insight into the foundational importance of concepts is supported by cognitive science, for example Willingham's conclusion: 'Students can't learn everything, so what should they know? Cognitive science leads to the rather obvious conclusion that students must learn the concepts that come up again and again – the unifying ideas of each discipline.' [1]

What follows from this is that if I am planning a unit in Christianity about the birth of Jesus, this will be underpinned by the concept of incarnation. Incarnation is a fundamental element of Christian theology, namely that the divine became human in the form of a baby.

Very young children can grasp this, if it is taught explicitly. It then means that the gospel accounts of the birth of Jesus, the nativity plays and the festivities that take place in primary schools, are underpinned by the idea that this is important for Christians because they believe that god became human through the birth of baby Jesus. Unless that conceptual understanding is in place, it is just a random list of things that children experience without making the deeper connections.

Similarly, if I am planning to teach about the langar in Sikhism, this needs to be understood in terms of the concept of sewa. Without the building of the concept, then it is just understood as a free meal provided at a gurdwara.

Why stories?

Stories are the oldest means of conveying important ideas. Again, their use is supported by cognitive science: 'Our brains privilege story' [2]: Willingham and Pinker's observation reminds us that 'Cognitive psychology has shown that the mind best understands facts when they are woven into a conceptual fabric, such as a narrative, mental map, or intuitive theory. Disconnected facts in the mind are like unlinked pages on the Web: They might as well not exist.' [3] Religious education as a subject domain is rich in stories, including high quality non-fiction commentary, and it is on these that I believe we should draw. There are further rich pickings from the use of story as a driver for the curriculum: they contain the concepts and big ideas; they are very efficient at providing the background knowledge or 'hinterland' that we know is essential for pupils remembering things in the long term; they contain sophisticated vocabulary, often tier two and tier three not normally encountered in everyday discourse; and finally, they are inclusive. Everyone can access a great story. It follows from this that a unit I am preparing on the first account of creation in Genesis 1 will be driven by the text, and indeed different versions of the text. It also follows from this that if I am planning to teach about Sadaqat in a unit on Islam I will draw on a story such as 'The Apple Tree' by Miriam Al-Kalby [4].

Why high quality sources materials?

Pupils' experience and their understanding will be degraded if we give them a diminished diet of low quality materials. Many of the worksheets given to pupils do not place sufficient demands on them either cognitively or affectively. How does the colouring-in of a mosque add to their learning? What do pupils learn from labelling the inside of a synagogue? We have an obligation to draw our material from the original artefacts and original sources. And with materials from museums, art galleries and faith communities, we have a cornucopia of material from which to garner high quality ingredients.

I believe that high quality resources, supporting the teaching of stories held together by rich concepts, are absolutely key to implementing the national entitlement