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# RE teachers and the shifting landscape of values education in England

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## ABSTRACT

The promotion of fundamental British values (FBV) and character education in schools can be seen as part of a new policy landscape of values education in England, with significant implications for Religious Education (RE). Research on these policies has tended to emphasise their securitising and constraining effects. This paper shifts attention to teachers' creative responses to this new policy landscape and the generative contradictions within it. Building on findings from a pilot study, the research used focus groups and creative writing workshops to explore RE teachers' responses to the new policy landscape (including their perceptions of whole-school approaches to values education) and their imagined futures within it. The findings illustrate how teachers drew on a range of RE pedagogies in their responses to the new policies and illuminate teachers' feelings about their faith-based interpretation at whole-school level. One key implication is the potential of RE for enacting the new policy agenda in meaningful ways. The research also offers an original contribution to conversations about the faith-based interpretation of FBV and character education at whole-school level, suggesting that the important question in relation to such interpretations may be not whether but how schools are drawing on religion.

## KEYWORDS

FBV; character education; values; religion

## Introduction

### *The new values education landscape in England*

Interest in 'values', and their application in public life, has increased in recent years, with some suggesting that values have become the 'new religion' (Woodhead 2021). While schools have long been concerned with teaching values, England has arguably entered a new phase of values education policy over the past ten years, with the introduction and re-emergence of policies that Vincent (2018, 227) has described as 'two forms' of the 'current wave of values teaching' in schools, i.e. 'fundamental British values' (FBV) and character education. FBV can be seen as the regulatory 'strong arm' of the current policy landscape, appearing first in the government's Teachers' Standards document, as values that teachers, 'must not undermine' (Department for Education 2011). However, FBV originate in the Prevent Strategy, part of the government's counter-terrorism agenda (Home Office 2011), where they are defined as, 'democracy, the rule of law and mutual respect and tolerance for those with different faiths and beliefs (Department for Education 2011). Since 2014, all schools in England have been expected to 'actively promote' FBV (Department for Education 2014)

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and are rated on this in national inspections. Character education, which might be seen as the ‘carrot’ to FBV’s ‘stick’, consists in promoting specific virtues, values, and traits such as resilience, determination, and neighbourliness. The government has been promoting character education in schools since 2015 via voluntary initiatives and reward schemes and, in 2019, published a non-statutory Character Education Framework (Department for Education 2019), outlining six benchmarks for character education and describing how schools can promote character. While distinct, each of these policies can be seen as part of a broader agenda aimed at instilling predetermined sets of values through whole-school initiatives. These policies impact in turn on the work of Religious Education (RE) specialists.

This paper reports on research which explored the responses of RE teachers to this new policy landscape and builds on findings from a pilot study with teachers working in RE, citizenship and Personal, Social, and Health Education (PSHE). The pilot study investigated how teachers with a pedagogic background in those subjects most often associated with values education in secondary schools were responding to government advice on promoting FBV. Substantive findings from the pilot study (elaborated below) were used as a starting point for the research reported in this paper, which engaged with a larger sample of teachers from across England and addressed not only FBV but the broader landscape of values education policy.

### *Religion and the new values education landscape*

Given the origins of FBV within a national (and global) counter-terrorism agenda, and its explicit attempt to define what is fundamentally ‘British’, it is perhaps unsurprising that much critical research on this policy has addressed its racialising and securitising effects (see, e.g. Lander 2016), or its place within civic national education (see, e.g. Healy 2019). However, as Panjwani (2016, 331) has observed, ‘with hindsight, we may say that the focus on the adjective “British” stole the limelight leaving very little space to discuss more important issues around the utility and adequacy of the proposed values themselves’. Similarly, much critical research on character education has centred on its role within a culture of surveillance and governance, often targeted at disadvantaged groups (see, e.g. Spohrer and Bailey, 2020). Concerns have also been raised about character education emphasising moral over political values, with some arguing that it represents a therapeutic rather than educational approach to teaching (Suissa 2015).

Vincent (2018) has expressed concerns about the erosion of political and civic education within current values education policies through the lens of religion. Viewed from a post secular perspective, Vincent (2018) argues, both FBV and character evidence the growing influence of religion in public policy. FBV, Vincent (2018) notes, was not only set up in opposition to the perceived threat of conservative Islam (widely discussed in the literature); the supposedly ‘secular’ values defined in the policy are in fact informed by a Christian history and outlook – as evidenced, for example, in David Cameron’s reference to the King James Bible in his speech launching the policy as the then Prime Minister. Similarly, Vincent (2018) notes the broader context for the re-emergence of character education within an international trend of promoting virtue education. Bull and Allen (2018) have outlined the financial and political influence of conservative Christian organisations on this trend.

Beyond the influence of religion on the formation of these policies, Vincent also offers evidence that schools (including those with a specific religious character and those without) are enacting FBV and character education in faith-based ways. Referring to one school in her study, Vincent (2018, 235) describes a whole-school approach to promoting values through displays, class activities and behaviour policies as the promotion of a ‘de-theologised’ Christianity:

The iconography, and the fluent and ritualised nature of the children’s responses, the way in which the values permeate school life ... all work to suggest the atmosphere of a traditional faith community – minus the theology (Vincent 2018, 235).

Drawing on earlier research reporting the similarities between values education in faith and non-faith school settings, Vincent (2018) argues this is evidence of the ways in which Christianity permeates 'secular' school culture, often in unacknowledged ways. Such faith-based enactment of recent values education policies has also been reported in McGhee and Zhang's (2017) analysis of school statements on the promotion of FBV. In the case of one Catholic faith school in their study, this involved the 'co-option of the duty to promote British values not only into the school's ethos, but also within Catholic values as a whole', following advice from the Catholic Education Service (McGhee and Zhang 2017, 945).

The findings of both Vincent (2018) and McGhee and Zhang (2017) raise an interesting question about how we might interpret the faith-based interpretation of FBV and character education. Both studies point to a similar phenomenon, but they interpret it differently. While for Vincent (2018), this represents a threat to political and civic education, for McGhee and Zhang (2017), it is an example of schools facilitating contextualised forms of citizenship suitable for a multi-faith and multi-cultural society, in ways that allow students to reconcile the values of their home and community lives with the public life of society. Both also take civic values and citizenship education as a frame of reference against which to assess the enactment of values education policies in schools. Others have approached these policies with RE as a frame of reference, highlighting the ambiguity inherent in RE teachers' responses to FBV. Farrell (2016), for example, in his research with student teachers of RE, reported that participants resented the encroachment of FBV on their practice but also argued that critical pluralist approaches in RE may allow for more serious engagement with the values than other areas of the curriculum. Similarly, the pilot study that informed this research demonstrated how teachers of RE, citizenship education and PSHE drew on their own pedagogic histories to respond creatively to the policy (McDonnell 2021). These findings resonate with Vincent's (2019) suggestion that RE is one key area of the curriculum where the enactment of FBV may go beyond more superficial approaches to achieve real critical engagement.

From various perspectives then, research has highlighted the significant, complex, and contested role of religion and RE in the interpretation of current values education policies in schools. A key theme within this research is the trend for schools (both faith and non-faith) to interpret these policies in faith-based ways, often privileging Christianity. Another theme relates to the specific challenges that the new policies represent for the RE community (including the encroachment of these on RE teachers' work) but also the potential inherent in RE for enabling critical and creative responses to the current policy agenda.

### *Aims, objectives and research questions*

The research reported in this paper built on findings from a pilot study carried out in 2018, exploring responses to FBV amongst a small sample of teachers working in RE, Citizenship and PSHE. The pilot study highlighted (1) teachers' willingness to work with FBV because of a deeper commitment to values education per se, (2) the adoption of subject-specific strategies and commitments – including multicultural RE and global citizenship education in the teachers' interpretations of FBV and (3) a commitment to discursive, 'values clarification' pedagogy, centred on the facilitation of discussion and debate as a key feature of RE. These three substantive findings formed the basis for the first part of discussion in the focus groups conducted in this research. The aims of this research were to further explore the dynamics involved in RE teachers' responses to FBV, to extend that understanding beyond a one geographic location (an urban centre in the north of England) to the national context of England (where these policies apply) and to encompass both FBV and character education to explore teachers' response to the new values education agenda more broadly. The research had the following objectives:

- (1) To establish the extent to which the findings of the pilot study resonated with a wider cross-section of RE teachers from across England.
- (2) To understand RE teachers' responses to the broader policy landscape of values education in schools in England (including FBV and character education).

The research questions were as follows:

- (1) To what extent did the findings of the pilot study resonate with participants?
- (2) How did participants interpret the current values education policy landscape?
- (3) How did participants see their own role within this policy landscape in the context of both their school settings and curriculum developments in RE?

## Method

### *Methodological perspective*

The research was informed by innovative approaches to educational research that draw on a Rancierean critique of social theory – particularly of the Bourdieuan and Foucauldian perspectives so common therein. For Rancière, such perspectives place the social scientist or philosopher in a position of superiority of those whose lives they seek to explain (2012). Underpinning this critique is Rancière's insistence on the 'equality of intelligence' understood as an equality of *kind*. As Rancière puts it, 'all sentences, and consequently all the intelligences that produce them, are of the same nature' (1991, 62). For Rancière, this implies an artistry or poetry in all communication, as, 'human intelligence employs all its art to make itself understood, and to understand what the neighbouring intelligence is saying'. (Rancière 1991, 62). For Rancière, we are all, always, engaged in a literary or poetic endeavour of making metaphors to try to communicate with others, who we must assume are equally capable of understanding us. This concept of the 'equality of intelligence' also underpins Rancière's (e.g. 2006) writing on politics, since he views the bringing into play of generative contradictions between equality and inequality in political communities as the essence of democracy.

The work of Pelletier (2009a, 2009b) offers perhaps the most comprehensive re-framing of educational research in a Rancierean mode. Pelletier (2009a) argues that educational researchers would do well to shift their focus away from the pessimistic, 'mournful' register that is common in critical research, turning instead to the generative contradictions, which, when brought into play can affect political change. As she writes, '[w]hat Rancière's work effects is a recentring of this agenda around the other of power and the other of domination' (2009a, 268). Taking inspiration from the style of Rancière's writing, as well as his poetic view of human communication and the deep connection between politics and aesthetics in his writing (e.g. 2004), Pelletier (2009b) also argues for the possibility of carrying out research in a 'poetic register' including the use of artistic and creative methods and attention to the moments when participants disrupt what is sayable, doable, and possible.

Whether or not Rancière's writing warrants a wholesale reconsideration of the aims and methods of educational research, it is fair to say that recent values education policies in England have been subjected to plenty of analysis in the critical mode, particularly through a Foucauldian lens. Such work has done much to tease out the limitations and exclusionary effects of the current policy agenda. The aim in this research, however, was to turn attention instead to the 'other of power and domination' (Pelletier 2009a) to consider how teachers negotiate practice with (and despite) their reservations and the generative contradictions within policy that allow them to disrupt given policy narratives. This is not to suggest that Foucauldian approaches do not also allow for the treatment of participants as creative agents of resistance in relation to these policies (Farrell 2016) Indeed, Rancière (2016) acknowledges the influence of Foucault on his writing and his critique of Foucauldian discourse is directed most acerbically to those who applied Foucault's work (Rancière

2016, 2012). While Rancière (2016, 169) remains sceptical about the concept of 'parrhesia' as 'telling truth to power', the approach adopted here might be seen as complementary rather than antagonistic to those Foucauldian analyses of education policy that foreground agency, resistance and 'heterotopias' (Liddle 2021).

### **Research design**

The research took place during 2020, when lockdown restrictions associated with the COVID-19 pandemic made in-person research activities impossible. While originally intended to be conducted as a one-day, in-person event, research activity was eventually conducted online over the course of two weeks, involving two small groups of participants taking part in focus groups one week, followed by creative writing workshops the next. In the interim, themes from the focus groups were used to inform the prompts used in the creative writing workshops. Data from both activities were recorded and analysed, as described in more detail below.

### **Ethical considerations**

The project was granted institutional ethical approval and adhered to the ethical guidelines of the British Educational Research Association (British Educational Research Association [BERA] 2018). Participants were fully informed about the project's aims and intended outcomes at the point of selection and gave their written consent to participate. Because of the sensitive nature of the topic, participants were reminded of their right to withdraw at any stage and were made aware of the interpretative rather than evaluative nature of the project: teachers' views on values education policies were not being sought for assessment but for understanding.

### **Selection of participants**

Since one of the objectives of the research was to establish the extent to which the findings from the pilot study resonated with RE teachers across England, the principal selection criterion was current, or recent experience of, teaching RE in secondary schools in England. The status of participants' current workplaces as schools with or without a specific religious character was not treated as an inclusion or exclusion criterion. Participants were recruited using a combination of methods. Firstly, an invitation to participate in the study was put out via the national association of teachers of RE (NATRE). This was followed via a call on social media, which was then shared more widely by prominent RE commentators on relevant platforms. A total of eight teachers took part in the research. All participants were currently (or had recently been) employed in the state sector and all but one worked in schools without a specific religious character.

### **Data collection**

Online focus groups were used to generate data articulating participants' responses to the three substantive findings of the pilot study (outlined above) and their interpretations of values education policy more broadly (including both FBV character education), as experienced in their school settings. The use of focus groups allowed for the generation of rich data that illuminated both shared responses and points of tension or disagreement. As the data were generated from a small sample, these were not intended to be representative of RE teachers, but to illuminate the dynamics involved in teachers' attempts to grapple with and make sense of the policies, including in ways that might challenge or disrupt more mainstream narratives surrounding them, thus focusing on the 'other of domination'. The focus groups were semi-structured; key findings from the pilot study were shared with participants and responses invited, followed by open discussion of developments in values education more broadly (including both FBV and character education), concluding with an

opportunity for participants to discuss any final thoughts relating to values education and RE. The recent recommendation of the Commission on Religious Education (CoRE 2018) on the adoption of a ‘worldviews’ approach was also discussed (findings on this point are addressed in a separate paper). In line with best practice in online focus groups (Abrams and Ted 2017), the eight participants were split across two smaller groups to better facilitate discussion.

Online creative writing workshops were used to allow teachers to imaginatively explore their role within the current policy landscape of values education. The workshops were facilitated by a freelance creative writer and scaffolded to incorporate participant’s past and present experiences in RE, culminating in the writing of imagined futures as values educators. This approach was considered important in addressing the highly sensitive and ‘risky’ topic of values and builds on an established tradition of working with imagined futures in educational research (Facer 2013). The intention here was not to predict or plan but to allow teachers to speculate about the future of values education in England and their role within it. The creative writing workshops were used as one way of treating research participants as intellectual equals, engaged in a creative process of making sense of policy, often through poetic and literary techniques such as the construction of metaphors. Focus groups and creative writing workshops took place in the same groups, to allow for continuity, the building of relationships, the creation of group identity and the pursuit of themes from the focus group in the workshops.

### **Data analysis**

The data generated from the research consisted of transcripts from the focus groups and writing produced in the workshops. The data were analysed in relation to the three research questions, first by coding them according to content on:

- (1) Key resonances with findings from the pilot study
- (2) Interpretations of the values education policy landscape and its relation to RE
- (3) Teachers’ sense of their own role within the enactment of values education policies at the whole-school level

Care was taken to analyse not only participants’ individual responses but also thematic strands within each group – including both collective understanding *and* points of tension (Abrams and Ted 2017). Special attention was paid to participants’ use of language – particularly in the case of the creative writing workshops, in part as a way of treating participants as intellectual equals engaged in making metaphors to communicate poetically.

### **Findings**

The findings of the research are presented below in line with the three key areas of analysis outlined above. Pseudonyms are used to protect participants’ identities.

#### ***Universalising British values with reference to religion***

One finding from the pilot study that resonated with the participants was the motivation to work creatively with FBV because of a deeper commitment to values education. In the first focus group, a key theme was the collective commitment to ‘claiming back’ British values from its nationalistic connotations, and instead imbuing FBV with more universal significance:

Kathryn: As a school we call it ‘Human Values’ rather than ‘British Values’, which takes that kind of ... the possibility of it being seen as a nationalist and a negative subject away ...



Maeve: And you're quite right, because when you do look at the media, when you do look at things that are on the internet, things that are in newspapers, this whole thing of being British is taken away and it's misused. So, it's sort of trying to claim it back if you like you know and put the correct idea on it.

Lucy: Agreed.

Interestingly, participants drew on religious identity and RE pedagogies as a way of 'claiming back' British values. Following the discussion outlined above, Maeve spoke about inviting a guest speaker to encourage students to re-consider what she imagined might be their perceptions of Britishness. The use of emic accounts of religious experience is an established approach in ethnographic, interpretive RE, in which better understanding of religion is sought via, 'oscillating movement between the learner's and the insider's concepts and experiences' (Jackson 2000, 134). Here, however, Maeve used the strategy to achieve better understanding of diversity of religious identity within a national context, rather than of religion itself:

But the values are there within our school and you know we do promote them within lessons, and like I said before, you know I come at it from the point of view with 'What is British?' - it's not necessarily what people think. I mean I bring a guest speaker in, a guy comes in, a Muslim guy comes in, and he always starts off the Year 9s with his pictures of how he was involved in the Olympics and how he's a proud British Pakistani - that he's a Muslim, but he's British ... and this idea again, we put this across quite a lot you know to try and ... I'm really putting this badly, but this idea of what Britishness is - it's not necessarily that view that people have of Britishness (Maeve, focus group 1).

In the second focus group, there was disagreement as to whether the policy was motivated by nationalism at all. However, following the focus group, Peter considered this dimension of the policy in his creative writing, with the use of rhetorical questions:

Are British values for everyone in Britain freely available and open to all, are they linked to universal values? Or are they values for 'British' people that only British people believe in? (Peter, creative writing)

Peter also reflected on his school's approach to promoting FBV as gospel values (discussed in more detail below) as a way of 'universalising' British values:

this approach made British Values seem less superficial as they were now rooted in something and had more substance, they became universal and human values. (Peter, creative writing)

In different ways, Maeve and Peter drew on experiences of religion and religious identity to try to diversify or universalise British values and challenge its nationalistic narrative. Respectively, they also drew on confessional and interpretive approaches to RE to achieve this.

### *Finding space for RE pedagogies within the new values education framework*

The data offered insights into the teachers' ambiguous feelings towards values education policies, indicating, for example, a sense of resentment about FBV encroaching on their work as RE teachers (Farrell 2016):

It frustrates me a little bit that it is shoehorned into RE, because it's not RE, it should be like everywhere ... I've got a friend who would say that what I do with our Key Stage 4 core Religious Studies is not RE. And she's like, 'doing British Values is not RE', and so we have kind of these conversations about well, 'I'm trying to bring religion in here and here and here', but actually it's not RE. I'd say it's more Citizenship. And I'm fine with that, but it's not RE (Kathryn).

While Kathryn's reflections suggest a resignation to the fact that FBV might impoverish RE to some extent, for others, there was a sense that RE strategies might be used to enrich new values education policies:

I think it's so important that when you teach anything to do with like ethics or values or culture and religion is that you teach it with passion and with joy, but you equally teach it as much as you can without that bias. But you teach it critically as well, you critically challenge them to think (Lucy).

While criticality is not the sole preserve of RE, the facilitation of debate is seen by many as one of its key strengths, particularly within traditions of Critical RE, which aim to help students submit their existing beliefs to scrutiny and to develop an openness to contested truth claims (Wright 2003). Not only did Lucy identify criticality as a strength of RE, but she also explicitly contrasted this with other subjects, where she perceived a lack of confidence and proficiency amongst teachers:

Because maybe the staff don't know how to promote it [character education], and how to give pupils the confidence to participate in etc, and how to facilitate critical debate. That doesn't come naturally to all staff because not all subjects lend themselves to that (Lucy).

In the second focus group, the view that RE has much to offer the enactment of new values education policies (in terms of criticality) was expressed in the context of a broader discussion about advocating for RE as a subject:

Peter: we're talking about the importance of values education and the place of RE in all of this, and I find it always mindboggling that number 1 – RE seems to be constantly looked at or perhaps even ... this is a bit strong, but 'under attack' in this country. I sometimes always wonder what it would be like if most countries were to adopt at least an element of RE into their curriculum, just maybe see what would happen if they were to do that and how different the world might be ...

Maryam: I definitely agree with you Peter, the protection of RE is necessary and actually through that teaching we are actually enabling our young people to actually understand themselves as well, value others as well as they go along within society.

Within this conversation, Chloe argued for the facilitation of debate as a key feature of what RE could offer to character education:

We call it character and culture in our school because we're a [brand name] school, so we pay into this brand, we pay in yearly, and we get resources, we go to conferences and all of this. And they have used things like debate and stuff to try and encourage these conversations in the classroom, which as RE teachers we are used to debate, and we're used to that (Chloe).

Chloe's comments here present the existing pedagogical expertise of herself and her colleagues in RE as a counter point to the commercial, branded strategies for enacting character education in her school. This sense that RE has something important to offer, in terms of a critical debate, was also expressed in some participants' creative writing:

Our students aren't machines or robots designed for a narrow space in society. As well as having a truly broad and balanced curriculum they must learn how to disagree agreeably. They need to have the knowledge, the skills, the space to think so that they are challenged by difference in a way that causes conflict. The challenge should prompt curiosity. They should want to seek answers and not just shout people down (Kathryn, creative writing).

The emphasis on the human (underscored by Kathryn's use of metaphor, contrasting students with 'robots' and 'machines') evidences the distinctiveness of critical thinking skills in RE as *instrumental* to human understanding, hinting at the influence of older, development models of pedagogy in RE (Grimmitt 2000, 34).

### ***Faith-based interpretations of FBV and character at whole school level***

As in the existing research (Vincent 2018; McGhee and Zhang 2017), the data offered examples of the faith-based enactment of new values education policies. This was particularly evident in Peter's articulation of his approach to promoting FBV and character as head

of RE in a Catholic school. In the focus group, Peter gave a sense of how this worked at the whole-school level:

in our school the Fundamental British Values, you know we go through them all the time that's a whole school approach underpinned with the Gospel values and the Catholic ethos of the school ... The character development side of things, we kind of do twofold ... the second way we do that, again whole school, is we have what's called a pupil profile – it was actually inspired by the Jesuit order of priests in the Catholic church, which looks at various character developments that pupils should like aim to take on (Peter).

In his creative writing, Peter offered a much more personal account of this, offering not only a description of how he approaches FBV as gospel values within his department but also his rationale for doing so, within a broader commitment to confessional RE and faith-based education:

It all changed when I first became Head of RE at a new school, a Roman Catholic school in a deprived area, where most pupils are Muslim. I naturally found myself changing the way I approached the teaching of British values and embedding them in a common language that linked the students and people of our community; that being faith ... pupils still know all the British values, they understand what they mean and why they are important in our society but when asked by visitors to express what they mean to us here in school, they are most likely to quote the Bible and the Qur'an when articulating their response (Peter, creative writing).

Particularly in the latter part of the extract above, Peter balances the performative demands of policy with a more personal commitment to values education. This personal commitment was further expressed in Peter's creative writing, addressed to his future self, in which he framed his faith-based interpretation of character education almost as a vocation:

Remember you are here to serve the pupils and community in which you find yourself ... continue to develop the whole person, build the character of the individual ... (Peter, creative writing)

Peter was writing in the context of Catholic education, where the promotion of FBV as gospel values is common (McGhee and Zhang 2017). However, the faith-based interpretation of values was also described by teachers working in schools without a specific religious character:

in the dining hall there's like sort of the equivalent of 'love your neighbour' in all of world religions including like Shia Hadith and the Suni Hadith up in the dining hall. And they're all in English and then they're all in their original language, apart from the quote from the New Testament which is always ... like both are in English, and it really, really bugs me – no one came to ask me (Kathryn).

Kathryn's reflections confirm Vincent's (2018) observation about the privileging of Christianity in faith-based interpretations of FBV, even in schools without a specific religious character, but also highlight concerns about the risk of senior management implementing such strategies without sufficient religious literacy, understood in the broad sense of knowledge and awareness of both religion and religious diversity.

## Discussion

In answer to the research questions, the data illustrate that the substantive findings of the pilot study *did* resonate with many of the teachers in this research; these teachers were also committed to values education per se, often 'universalising' British values and drawing on religion to do so. While there was variation in how the teachers interpreted the current policy landscape, one important theme was the need to defend and advocate for RE within this context. In terms of their own role, the teachers often saw themselves as important authorities for their schools to draw on in their handling of religion within the current policy agenda. As such, the findings of this research, based on a small sample of RE teachers in England, offer important insight into the some of the dynamics involved in *how* RE teachers are grappling with FBV and character education as 'two forms' of the 'current wave' of values education in schools (Vincent 2018). These insights have the potential to add to conversations about RE in the current policy landscape.

Firstly, the findings extend work in this area that has highlighted how pedagogic commitments from RE can aid teachers in meaningful interpretations of the new policy landscape (McDonnell 2021; Farrell 2016). In particular, the findings show how the ambiguity that teachers often feel towards these policies can sometimes provide points of generative contradiction that allow teachers to articulate the specific contribution RE can make to interpreting these policies in meaningful ways. Central to this dynamic is these teachers' commitment to criticality – as something that goes beyond critical thinking skills to the cultivation of curiosity, human development, and mutual understanding. Significantly, teachers also sometimes juxtaposed this educational commitment to commercialised forms of expertise on how to do values education well. This insight offers a counter point to studies of FBV and character education that highlight the constraining workings of power within and through the policies, indicating that RE might provide an alternative point of authority within the values education landscape to the officially sanctioned and commercialised versions promoted in schools.

Secondly, the findings offer further evidence that schools both with and without a specific religious character are drawing on religion in their interpretation of these policies, implicitly or explicitly favouring Christianity (Vincent 2018; McGhee and Zhang 2017) but offer deeper insight into teachers' personal commitments and struggles within such whole school approaches. This includes both teachers' personal commitments to the faith-based interpretation of new values education policies within confessional approaches to RE that border on vocation, *and* thoughtful objections to whole-school approaches that betray a lack of religious literacy. The research thus provides an alternative reference point for discussions about the faith-based interpretation of values education policies in schools. Most research in this area has adopted a citizenship or political education perspective, arguing that such faith-based interpretations erode political conceptions of values education (Vincent 2018) or at best soften the edges of the nationalist frameworks within which the new values education policies originate. Viewed from a different perspective, grounded in RE, the key question may be not *whether* schools interpret these policies with reference to religion but *how*. If done in a way that is religiously literate and community responsive, such approaches might meaningfully engage students in values education in the current policy climate.

## Conclusion

Values education in England is undergoing significant changes. As manifest in the current policies of FBV and character, values education is bound up with broader neo-conservative government agendas associated with counter terrorism and the governance of people's lives through the cultivation of character traits that will support the social and economic status quo. As with all contemporary education policies in England, these are enacted within a complex system of schools and commercial interests, following forty years of neoliberal reform. Important research has been carried out to document the ways in which this policy landscape is constraining the work of teachers and to alert us to the risks associated with faith-based interpretations of values education that might undermine civic education. This research offers an alternative perspective, amplifying the work of teachers who are responding creatively to these policies and challenging them in meaningful ways, based on their knowledge, expertise, and commitments as teachers of RE. New developments in RE, including the adoption of a 'worldviews' approach, will provide an important context for future research in this area.

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## Notes on contributor

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