



9 ways to support a new primary beginner teacher in RE/religion and worldviews

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What can you do to improve the experiences and understandings of primary beginner teachers in RE? NATRE surveys (e.g., 2016, 2018, 2020) show time after time that many primary teachers do not feel adequately prepared to teach RE. Some receive over 12 hours of teaching, but others have as little as 1–3 hours, and in 2020 more than one in five recorded no training at all (NATRE 2020, p. 13). This article suggests nine ways teachers in primary schools can improve beginner teachers' understanding and experience of RE. It is based on discussions with teachers, beginner teachers and teacher educators about teachers' entitlement and Recommendation 6 in the Commission on Religious Education's Report (CORE 2018). The recommendation of 12 hours' training in RE is intended for all primary trainees, whatever the training route they are on. Time in school can be an important element, especially if there is an opportunity to discuss and debrief teaching experiences with a knowledgeable RE subject leader. Here are some ideas to support someone new to RE, from first beginnings to continuing professional development (CPD).

A new teacher in school has implications for everyone – subject lead, class teacher, mentor, support staff or member of the senior leadership team. Whatever your role, what opportunities can you offer to give understanding, experience and confidence in RE?

The following nine points can be used as a Diamond 9 exercise to discuss beginner teachers' needs and support their learning:



1. Introduction

Meet them, discuss what they already know about RE and their attitude towards it. It is important to understand the beginner teacher's previous experience of RE and build from where they are in their thinking. This is an opportunity to find out if they have had any previous training and what it contained. This may be their first opportunity to verbalise their professional and personal ideas, and consider their own life experiences. If they have very little understanding of RE as a subject, it is important to go back to basics so that they understand why the subject is part of the Basic Curriculum, what its aims are and what benefits it has for pupils. Beginner teachers are entitled to understand all the curriculum as part of their training, including recent developments.

2. Context

Explain the context of your school and its arrangements for teaching RE/religion and worldviews. Discussing the context of the school, be it local authority, academy, faith, church or independent, will help the beginner teacher. They need to know about the ethos, inclusive practices, backgrounds, beliefs and cultures in the school and the class(es) they are teaching. Explain the teaching arrangements. Is there an RE specialist? Are higher-level teaching assistants (HLTAs) teaching RE? How much time does RE have?

3. Planning

Introduce them to the Agreed Syllabus or syllabus used by the school and the section(s) they are covering on practice. Explain how RE is planned. Is it a discrete or cross-curricular subject? Ask them to show you their planning templates, which might be more complex than the school's, especially around differentiation and assessment. Make sure they have access to school plans, including out-of-school hours if possible, so they can plan away from school. Encourage creative planning, visits and visitors, and imaginative assessment.

4. Resources

Show them the resources available, including artefacts and online and other resources for their class/year group/key stage. Talk them through an artefact so they develop subject knowledge and can see how to use it creatively.

5. Subject knowledge

Many beginner teachers are worried about their lack of knowledge and fear causing offence. Identify key terms and ideas so they can learn basics rapidly. Give them reliable websites that will enable them to find out more. Warn against stereotypes and stylised depictions of religions. Remind them of the complex make-up of belief and non-belief in Britain and how that can be depicted in class. Introduce the concept of worldviews and explain how it can enrich pupils' learning. Introduce and explain Ofsted terms – 'substantive knowledge', 'ways of knowing' and 'personal knowledge' – so they can analyse their own teaching (Ofsted 2021).

6. Teaching

Above all, give beginner teachers opportunities to teach RE. This is when they can discover the power of the subject in the classroom. If you can talk through their plans beforehand, you can help identify possible issues and help them to model inclusive language. In my research this was the single most important factor in ensuring beginner teachers gained confidence to teach RE and went on to improve their lessons (Whitworth 2017).

7. Observation

Plan in at least one observation of another teacher teaching good RE, if necessary in another year group. Give the beginner teacher a focus, so they know what they are looking for. If possible, ensure that the subject lead, class teacher or mentor observes the beginner teacher teach at least one RE lesson and gives written feedback.

8. Follow-up

Feedback on an observed lesson, including targets, should include RE-specific commentary – for example, subject knowledge, pedagogy and assessment – as well as more generic comments, such as on classroom management. If it is a long placement, arrange a further meeting to discuss progress.

9. CPD

If the trainee has had little or no prior training or wishes to find out more, point them towards local groups, local courses and online support courses. RE:ONLINE (reonline.org.uk) hosts a free, bespoke course, 'An Introduction to Religion and Worldviews for Primary Practitioners', which provides up to 12 hours of learning about RE. There is also 'Religion and Worldviews: Subject Knowledge for Teaching', a course on developing subject knowledge. These online courses are available to Initial Teacher Education (ITE) trainees, early career teachers and HLTAs on RE:ONLINE if they or their ITE providers or schools want to supplement their training.

Unfortunately, there is no subject-wide recommendation about how to support trainees in school, which means that their opportunities to observe, teach and discuss achievement in RE are dependent on the provision the training route requires and what schools offer. For some this will be an opportunity to work with knowledgeable and experienced teachers who participate in current thinking about RE/religion and worldviews, but for others it can be a lottery, depending on the engagement of the class teacher or mentor they are working with and the opportunities offered to talk to the subject coordinator to develop understanding and confidence.

Research with my own students (Whitworth 2017, 2020) showed that their biggest concerns were their lack of subject knowledge and fear of causing offence. Tracking their experiences across their school practices showed that these concerns changed, and they became more confident about understanding the content of RE when they had opportunities to teach it to their classes. Many reported back how much they enjoyed teaching the subject once they overcame their initial hesitation, and recognised that their own developing skills as teachers meant they could select and plan for the pupils they knew. What better opportunity is there to discuss real-world learning with pupils?

References

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