

Assessment in RE - a Case Study

Assessment is big in RE at the time of writing. We need to ask what the purpose of assessment is and whether current methods and policies on the matter are likely to bring about the hoped-for improvements in RE attributed to assessment. Are there any possible negative outcomes associated with formal assessment in RE?

In the view of OFSTED, the purpose of assessment is to raise standards in RE. OFSTED continues to point to weakness of assessment in RE, both at primary and secondary level. Progress has been made but the comment in their 2004-05 report is that 'much more could be done'. The implication is that the problems of low achievement in RE are due to lack of or inadequate methods of assessment. Failure to assess pupils is held to lead to [a] an inability on the part of teachers to recognise pupils' weaknesses and [b] a failure to build on existing understanding. At the secondary level OFSTED has pointed to teachers targeting the middle, as often pupils are not streamed for RE. Too often able pupils find themselves having to complete work that is too easy for them before reaching the more difficult tasks set at the end of the worksheet, while the less able may not be able to do much more than the first section. In other subjects pupils are being given specific targets to meet which are assessed and the push is on for RE to do the same. The non-statutory national framework has given RE teachers an 8 level scale for each of the two attainment targets, which gives precise assessment targets. Behind much of the concern expressed by OFSTED and efforts to promote the framework is the feeling that RE is not working at the same rigorous levels as other subjects and is in danger of being left behind, merely entertaining the children for an hour a week. And the answer to this is thought to lie, in part, in bringing in more precise methods of assessment.

Will assessment raise standards?

This is an obvious question to ask and at the same time not easy to answer since a large number of examples would be needed to get a worthwhile answer. Teachers need to be very sure in their own minds that the large amounts of time and effort spent on assessment do really motivate pupils and raise standards. The danger is that because OFSTED and others are making such a big thing of it teachers feel they must follow the advice to the letter even when, in their experience, assessment is not raising standards or may even be having negative effects in other ways.

The 8 level-scale in the non-statutory framework

The non-statutory national framework for RE, it is hoped by many, will be adopted by agreed syllabus conferences, diocesan bodies and other providers. In particular it is hoped that its 8 level-scale, which is non-specific in relation to content, will be widely used for assessment purposes. But is it fit for purpose?

The framework sets out 8 levels related to the two attainment targets 'learning about religion' and 'learning from religion'. The first target concerns knowledge, skills and understanding of a) beliefs, teachings and sources, b) practices and ways of life and c) forms of expression. The second target concerns the responses and insights of pupils to issues of a) identity and belonging, b) meaning, purpose and truth and c) values and commitments. The framework states that 'Learning about religion and Learning from religion' are closely related and neither should be taught in isolation.' P.35. Nonetheless, teachers are being asked to assess pupils identifiably under both headings and the levels attempt to set out the increasing levels of attainment in the two separate areas. On the face of it, what

distinguishes the A2 levels from A1 levels is the requirement that *pupils express their own feelings and ideas*. So we read:

Level 1: Pupils talk about their own experiences and feelings

Level 3: Pupils identify what influences them

Level 5: They explain what inspires and influences them

Level 6: Pupils express insights into their own and others' views on questions of identity and belonging, meaning, purpose and truth.

Level 8: Pupils coherently analyse a wide range of viewpoints on questions of identity, belonging, meaning, purpose, truth, values and commitments...fully justifying their own views and ideas and providing a detailed evaluation of the perspectives of others.

However, an important caveat to assessment is given in both the framework and in the website sponsored by QCA, which gives examples of assessed work and other guidance (www.ncaction.org.uk). The framework says: 'not all aspects of religious education can be assessed. For example, pupils may express personal views and ideas, that, although integral to teaching and learning, would not be appropriate for formal assessment.' P.35. This hesitancy is also reflected in the ncaction website where it is stated that 'Areas such as personal beliefs, opinion and reflection are not included because they are inappropriate for assessment.' One might conclude that this would pose a considerable difficulty for the teacher attempting to assess AT2 since the emphasis of AT2 is clearly on the expression of personal opinion. Perhaps the intention is to ascertain that the pupil *forms* personal opinions without any judgments being made about their respective merits.

Let us analyse one example on the website mentioned above in order to raise important issues concerning assessment and the view of RE that is implicitly assumed by the framework.

It is entitled *The Five Precepts – Joanna and Karen*. It is given as an example of AT strand c) values and commitments. Joanna and Karen are Y9 pupils who were studying Buddhist teachings. They were given a worksheet which required them to state a) what Buddhist teaching was on certain topics, b) their response to Buddhist teaching, c) what a materialist might teach on the subject and d) their personal opinion on the topics.

Here are their answers to a):

Joanna:

No killing or harming of living things
No theft or taking of what is not freely given
No sexual misconduct, love and be content
No lying or wrong speech
No misuse of senses through drink or drugs

Karen:

No killing. It's bad or harming of living things
No theft or taking of what is not freely given
No sexual misconduct
No lying or wrong speech
No misuse of senses through drink or drugs

When it came to b) their response to these Buddhist teachings, both pupils answered in terms of their own views. So Karen answered that 'people should try not to lie so much but a little lie never hurt anyone'. Joanna said that lying could spare a person's feelings. Karen thought that people should be allowed to drink but not take drugs and Joanna that the Buddhist rule would be hard for those addicted but that 'everyone likes an odd drink now and then'. Joanna thought it was OK to kill animals for food but Karen wrote that 'no-one should be killed just for meat'!! Only one answer (from Joanna) revealed any further understanding of Buddhist teaching. She said that it was sensible not to have sexual relationships outside marriage.

On the basis of these responses in this advisory example Joanna is placed at Level 6 on the grounds that 'she has responded to Buddhist perspectives on a range of moral issues and has related these to her own and other people's lives'. To progress further 'she needs to evaluate Buddhist teachings using more evidence and examples, and to make links with other perspectives on ethics and values.' Karen is placed at Level 4 as 'she has shown understanding of moral and religious issues from Buddhist sources. To progress further she needs to give more of an informed response, adding depth and detail to her basic understanding.'

Comment

It seems that both pupils have extracted information about Buddhism from a common source (presumably provided by the teacher). Neither pupil has explained the thinking behind these rules or whether they apply to everyone or just to some people. Neither pupil has asked or defined what 'wrong speech' is, what exactly sexual misconduct might entail or raised the question in relation to drug-use whether some dulling of the senses in the operating theatre through the use of drugs might be acceptable. It looks as though there has been some discussion about whether it is OK to kill animals for food and Karen, perhaps picking up unconsciously the fact that Buddhists respect all living things equally, has gone on to react against the possibility of killing human beings for food. The exercise has raised in her mind the notion that some people might think cannibalism morally justified. She is surely to be commended for arguing against this!

On the face of it both pupils appear to be at the same low level of understanding of Buddhism. In fact it is questionable as to whether the form of assessment used is a reliable guide to their understanding of Buddhist teaching as opposed to their ability to extract relevant information from a worksheet/text/source, a skill which both clearly possess.

It is difficult to see any real basis for how Joanna can be judged to be at a higher level than Karen. Joanna has added the rather vague 'love and be content' to the prohibition against sexual misconduct which *may* reflect greater understanding on Joanna's part. And Joanna assumes that sexual misconduct for Buddhists includes sex outside marriage whereas Karen does not give any hint as to what sexual misconduct might be for the Buddhist. It is quite possible that Joanna has projected cultural norms from her own society. Just as Karen (like Joanna) has 'responded to Buddhist perspectives on a range of moral issues and has related these to her own and other people's lives', so Joanna (like Karen) needs to 'give more of an informed response, adding depth and detail to her basic understanding.' Joanna's answers are, however, more articulate than Karen's. Her handwriting is better and her answers are slightly longer. She is probably capable of articulating different points of view in a way that Karen will never be able to do. But, in this particular case, the evidence is not there as Joanna

clearly does not have sufficient understanding of Buddhism to engage with it meaningfully. Joanna has been put on a higher level than Karen simply on the basis of academic ability, not attainment. There has, in effect, been little solid evidence on which to make an assessment and entirely arbitrary grounds have been utilised. If I were Karen I would protest.

What does it mean, as a practical tool for raising standards, to say that Karen should add more depth and detail? What is needed is a statement which states *what* depth and *which* detail could reasonably be expected at her stage. And of what practical use is it to Karen's next teacher to be told that she 'has shown understanding of moral and religious issues from Buddhist sources'? The teacher needs to know which issues have been covered and to what extent Karen has understood them. It is difficult to see how this example of assessment is raising standards. It may rather be depressing them since it accepts such low level knowledge and understanding. It is difficult to see that this particular assessment has a) revealed anything meaningful about the level of achievement of either pupil, b) provided information to the next teacher which will help him or her to build on progress, or c) motivated the pupils to learn more.

It is equally interesting to note that future progress for the pupils is set out in terms that suit AT1 rather than AT2. Pupils are, in effect, told that they need to *know* more about the topic. A simpler form of assessment might have been a comment 'go away and read x,y and z.' And this, interestingly, is not a form of assessment but a straightforward instruction! Given that pupils' personal views are not to be assessed it is not surprising that the only way that sense can be made of AT2 is in terms of AT1.

But it does seem as though the intention is to assess these pupils on something other than knowledge and even understanding. They are put at levels 4 and 6 on the basis of how they have 'responded', which seems to imply that there are levels of response which may be judged. There are better responses and worse responses. What is meant by response? Response is clearly, given the emphasis on personal response throughout AT2, meant to link to personal ownership or rejection of the views in question. Yet it is personal views that cannot be assessed. The assumption is made that there are better and worse responses but there appears to be no way of communicating this to teachers and pupils. The inevitable conclusion would seem to be that pupils may express any view or response that seems good to them and not fear the consequences!

The example given above illustrates this clearly. Karen's 'personal' views are clearly stated on the worksheet she completed. She thinks that theft is wrong 'because a person might end up in court', that 'lying is good because a lie never hurt anyone'. Her 'rule' for sex and love is that it is 'good and I would let it be'. She thinks that people should be allowed to drink but not take drugs. And she thinks that 'no-one should be killed for meat'. There is no comment written by a teacher on the worksheet, nor does the official website refer to the views of either pupil in any way.

It is true that the levels for AT2 look for increasing complexity of judgement on the part of pupils. But as long as there are no precise criteria as to what constitutes a particular response at a particular level such language is simply obfuscating. [e.g. on this basis it would seem that Nazi attempts to find 'scientific' evidence from archaeology, philology etc to support their judgement of Jews would warrant high marks as they were clearly complex!] At the earlier stages it would be possible for a teacher to note down that a pupil has talked about feelings and experiences and expressed a view. But at the later stages (see levels 5 upwards) a pupil is required to explain and then justify the views they

hold. In fact Karen gave an explanation which satisfied her. Lying is OK because 'a lie never hurt anyone'. Theft is bad 'because a person might end up in court'. She has given an explanation so this should have put her at level 5. It is no good writing about 'fully justifying' and 'detailed evaluation' if no examples are given [especially if one is not allowed to introduce values which could be expected to justify moral claims]. It is possible to state a highly sophisticated and reasoned justification for any belief no matter how odious, as we know all too well. No wonder teachers are nervous of assessing AT2!

What are the implications?

1. What are the possible implications of asking pupils to state their own views and then not assessing them? What lesson is Karen likely to learn from this exercise? She is likely to learn that her views on the topic are every bit as acceptable as those held by Buddhists and the materialists whose views are also included on the worksheet. It may be argued that at later levels more sophistication is required of pupils, see level 8 above. This is certainly true. However, if Karen does reach this level, teachers may still not assess her personal beliefs and values. It may seem to a pupil that the content of their untutored mind, with its inexperienced reasoning powers and limited experience, is more important than what is being taught. This is unlikely to happen in any other subject. The whole notion of requiring pupils to state their opinion at every stage of learning as a separate activity, immune from criticism, is misguided, leads to relativism and may seriously undermine moral development. It reinforces the doubtful notion that valuing is separate from factual understanding where the former is 'subjective' and the latter 'objective'.

2. A further problem is that a pupil is constantly required, as part of the learning, to give an opinion and reveal what he or she believes and values alongside what others believe and value. This could become boring and oppressive, and may be experienced by many as an invasion of privacy. A further problem lies in the encouragement of agencies such as OFSTED to record oral contributions as part of assessment. This may be fine when it is appropriate (such as the learning of a Psalm) and may suit some pupils who find writing difficult. But if it becomes the norm there are dangers. Gavin D'Costa has commented elsewhere on how damaging the requirement of constantly noting what students at university level say is in having proper conversations with them. That applies just as much - even more - to young self-conscious pupils. The knowledge that pupils' oral contributions are all recorded for assessment purposes is likely to put an end to any spontaneity. It might make pupils clam up altogether, afraid that getting the answer wrong or of asking a question, will be used against them. Classroom discussion should have an air of confidentiality about it. A tape-recorder, switched on as a matter of course, is the logical and efficient corollary of assessing oral contributions. Do we want this?

Conclusion

The problems outlined above may reflect the fact that society finds it difficult to declare openly what is good and true. The easy way out is to tell the pupils to decide 'for themselves'. Yet, at a practical level, all schools do believe and value things. Hopefully, no teacher reading Karen's worksheet is going to leave it at that. Schools work hard to teach children that theft is wrong and that deception is hurtful to others and to the person who deceives. The basic instinct to want pupils to be engaged with religious life and to develop in their understanding and awareness is surely sound. But this should be done by pointing outwards to what is inspiring and true rather than directing attention inwards to the individual child who is assumed to have instant access to the truth the moment they offer an opinion.

If we know what it is we want pupils to learn we will have a better idea of the attitudes and skills we want them to develop. Agreeing what should be taught has always been the 'Achilles heel' of RE. Identifying what pupils should learn involves us in a certain particularity, a certain grasp of how things are. And 'how things are' is deeply contested in our society. Even the idea that it makes sense to talk of how things are is a matter of debate between the realist and the non-realist. Assessment will only make sense once we know what we want pupils to learn. In the example discussed here assessment is a distraction, an irritation and possibly causes pupils to become antagonistic. Even if know what we want to assess, assessment of itself can never be the answer to overcoming problems in RE. Good teaching may be.