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The legacy of community cohesion: exploring the teacher agency of beginner RE teachers

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the teacher agency of five beginner RE teachers undertaking their 1-year probationary period (Post-Initial Teacher Education)¹ in five Secondary RE departments in the North-West of England during the 2018/2019 academic year. Drawn from a piece of doctoral research, the article discusses the findings of an interpretivist practitioner-inquiry, which adopted an ecological approach to teacher agency. The article suggests that for the beginner RE teachers involved in the research their sense of agency was significantly influenced by their own experiences of RE as secondary-aged pupils and that this is to a much greater extent than the current literature on teacher agency may acknowledge. The article suggests that despite the passage of time a 'legacy of community cohesion' dominates their sense of teacher agency and informs their sense of self as a teacher of RE. The article concludes by briefly considering the tensions, which such a sense of agency may cause in the current climate of what it means for pupils to 'get better' at RE.

KEYWORDS

Religious education;
secondary; teacher agency;
initial teacher education

1. Introduction

The current landscape of secondary RE in England continues to be complex and little is known about those currently choosing to enter the RE profession. Existing literature struggles to account for the impact of recent educational reforms, shifts in societal attitudes towards religion, and the changing nature of ITE in England. Moreover, whilst previous work has been undertaken to explore the construction and enactment of agency amongst experienced teachers, most notably Blesta and Tedder (2007), Priestley, Biesta, and Robinson (2015) and Biesta, Priestley, and Robinson (2015), the research carried out for this article suggests that such approaches may not adequately reflect those situated in environments as complex and 'contested' (Baumfield 2005) as Secondary RE in England or those at the outset of their teaching career.

2. An ecological approach to teacher agency

Teacher agency is what teachers *do* rather than something they have. It is visible when teachers exercise their power and teach in a way, which is conducive to their beliefs and values about education, thus giving their professional life direction and a sense of control (Biesta and Tedder 2007). Although the development of such a agency is a significant aspect of a teacher's professional identity, some note that the wider literature has not given the concept the systematic attention it deserves (e.g. Emirbayer and Mische 1998; Blesta and Tedder 2007; Priestley et al.,

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2012; Eteläpelto, et al. 2013) or considered teacher agency as a concept in its own right (Priestley, Biesta, and Robinson 2015; Blesta and Tedder 2007). The ecological approach to teacher agency (as presented by Biesta and Tedder 2007; Priestley, Biesta, and Robinson 2015; Biesta, Priestley, and Robinson 2015) focuses on the conditions in which such agency is enacted and the factors which influence its origins and sense of direction. Building on the work of Emirbayer and Mische (1998), the ecological approach purports that the agency is understood as a 'configuration of influences' (Biesta, Priestley, and Robinson 2015, 626) from the past (*iterational*), orientated towards the future (*projective*), and situated in the present (*practical-evaluative*). Whilst each dimension plays a role in the development and achievement of agency, they are best understood as a 'chordal triad within which all three dimensions resonate as separate but not always harmonious tones ... in any given case, one or another of these three aspects might well predominate' (Emirbayer and Mische 1998, 972).

Teacher agency does not merely spring into existence. Instead, the socio-cultural factors, which influence the individual teacher are of paramount importance and attention must be paid to the iterational beliefs, which are seen to be instrumental in shaping the agency and practice of teachers (Priestley, Biesta, and Robinson 2015). Such beliefs are played out here and how (*practical-evaluative*) and assist in the achievement of the agency. Moreover, they play a significant role in giving pedagogical practice meaning, direction, and a sense of purpose (ibid.) Beliefs such as those about educational purpose and the role of the teacher, are a significant aspect of the iterational aspect of a teacher's sense of agency, and they impact on how a teacher may exercise and achieve agency in their day-to-day classroom practice (Biesta, Priestley, and Robinson 2015; Priestley, Biesta, and Robinson 2015). As noted by Biesta and Tedder, 'understanding the achievement of agency requires an understanding of the ecological conditions under and through which agency is achieved' (Biesta and Tedder 2007, 146). Moreover, as teachers often bring pre-existing values and beliefs to their role (Biesta, Priestley, and Robinson 2015), it is by exploring the experiences which beginner teachers had prior to entering the profession that we can further an understanding of what the achievement of teacher agency looks like for those at the outset of their RE teaching career.

3. The practical-evaluative context of secondary RE

Since teacher agency is enacted in the here-and-now attention must be given to the secondary RE context in which the research participants in this study were located. Ofsted (2021), the national body for inspecting schools in the UK, purports that the subject has failed to keep pace with the academic and intellectual developments necessary to help pupils make sense of an increasingly complex world. This reaffirms previous research, which expresses concerns that the subject is overburdened with conflicting imperatives and expectations (Teece 2011; Metcalfe and Moulin-Stožek 2020) and suffers from historical, political, and legislative neglect (Butler-Sloss 2015).

Against such a backdrop, a lack of agreement about the core purpose(s) of the subject has led to RE being marginalised, perceived as weak and victim to a myriad of competing conversations (Lundie 2010, 2018; Teece 2011; Conroy, Lundie, and Baumfield 2012) and political agendas, such as those relating to Fundamental British Values (Farrell and Lander 2018) or Community Cohesion. Indeed, in the wake of the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York on 11 September 2001, and the subsequent attacks in London in 2005, RE experienced an unprecedented amount of attention (Moulin 2012) for its ability to promote social cohesion amongst divided multi-racial communities (Qualification and curriculum authority QCA 2004; DCSF Department For Children, Schools, And Families 2007; Woodward 2012). RE lessons in the years, which followed, during which time the participants in this study were secondary-aged pupils, included such topics as 'The UK as a multi-ethnic society' and 'Government action to promote community cohesion' alongside lessons on 'The existence of God' (Watton 2009). The subject became increasingly positioned as a way for young people to better understand contemporary struggles and political upheaval (Gearon, 2014) and this was met by a welcome change in attitude about RE from pupils (Ofsted 2007).

In the two decades since the September 11 attacks, the claim that quality RE can substantially contribute to positive community relations persists, despite significant educational and political shifts. In RE reforms to curricula have seen a move away from topics, which include an explicit focus on promoting community cohesion and/or related topics and towards an overt focus on pupils' knowledge and understanding of religious and non-religious beliefs (DFE Department For Education 2015) including the requirement that learners must study two world religions in significant depth at GCSE.² More recently Ofsted (2021) has sought to focus conversations in RE around 'knowing more' and 'remembering more' substantive religious knowledge. In an increasingly constricted curriculum, it could be suggested that this has served to side-line conversations about the way in which the subject can explicitly promote a sense of community cohesion.

Given the contested nature of the subject, questions of professional identity and agency are more complicated in RE than other subjects (Sikes and Everington 2004; Freathy et al. 2014, 2016). Furthermore, it is well established that those who lack a clear sense of professional identity at the start of their careers are more likely to leave the teaching profession altogether (Hammerness 2008; Heikonen et al. 2017). This seems to suggest, therefore, as Freathy et al. (2016) indicate, that the development of professionalism, professional identity, and by extension professional agency amongst RE teachers needs much more attention. It is here that this research seeks to contribute.

4. Research design and data collection

This research was underpinned by the notion of the researcher as a bricoleur (Denzin and Lincoln 2008), an approach, which makes use of whatever tools are at hand to best represent the specifics and nuances of the phenomena under investigation. Akin to creating a montage, bricolage frees up the researcher from applying a pre-defined framework to their research and instead it allows one to develop throughout the process of the inquiry. Qualitative in nature, the research design consisted of 'interpretive, material practices that make the world visible ...' (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003, p.4), eliciting a better understanding of the agentic experiences of participants. Such a methodological approach places emphasis on the researcher. To better understand the situation under investigation 'researchers need to understand the context because situations affect behaviour and perspectives and vice versa' (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011, p.219). Given the focus on understanding the complex and subjective nature of the experiences of participants, an interpretivist position was adopted. Whilst such an approach limits the extent to which results can be generalised and applied to other contexts, it reflected the subjective and value laden nature of teacher agency (Priestley, Biesta, and Robinson 2015) and teaching more broadly (Sunley and Locke, 2010; 2012).

The researcher sought to reflect the bricolage design of the research to generate the 'rich' data, which is the hallmark of qualitative and interpretivist research. Data collection used several qualitative tools to ensure a rich representation, which best captured the complexities and nuances of the participants' experiences. Semi-structured interviews were the dominant method of data collection, noting their use as purposeful and coordinated conversations (Berkelaar and Murphy, 2017) and mirroring the methods used in existing research on agency and teacher values (e.g. Lai, Li, and Gong, 2016; Lord, 2016; Sunley and Locke, 2012). The flexibility and pragmatism of bricolage meant that other methods were introduced throughout the data collection process to provide a more detailed landscape of the research focus and by way of triangulation. Thematic analysis was adopted to organically derive the themes from the data for further discussion (Grbich 2013; Braun and Clarke 2006) and to enable an interrogation of the data.

Each of the five participants were interviewed twice over the course of their probationary year post-ITE (January 2019 and August 2019). During the first set of interviews, participants constructed narrative timelines (Woolhouse 2017) to explore their significant experiences prior to undertaking ITE. Having used thematic analysis to identify factors which influenced their agency from the first interview, an opinion matrix task was designed for the second and participants were asked to organise the factors into four groups; promotes my agency, hinders my agency, has no impact,

and promotes and hinders my agency. This generated further discussion and enabled deeper exploration of significant factors. The creation of such an approach typifies the notion of researcher as bricoleur, inventing or creating tools to best capture the research focus (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011) and highlights how triangulation can enhance the validity of data (Candappa, 2017).

Discussions from both the narrative timelines and the opinion matrices were included in the transcript for each interview and a photograph taken of each for record keeping. Appropriate ethical guidance was applied to all stages of the research process (BERA British educational research association 2018; Liverpool Hope University 2015).

4.1. Participants and site of research

All participants met a pre-defined sampling criterion that they were undertaking their probationary year post-ITE and were employed as teachers of RE or teachers of Humanities with a focus on RE. To mitigate against the variations of the RE taught in each of their schools, participants also had to be teaching GCSE Religious Studies. Participants were all female, aged 23–27 years and worked in non-selective Secondary schools in the North-West of England. The Get Information About Schools website (GOV. UK UK Government 2017) was used to identify the type of school in which each participant worked, including any religious character and/or ethos. Of the five participants involved in the research two worked in schools which had a Christian ethos and/or character and four worked in schools which were part of a Multi-Academy Trust. Where participants identified as a being of a certain faith, this was noted, given the importance of personal beliefs on professional identity as teachers of RE (Holt 2013; Biesta, Priestley, and Robinson 2015; Conroy 2016; Stuart-Buttle 2018). One participant identified as Muslim, another was Catholic, and the remaining three were of no faith. Care has been taken to ensure that participants cannot be identified from data used within this article.

5. Findings

Thematic analysis revealed that participants' sense of agency was greater when teaching in a way which reflected their values and beliefs about education, specifically those related to RE. These values and beliefs were overwhelmingly derived from their experiences of RE as secondary-aged pupils and reflected an RE, which was primarily concerned with promoting community cohesion and social harmony. Teacher agency was expressed by participants as a feeling that they were doing what they felt they *should* be doing in their classroom as teachers of RE. Participants primarily perceived RE as a unique space in the curriculum, which existed to promote community cohesion and social harmony, and this was the predominant remit of the subject. This informed the values and beliefs they had about RE, which served as the bedrock to their sense of teacher agency.

Participants spoke about their own experiences as pupils of RE. They saw the subject as a 'safe space' where ideas and thoughts could be exposed to critical discussion and where a diversity of views was celebrated. As one participant put it,

'Our year was like full on Asian, [we were] all the same culture . . . so we [would] learn about different religions and we learn about different things . . . we were mixing with different cultures, we didn't see it as a bad thing like how it was shown in our area' (Participant 5, interview1).

As discussions led to what participants saw as the purpose of RE, the legacy of community cohesion was evident. Based on their experiences of the subject, participants unanimously saw RE as a subject which aims to bring disparate and diverse communities together. They saw its remit as one which focussed on teaching pupils how to live amongst those from a range of multicultural and multi-faith backgrounds and as a way to foster understanding and tolerance between different groups and cultures. All participants used terminologies such as accepting, respectful, challenging stereotypes, and living together and when considering the inherent value of the subject, the group collectively

expressed the broad opinion that good RE was about teaching pupils how to 'get along' with those who held different views and getting pupils to put themselves in 'someone else's' shoes. As explained by Participant 4,

'Because the UK is diverse, and Liverpool is diverse and it's important to me that they go out into the world, and they don't discriminate. They understand that people have different views, and they don't go around offending people. I think that's a trait that all people should have, they are like ... not tolerant cos I don't like saying tolerant cos it's like a bare minimum but that they are fully accepting of other people' (Participant 4, interview 1).

Discussions with participants also evidenced that it was not just the content of the lessons, but the skills taught. This assisted with a sense that the subject was about bringing people together.

'I think the point of RE is to educate people of other religions, other cultures. But the things that you learn, the skills you need for that help. They help you develop morally, as a person. I mean like it is one of the biggest things learning about Muslims and saying that they're not all the same and ISIS aren't, well Muslims aren't ISIS. But the skills that it takes to go against what people are telling you, to not believe in the media, it helps you to think about things and you come to your own conclusions and say well I'm not gonna believe what you say'. (Participant 2, interview 1)

Participant's experience of RE extended not only to the values and beliefs they had about the subject and where their sense of agency came from but it also led them to consider what enacting this agency looked like in their current practice. Mirroring the teaching they had been exposed to, when participants spoke of the values which they hoped to model as RE teachers, they spoke of the need to be open-minded, non-judgemental, objective, and able to craft a unique space in the curriculum, one which afforded pupils' opportunity to debate, construct and consider their own views. One participant felt that her role as a teacher of RE meant she could voice 'unsafe' opinions, which served to facilitate discussion and prompt critical thought. Another spoke about her belief that RE should be a space where pupils could ask questions that they could not ask in other subjects and that teachers of RE should model to pupils how to have respectful conversations with people who held differing and opposing views to their own. This further hints at the suggestion that participants saw RE as a space for talking to but also listening to those from diverse backgrounds to bring about social cohesion.

'I think it's [RE] become more relevant because there are so many things going on that it is important to put your opinion across but to do so in a way which is respectful. And I think, some kids don't have it modelled to them at home, so I think where else are they gonna learn it? Cos they're gonna go through life and run into trouble being called like a bigot or being rude to people and I don't want that'. (Participant 3, interview 1)

By contrast, participants identified areas of their practice where they did not feel their agency was being promoted and where, in some instances, they felt a disconnect with their ideas about the remit of the subject. This meant their sense of agency was hindered. This was explicitly seen when the group spoke about teaching substantive knowledge, such as religious beliefs, sources of authority, or religious practices. One participant expressed concern at how much overt Christianity was taught in her school '... I feel like we shouldn't start off with Christianity cos the kids aren't interested in it. They spend the first part of the year thinking 'oh God, we're learning about Jesus again!' (Participant 1, interview 1). Similar views were reported by other participants who spoke about the constraints placed on them by the current GCSE specifications. Such specifications were seen as having too much content and too much overt focus on the teaching about religions. Such views led one participant who taught in a faith school to describe her attempts to engage pupils in Judaism as a 'battle' (Participant 4, interview 1).

6. Discussion

Despite the various political and societal shifts which have occurred over the past decade and the ways in which RE teachers have been variously positioned, this research suggests that a legacy of

community cohesion exists amongst beginner teachers of RE. The beginner RE teachers involved in this research were motivated by an approach to RE which had been taught to them as secondary-aged pupils and this had a significant influence on their sense of agency. Their experiences of an RE curriculum that spoke of community cohesion, social harmony and in the wake of terrorist attacks bringing divided communities together, subsequently informed their values, beliefs, and ideas related to the purpose of their subject, what they saw as their role and fundamentally it was here that their sense of agency as teachers of RE was located. Such a legacy of community cohesion appeared to persist and give shape to their sense of purpose and agency in their here-and-now long after their initial experiences. This gives weight to the assertion that values and beliefs are instrumental in shaping the agency of teachers (Biesta, Priestley, and Robinson 2015; Priestley, Biesta, and Robinson 2015) and that teachers often bring such beliefs with them into the profession (Biesta, Priestley, and Robinson 2015). By extension, this helps to address questions such as 'where do teachers beliefs come from?' (Biesta, Priestley, and Robinson 2015, 627) and shines a light on the agentic experiences of beginner RE teachers.

Moreover, when considering the existence of achordal triad between the three separate dimensions (Emirbayer and Mische 1998), this research suggests that for those at the outset of their teaching career, the iterational dimension sounds much more forcefully than the practical-evaluative dimension (seen as the resources, context, or curriculum content being taught in the here and now) and this extends to give shape to the type of world or future the participants wanted to prepare their pupils for (the *projective* dimension). A legacy of community cohesion was evident not only in the type of RE which the participants valued, but also when they spoke about what they saw as the remit of the subject, how they saw the subject as preparing pupils for a world outside of the classroom and a desire on the part of all participants that pupils would be able to live amongst those from different backgrounds. Such a finding suggests that the iterational chord is the most dominant chord for those at the outset of their career, reflecting the argument that at any one time one or more of the chords may sound more forcefully than the other(s) (*ibid*). Moreover, factors in the here-and-now, such as the GCSE content they were teaching and which participants saw as not overtly about bringing communities together, were seen as a hindrance to their sense to their agency. This gives further weight to the assertion that it is the iterational dimension of the ecological approach, which is dominant for those at the outset of their RE career and that this has greater influence than their current context.

The iterational dimension relates not only to previous experiences but also to the socio-cultural context or discourse in which such experiences occur (Parker 2016). When participants spoke about their sense of agency, this was rooted in the values and remits of a subject to which they had been exposed at a specific societal and political moment, some 10 years prior when community cohesion was identified as *the* remit of RE (Ofsted 2007, 2010). Thus, the discourse in which beginner RE teachers experience the subject themselves as pupils can be seen as having a continuing influence on their ideas and values about the subject, more so than the context or discourse in which they now teach, giving further weight to the suggestion that a legacy of community cohesion permeated the iterational dimension of their achievement of agency. In a manner akin to Heidegger's notion of primordial temporality, their past experiences can be seen as giving shape and meaning to their present and future ones, as it was 'a past that lives on in their present, and which informs them of their future possibilities' (Watts 2011, 123). In the case of the participants involved in this study, their previous experiences are not in the past as we may understand the chronological sense of time, but rather they continued to live on in their present and were routinely enacted in their current practice. Such experiences continue to give shape to their sense of being, were responsible for their here-and-now and extended to shape their projected future in terms of the RE they strived to deliver and the duty they felt to ensure that their pupils were prepared for multi-cultural Britain.

Whilst it may not be possible to generalise the findings of this small-scale study to other contexts or subjects, the findings presented do raise questions about how teachers continue to exert their agency and give voice to their deeply held commitments amidst a changing educational landscape. This is especially the case for teachers at the outset of their career and for those in 'Cinderella' subjects such as RE (Copley 2008). In the 3 years since these data were collected, the educational discourse in England has become dominated by a pseudo-psycho-biological narrative housed under the umbrella term of 'the science of learning' which drives many of the current pedagogical discussions (Hordern and Brooks 2023). Alongside this, reforms to GCSE specification in RE have seen an increase in the amount of content pupils need to study, a reduction in explicit content related to social or community cohesion, and an increase in the overt studying of religious practices and traditions (DfE Department For Education 2015). In addition, ITE and post-ITE in England have become increasingly centralised via curricular frameworks which ensure providers cover specific approaches and theories in relation to how learning occurs (DfE Department for education 2019a; 2019b). The dominance of Cognitive Load Theory, as the current predominant method of learning, is premised on pupils 'knowing more' and 'remembering more'. Curriculum design reflects the current guidance that knowledge should be broken down into distinct component parts, which can be built upon to craft a more complex composite understanding (ibid.). Similarly, current Ofsted guidance (2021) suggests that high-quality RE is comprised of substantive knowledge, ways of knowing such knowledge, and personal knowledge. Such discussions are a distinct move away from policies which positioned RE as a vehicle to bring divided communities together and promote a sense of social harmony (Ofsted 2007; DCSF Department For Children, Schools, And Families 2007).

Priestley, Biesta, and Robinson (2015) voice concern that where values and beliefs can be traced to early experiences, teachers may lack the ability to act flexibly or manoeuvre accordingly in the face of shifting priorities or professional dilemmas. As such, beginner teachers in RE may suffer from building their sense of teacher agency upon on a specific approach to RE whilst the discourse about what it means to 'get better' at RE shifts around them. Whilst there is still a place in RE for pupils to apply their learning and develop personal knowledge (Ofsted 2021), such an overt focus on breaking down subject knowledge into distinct component parts to be developed into a composite understanding, may be seen as a shift away from the RE evident in the legacy of community cohesion presented. This raises questions for classroom-based practitioners, such as those involved in this research. How is their teacher agency enacted, developed, or championed when the pedagogical base of the subject has reorientated itself away the values which inform their sense of what it means to be a teacher of RE? If teaching is viewed as a 'decontextualised series of interventions with narrow objectives' (Hordern and Brooks 2023), what does this mean for the agency of teachers and the values which underpin their sense of this agency? For those of us who work in training the next generation of RE teachers, what role can or should ITE play in challenging specific or dominant discourses? Palmer (2007) notes that it is the duty of those educating future professionals to ensure they can bring themselves back to the firm ground on which they and the profession stand. It is equally important that ITE providers educate and train beginner teachers to be aware of the impact of their previous experiences and how such experiences can influence the achievement of agency in the climate in which they are training to teach.

7. Conclusion

The small-scale nature of this research limits generalisation, however for the participants in this research there existed a legacy of community cohesion, which could be traced back to the RE they were taught and exposed to as secondary-aged pupils. This legacy was apparent in their sense of teacher agency in that it influenced their values, ideals, and beliefs about what they thought they should be doing in their classrooms as teachers of RE and, by extension, what they saw as the purpose of the subject in terms of the contribution RE makes to helping pupils live amongst diverse communities. Content which they did not recognise as overtly about community cohesion was seen

as a hindrance to this agency and gives weight to the assertion that beginner teachers are significantly influenced by their previous experiences of RE. Moreover, this research suggests that there is a much greater need to explore the experiences of beginner teachers of RE and to ensure that they are able to enact and achieve agency in different socio-political contexts. Failure to do so risks not only further damage to the professionalism of those within the subject (Freathy et al. 2014, 2016), but also risks an ill-informed and inauthentic understanding of the experiences of those at the outset of their RE teaching career and damages their continuing retention and development as religious education professionals.

Notes

1. Participants in this research undertook a 1-year induction as Newly Qualified Teachers (NQTs). Since September 2021 this has been replaced by the 2-year 'Early Career Teacher' induction in all English schools.
2. General Certificate of Secondary Education. The compulsory examinations sat by pupils at the end of their Secondary education.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Sjay Patterson-Craven currently works at Edge Hill University where she leads on Initial Teacher Education for the Secondary and Further Education phase. Prior to this she led on Post Graduate ITE for Secondary RE and taught RE in secondary schools in Manchester. She completed her EdD in 2021 which explored the teacher agency of NQTs in RE

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