ASSESSMENT AND EXAMINATIONS IN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION: SIXTY YEARS OF

RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS

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ASSESSMENT AND EXAMINATIONS IN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION: VIRTUAL SPECIAL ISSUE

EDITIORIAL

In the broad field of educational research, there is a common view (e.g. Bernstein 1973; Wyse, Hayward and Pandya 2016) that education consists of three domains: curriculum, i.e. the content of what is taught, such as the disciplines of knowledge and intellectual skills; pedagogy, i.e. the processes of teaching and learning, such as the role and nature of classroom interaction; assessment, i.e. the methods of evidencing that the learning has occurred, including public examinations. In research about religious education, there has been considerable attention to curriculum, notably in defining the religions(s) and skills to be learnt, and some attention to pedagogy, for example in terms of classroom talk and dialogue; over the years assessment has received somewhat less attention, but is increasingly in the spotlight. This virtual special edition – the first ever in British Journal of Religious Education - takes stock of the past by presenting some of the research and scholarship on assessment, notably including examinations, which has previously been published in the journal (or its antecedent publications) from the 1950s onwards[1].

The papers set out below were chosen to illustrate the deep-rootedness of issues in assessment and examinations, covering a period of over sixty years, from 1952 to the present. This allows us to compare the present and the past, and to evaluate current debates in the light of an understanding

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[1] The journal was originally entitled *Religion in Education* (1934-1961), and then *Learning for Living* (1961-1978), before gaining its current title.

of their origins; indeed previously in this journal, Copley (1998) offered a similar review of the 1940s. The selection criteria included ensuring each decade was represented, and showcasing different forms of warrant and methodology, such as professional comment, qualitative studies, quantitative studies, secondary data analysis, theoretical papers, and policy review. Articles that use the term 'assessment' to mean psychological measurement by researchers were excluded (e.g. Francis and Fearn 2001; Astley et al. 2012), with one slight exception, as were my own articles on assessment for learning (e.g. Fancourt 2005, 2010).

Given the historical spread, most papers are focused on the situation in the United Kingdom; indeed the final article (Jokić and Hargreaves 2015), from Croatia, is the only article at all from outside the United Kingdom. This may simply be a question of chance, and such articles might be found in other journals, but it may also be due to a lacuna on the part of scholars and researchers; for example, nearly a decade ago, the REDCo (Religion in Education: Dialogue or Conflict) project did not explicitly include assessment as part of the methodological framework for its comparison of various countries (Weisse 2007). Issues of assessment are however a central concern most governments' educational policies, including within international comparisons such as PISA (Organisation for Economic and Cultural Development 2014; Meyer and Benavot 2013). Moreover, the Polish government was taken to the European Court of Human Rights over a school's handling of religious education assessment data, because it did not give any credits to a pupil who had opted out of religious education, and who thus was at a disadvantage against his peers[2]. For this reason, there is now an increasing research focus around the world on assessment

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[2] ECtHR 15 June 2010 *Grzelak v Poland,* Application no. 7710/02

in religious education (e.g. Osbeck et al. 2015), even if it is only beginning to be fully reflected in this journal.

In what follows, the first paper is described, and how various themes emerge from it, then the remaining nine papers are briefly described before some concluding remarks on research and scholarship on assessment and examinations.

H.A. Guy: key themes in assessment and examinations

In the first paper, Guy, who was a teacher at Taunton's College - a grammar school in Southampton - sets the scene for what follows (see also Guy 1947, 1949). This is the first article in the journal to tackle examinations or assessment directly, in response to some concluding remarks in an earlier editorial (Yeaxlee 1951), and offers a concise and prescient guide to the role and value of examinations, and to some extent classroom assessment. The article raises six broad themes which run throughout the subsequent selections:

A. Whether RE is assessable *per se* - as Guy (1952) explains, 'There are some who object to the whole idea of examinations in Religious Knowledge. They assert that this is not a "suitable" subject for examination' (p. 60). Indeed, in an earlier article he had pithily condemned 'the heresy that Scripture is "not a suitable subject for examination".' (Guy 1947, p. 91). This issue was also addressed in other studies during 1950s, notably the Institute of Christian Education's (1954) Report, *Religious education in schools*, which described some headteachers' concerns that examinations would 'spoil the spiritual atmosphere' of lessons (p. 72). This remained problematic, as even in 1990s one government document implied that

spiritual development was assessable whilst another government document stated that it was not (see Fancourt 2015, p. 129).

B. The nature of assessment. Guy alludes to the connection between formative assessment - such as questioning - and summative assessment, prefiguring later wider debates on assessment of learning and assessment for learning. He continues, after the previous quotation: 'One may wonder how [teachers who object to examinations] conduct their lessons in school. Do they never commence a lesson by asking the children questions about the matter of the last lesson?...For what is an examination but simply asking pupils, in writing or orally, questions on what they have studied?' (p. 60). Guy here explicitly links diagnostic questioning with public examinations, implicitly conceptualising them as a spectrum (see Harlen 2005).

C. The value of accreditation. Guy also argues that being an examinable subject would give religious education status, a point which is echoed increasingly loudly as neoliberal pressures have raised the stakes on examination results: 'Treating Religious Knowledge as suitable for external examination also raises the whole subject in the estimation of pupils and of the school staff' (p. 62-63). This, as we will see, is not as straightforward as one might assume.

D. The relationship between religiosity and assessment. 'Some candidates are no doubt very devout and regular churchgoing adolescents. But they frequently fail in the examination because they consider that this is a sufficient substitute for accurate knowledge of the syllabus they are expected to study.' (p. 62). This is in some ways the mirror of theme A; if religious education can be assessed on a differential scale (e.g. Sadler 1987), then learning is not the same as religious conviction, since few would argue that religious affiliation or commitment could be judged in this way. However, the differences between them would need to be explicit.

E. Assessing evaluation and reflection. The issue of how to define and assess evaluative skills is picked up in several articles, and sets up questions about the alignment between curriculum and assessment. As Guy comments in relation to the contemporary curriculum, 'mere repetition of passages from the Bible is not enough. *Intelligent knowledge* is required; candidates must be able to realise and state the significance of events or teaching, as well as narrate the simple facts.' (p. 62, emphasis added). Both in England and internationally, this has subsequently been played out in re-conceptualisations of the distinction between learning about and learning from religion (see Fancourt 2015).

F. The relationship between teachers and examiners. Guy addresses a perception that the examiners are separate from religious education teachers, raising questions about the different roles and practices within the field of religious education (see e.g. Baumfield et al. 2015): 'The standard of Religious Knowledge entries at most School Certificate examinations is at present very low. This is not because the examiners are hard-hearted and strict. They themselves are mostly practising teachers, and appreciate the difficulties under which their colleagues are working.' (p. 63). Whilst Guy saw the relationship benignly, this relationship has become increasingly questioned since examination boards - in all subjects - have also become the producers of course books for their specifications, and thus Puttick (2015) raises concerns about their multiple roles.

Two or three relevant themes are set out for the subsequent selected articles, though this is a fairly loose judgement; they are intended to be illuminatory and not systematic, and the reader may well identity other themes for each article, and indeed other themes.

From 1952 to 2015: examinations, assessment and examinations again

Harris's paper, from the 1960s, follows Guy in arguing for the importance of examinations, but he asks if examinations had led to a lack of challenge in the subject. This was not simply because the examination boards were setting simplistic questions; it was because teachers seemed to prefer to teach students in this way, rather than addressing questions providing more complex challenges:

> Out of nearly a thousand papers from non-selective secondary school pupils in their final year, nearly all avoided the two questions on the paper which asked for something additional to the straightforward narration of a Biblical narrative (p.24)

Thus Harris suggests that the examiners' attempts to provide a more stimulating subject were not being taken up by teachers, raising questions about teachers' sense of professionalism. The article addresses themes D, E and F.

Third is John Elliott's (1972) article, 'RE teachers look at CSE', and he gathered qualitative data from groups of teachers, showing how they disliked many of the examination boards' Christian-centric, Bible-focused exam syllabus, wanting a different approach. This article seems to show the reverse position to Harris's analysis, in that it now seems to be the teachers who are demanding different challenges and the examination boards who are stuck in their ways. The author is perhaps better known for his major contribution later to the development of action research, both in Britain and internationally (Elliott 1991; 2007; 2015), but he wrote various

articles for this journal (see also Elliott 1971), in which his later interest in teachers' pedagogical thinking can be seen emerging. The article is relevant to themes E and F.

The fourth article, from 1985, is by Allan Wainwright and entitled 'Some Problems in Examining RS in the Proposed 16+ Part Two: A Taxonomy of Skills for RS', and is the second in a series across three editions (see also Wainwright 1984, 1985). Wainwright, based at Moray House in Edinburgh, was an important figure in theorising examinations over a long period – indeed Harris's article was in response to him (Wainwright 1963; see also Wainwright 1964). Here, he meticulously applies Bloom's taxonomy (Bloom 1956) to (Biblical) religious education, typologising a range of different intellectual skills. The article shows the longevity of interest in utilising Bloom's theories in formalising the subject's appropriate intellectual skills, and is relevant to themes B and E.

The fifth to seventh papers show how implementation of the first National Curriculum following the 1988 Education Act had significant implications for assessment in religious education in England. The National Curriculum (National Curriculum Council 1990) was the first mandatory curriculum in England, and introduced the eight-level scale across all subjects - except religious education. Whilst many commentators within the world of religious education were wary of the neoliberal motives behind the National Curriculum's structure (see Grimmitt 2000), others were concerned that religious education was adrift in the wider curriculum, and John Rudge's article sets the agenda for subsequent developments in assessment in the subject. Rudge was a member of the Westhill Project team, based in Birmingham (Westhill 1989; 1991), one of the two major research projects addressing assessment directly, the other being the FARE project (Forms of

Assessment in Religious Education) led by Terence Copley at Exeter (Copley et al. 1991). Rudge's article is a position paper, setting the agenda for future strategy within the religious education community, and marks a shift in focus in the journals from examinations to classroom assessment.

Sixth, by the turn of the millennium, there had been a more general articulation of the need for better understanding of formative assessment and its relationship with summative assessment (Black and Wiliam 1998), to which Guy had already alluded. Lat Blaylock has long been an important figure in professional development in the subject, and here he addresses the implications for religious education, tackling similar issues as Rudge's article, but also consideration of these assessment paradigms (see also Fancourt 2005, 2010), and their implications for pedagogy, addressing themes B and E.

An outcome of these debates was the publication of the non-statutory framework for religious education (QCA 2004) which set out an eight-level scale for assessment, mirroring the National Curriculum. However, in 2005, Kay offered an insightful critique, which reviewed the issues of curriculum and assessment, addressing wider questions about curriculum and assessment theory, including - at least implicitly - alignment. Much of Kay's contribution to this journal has been in large-scale quantitative analysis (e.g. Kay and Smith 2002); this article however supplements Rudge's and Blaylock's papers, in a critical review of what was finally produced in national policy, and is relevant to themes A and E.

The final three papers consider issues surrounding examinations and examination-dominated assessment practices. One long-standing strand of debates about the place of religion in schools is connected with the higher argument that church and faith schools have higher attainment in public examinations, though this argument has been critiqued often on the basis that pupils of a higher socio-economic background are disproportionately represented (see Allen and West 2009). Godfrey and Morris (2008) address a related issue of whether these faith schools' pupils' overall success is aided by strong performances in religious education, through a statistical analysis of secondary data - from published examination results. This is a reminder of wider policy arguments about the place of religions in education, and also reflects the wider strategic importance of examination results for schools, addressing themes C and D.

Ninthly, Thanissaro's (2012) article presents the case for more nuanced approaches to assessment. Drawing on Piagetian-inspired psychology, it merges school-based assessment with psychological assessment of attitudes, to combat what he terms the 'banking model' of assessment through public examinations. His other work has focused on the experiences of pupils from minority religious backgrounds, especially Buddhist, and his interest here is in taking home background into account in assessment. Such an approach would require a significant re-evaluation of the role and nature of assessment in the subject – and raise issues about its place within the wider curriculum. It addresses themes B and D.

Finally, Jokić and Hargreaves's (2015) recent article is the only piece of research on assessment and examination from outside the UK, presenting pupils' views of the value of accreditation within their attitudes to religious education in Croatia. The issues and arguments they present

resound with the debates presented in the previous papers, most notably Guy's assumption of the value of certification being here undermined by the lack of challenge in public examinations; pupils will not value it if it is too easy, but various educational and religious authorities appear cautious with differential outcomes – suggesting that some pupils might have failed. It links to themes C and D, and makes an interesting comparison with Godfrey and Morris's article, as it would have been valuable to have found out what the pupils in their schools though of the value of their qualifications in religious education.

Discussion: researching examination and assessment in religious education

This selection of articles suggests that these issues of examinations and assessment have been a constant preoccupation within religious education over the last sixty years, and three broad comments can be made. First, despite this preoccupation, accounts of change in religious education often generally describe tensions between confessional and pluralistic approaches, or between variations of either or both of these approaches, most recently in references to 'paradigms' (Barnes 2014; Gearon 2013); such accounts do not give strong explanations of the ever-increasing neoliberal pressures (Fancourt 2014), tending to see the argument as being philosophical or theological in tone. Even in Copley's (2008) detailed history of religious education in England and Wales since 1940s there are no index entries for either assessment or examinations, none of the articles in this special edition are cited, and most surprisingly he does not even cite his own work on the FARE Project (Copley et al. 1991). This lack of attention means that in the preface to the second edition he asked rhetorically, 'Who would have predicted in the 1950s that RE in the 2000s would show a massive surge in 16+ examination entries that it

would overtake history, geography and French?' (Copley 2008, p. xi), yet Guy and perhaps

Yeaxlee - and the other authors in this collection over subsequent decades - would be obvious

suggestions, who would also not be surprised by the more precarious positions as a result of a

change in status of the public examination in religious education by the Coalition Government

(APPG 2013). The expertise has certainly existed, but has been buried in the archives.

Second, the range across the six themes identified from Guy's paper shows both the variety of

different issues involved in these processes, as well as how these issues are entwined. For

example, the value of accreditation, in desiring a course which awards pupils with formal public

certificates (e.g. Jokić and Hargreaves), has implications for how the learning outcomes can be

defined, especially given that examinations typically need to give a differential spread of results,

and this has implications for the relationship between religiosity and assessment, and also for the

relationship between examiners and teachers.

Third, there is a continuing need for studies on the processes of assessment and examining.

Clearly, there is a wider range of articles and studies than is included here, both within the

journal (e.g. Dingwall 1972; Francis et al. 2016), and outside it (e.g. Forster 2001; Grant and

Matemba 2013), but it is unsurprising that these issues get overlooked if there is still little

scholarly attention or empirical research. This is particularly striking given that there has been a

considerable effort over the years in planning and implementing assessment or examination

criteria by local and national governments, schools and examination boards, but less theorisation

of or research into this planning and implementation. However, the articles presented here

demonstrate how important insights can be gained from a range of different methodologies, from

a detailed theoretical exposition of Bloom's taxonomy, to analysis of secondary data, to policy critique. Indeed in the light of recent changes to examinations in England, a repeat of Elliott's interviews with teachers about course content could be valuable in supplementing Horrell, O'Donnell and Tollerton's (2016) recent analysis of the treatment of religion in the media. A related point is that religious education is not explicitly featured in more general research and commentary in this field (e.g. Wyse, Hayward and Pandya 2016), such as assessment for learning (Black and Wiliam 1998), marking (Elliott et al. 2016), or equity (Scott et al. 2014) because other areas of the curriculum are the focus of wider attention, but also because there is no obvious research to contribute to these discussions. Therefore, issues of examinations and assessment in religious education are often glossed over both internally, by researchers and commentators within the field of religious education, as well as externally, by those interested in assessment more generally.

In conclusion therefore, this selection showcases a wide-range of articles within this journal on assessment and examinations, pointing to the longevity of the issues, the range of different themes within them, and to some potential methodologies for exploring and refining these vital aspects of religious education. This introduction is therefore intended as an invitation to and encouragement of new and different investigations, both in Britain and internationally.

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