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Key findings in the Texts and Teachers report

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As I reread the transcripts and relistened to the recordings of the long interviews that concluded the Texts and Teachers pilot project, it was clear there were essential tensions in what those teachers were saying.

Several features from what many of the participants said, stand out as reflecting what is possible if we were to take hermeneutics and worldview education seriously, rather than the current status quo, at least at secondary school level.

It is doable: Irrespective of pupil population, whether in poor or wealthy social economic settings, whether in a faithy or largely nons pupil population, the teachers that taught hermeneutically, had experiences of something different and rich in their classrooms, with a quality they had not seen before. This was true even when they were long experienced teachers (3 had over 15 years) . Given it was on the back of what was just a few hours CPD in hermeneutics, albeit also of course those backgrounds of the teachers in terms of study and expertise, it was striking to see what seemed to be an unlocking experience. A door opening which one participant used as a phrase to describe what was happening for students. They had conversations with year 7s that went deeper than the questions the year 11 GCSE exams encourage.

Several participants expressed surprise at how pupils of widely different levels of achievement responded positively to the study of longer texts. This may be because narrative is easier to become familiar with than lists of propositions or quotes.

It can be multi religious: Two schools found they could apply the scholarship of sacred texts studies, studied for Christian texts, to the study of Muslim sacred texts. They grew in confidence about progression across religions, whilst remaining within a single discipline. That might be a very significant possibility in that it opens up religious/worldview diversity within single disciplinary patterns.

It decolonises: It think this shows sacred texts study need not be narrow or exclusive and this could open up a very significant possibility for the subject. Previous attempts at bringing in external disciplines to the study of religion has often had the consequence of colonising the content with external concepts and ideas that have the result of converting, rather than translating, the subject matter. That error leads every worldview into becoming a version of the liberal view of religion.

It is disciplinary: Previously, in RE, we were presented with a choice between study within a religious tradition, called confessional by some, and study from the objective afar, called professional or academic. Now we need a new way – study through disciplines. This asks a key question of curriculum writers. Is it time to develop sacred text programmes of study that cross two or three religious traditions rather than compartmentalising the different religions, or using the themes which owe little to disciplinarity and more to some immanent frame that colonises the content.

It is holistic and humanistic: A second observation, from three participants, showed the fascinating interplay within students between their personal worldview, institutional worldviews and academic study. In one case a Catholic sixth form student had what the RE

teacher participant described as a very important conversation, as he was introduced to symbolic meaning and non-literal interpretations, which the Catholic tradition endorses and includes in its approach to hermeneutics with multiple dimensions, following the tradition of different senses of meaning from the quadriga. The middle teenager had not encountered this before and the introduction of it proved troubling as thus far they had assumed a more literal reading of the Bible which was quite different from that of the tradition they believed they were part of. What this describes is a critical engagement within a faith based approach to the subject. And here I want to name check the recently and most sadly, deceased Bill Gent who did so much work around Madrassa education, and who also had knowledge of how RE teachers might find themselves revealing new things for children of beliefs, about their own traditions.

It is critical: In another school a participant teacher commented on how children had been introduced in a Church primary school, only to literal readings of the bible, and though most of the pupils were not Christian, this coloured their view of all religions readings of scripture such that the introduction to sacred text scholarship in year 7 came as a surprise. Margaret Carswell has argued repeatedly for the importance of hermeneutical approaches to sacred texts study in primary RE classrooms in her publications and projects with many schools in the UK and Australia¹. For example, she developed methods of introducing historical critical hermeneutics with 5 year olds. The kind of hermeneutics she does with primary children, English examinations curricula do not mention specifically until A Level.

In a third school, a participant teacher reported that a pupil had gone home after studying hermeneutics and later said to the teacher that they had opened up and reread their own religions' sacred text, which was of an east Asian religious tradition. This they found was positive. There was transfer between school curriculum and personal knowing.

These examples show how and why the separation between personal and so called objective, cannot easily stand in how we think of our subject. What is required is a sensitively and professionally managed relationship, not segregation. I suspect many teachers know this full well.

It can support but also challenges GCSE: Finally, most of the participants also made two kinds of observations about the GCSEs from their own work on the project. First they saw that an understanding of the hermeneutic of sacred texts could help their students explain difference and so write better long answers in evaluation questions that required insight into why differences were present within religion. This underscores precisely the words of the Commission final report about why the 'how' matters. This pilot study found evidence that a positive gain might come from teaching sacred texts scholarship in the current GCSE system. Hermeneutical RE can be good for grades.

Second, they saw a significant omission in examination design which does not foreground sacred texts scholarship and disciplinarity as something to be specifically included in the specification, or recognised in the grading system and question structures. One participant felt students could do very well without any sense of symbolic meaning. The tick tock

¹ Margaret Carswell (2018) Promoting fundamentalist belief? How scripture is presented in three religious education programmes in Catholic primary schools in Australia and England and Wales, *British Journal of Religious Education*, 40:3, 288-297, DOI: [10.1080/01416200.2018.1493271](https://doi.org/10.1080/01416200.2018.1493271); Carswell, M. (2018). Teaching scripture: Moving towards a hermeneutical model for religious education in Australian Catholic Schools. *Journal of Religious Education*, 66(3), 213–223.

video of the student critiquing the ludicrous dummed down practice of using a single quote to make a generalised point about almost anything is a clue that we are getting this wrong. The prioritisation of sources of wisdom and authority is a step forward but without specific space for the scholarship of sacred texts study practiced within the relevant tradition, the real gain will be hard to achieve and the dangers of an undue influence of proof texting will continue to limit and damage the education of students². The professed multi-disciplinarity permitted by the exams is a myth for question design reveals the non-discipline structure that is rewarded.

For the moment it is accidentally the case that students with a more hermeneutical kind of study could show better exam answers, but it should be hardwired into the fabric of the exam system, perhaps seen in similar light to the value of mathematical method as well as correct answers in maths exams. The Commission final report wish for the 'how' to matter as much as the 'what' in our subject, will falter without due recognition of and attention to examinations.

This was a small scale pilot study over 7 schools and 10 teachers. But it relates to an international field of scholarship with detailed and sustained work in Australia, Europe, the Americas as well as the UK³. I believe the insights I have outlined flow from the work of many colleagues in British RE, and the experiences of teachers.

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² Bowie, R. (in Press). The implicit knowledge structure preferred by questions in English Religious Studies public exams. In G. Biesta and P. Hannam (Eds) *Religion and education: The forgotten dimensions of religious education*. Leiden:Brill.

³ Bowie, B. and Coles, R. 2018. We reap what we sew: perpetuating biblical illiteracy in new English religious studies exams and the proof text binary question. *British Journal of Religious Education*. 40 (3), pp. 277-287; Bowie, B. 2017. Interpreting texts more wisely: A Review of Research and the Case for Change. in: Stuart-Buttle, R. and Shortt, J. (ed.) *Christian, Faith, Formation and Education* Palgrave-Macmillan. pp. 211-228.