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UoW Affiliated Authors	Parker, Stephen
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Children's Agency in Religious Education

The purpose of religious education is often couched in terms of its religious or cultural benefits to society, but what do children and young people expect and/or need from religious education? How would religious education look if it were take more seriously children's subjectivity and agency, not just in reaction to the learning which teachers stage in their lessons, but as directional in terms of the shape and content of the curriculum and pedagogy?

How religious education has conceived of children and young people historically is informative (Parker, 2015). In general, it has more often than not styled them, explicitly or implicitly, as passive individuals to be instructed; as students reacting to a stimulus provided by the teacher, or learners to be crammed with 'religious education knowledge'. Rarely, has it viewed children as active participants in their own learning: the "adult", religious representative or religious educationalist knows best' has been the dominant ethos of the subject. It is perhaps unsurprising, therefore, that at various points in the history of religious education its dullness and irrelevance to students has often been of note (Copley). This anticipated passivity of children and young people in RE mirrored the way in which children were viewed in schooling generally, and in wider society until around the 1980s (McEvoy, 2019).

In line with the perspective that 'children's lives are now seen to make an impact on social and cultural life' (McEvoy, 2018, p.675), thankfully, religious education increasingly conceives of students as being co-investigators in the shared enterprise of researching the religions and worldview of others (Stern 2018; Freathy et al). Indeed, children and young people's voices are sometimes called upon, in the English and Welsh system at least, as part of such gatherings as 'youth SACRE' - though these panels have little say over the content and shape of children's learning in the subject.

What if religious education were to take a step further in giving prominence to children's autonomy as subjects, designing the curriculum to be more actively concerned with encouraging the exploration of children and young people's questions, their natural inclinations and particular interests, reflecting this in both content and pedagogy? What adjustments to the subject might need to be made so that it is more attuned to their needs as blossoming

individuality, whether children and young people deem themselves to be religious or non-religious, rather than ignoring the positions children deem themselves to hold as Rachael Shillitoe and Anna Strhan have recently found (Strhan and Shillitoe, 2020)? Granted, it would take enormous confidence in oneself as a teacher, and skill in orchestrating such lessons, to let children take centre stage, permitting them govern the direction of learning. But surely the professional development of teachers required would pay off in terms of student engagement? It seems to me that the more we freight RE with 'adult' expectations, of doing this or that whilst ignoring children, the less likely it is to be able to do what children want or need of it that would truly make it of relevance to them.

In arguing all this, I do not think I am not simply romanticising childhood. I write at a time, mid-pandemic, when awareness of the mental health challenges facing children and young people are immense, and appear to be growing. Schooling itself places significant pressures upon children and young people: pressures of workload, performativity and the requirements to accumulate a mass of knowledge which barely seem relevant. Schooling is more often than not viewed as preparing children for a life of productive work as a citizen, not for life and wellbeing in general. RE is not exempt from being complicit in this. Can religious educators tip the balance towards a greater weight being given to children's agency in the subject?

More than a century ago Ellen Key declared the twentieth century to be 'the century of the child' (Key, 1909). In her book, Key lamented the 'soul murderous' effect of schooling in general (chapter 5). Alongside the rest of schooling, has RE unwittingly and ironically become one of the many aspects of education which commits 'soul murder'? As Key put it: 'Our age cries for personality; but it will ask in vain, until we let our children live and learn as personalities, until we allow them to have their own will, think their own thoughts, work out their own knowledge, form their own judgements; or to put the matter briefly, until we cease to suppress the raw material of personality in school, vainly hoping later on in life to revive it again (p.232).

This issue of the journal

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Are they required to be passive, or do they have a voice and agency in the learning process, or indeed in responding to religion itself, acting in relation to it, or even upon it?

Century of the child
Children's agency conceptualised
The spiritual life of children

Rachael Shillitoe
Anna Strhan

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