Understanding Attainment in Religious Studies

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A Research & Development Project

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‘Understanding Attainment in Religious Studies’

Abstract

This small scale research project was designed to investigate barriers to students' attainment in Religious Studies (RS), and how these barriers could be addressed to give students the best opportunities for success. A review of the literature was conducted which investigated the attainment gap, the aims of RS, and the issues that surround assessment in RS. Following this, the first phase of the research involved a focus group in collaboration with my colleagues. This was designed to gather teachers' views of the barriers to learning in RS. Phase two of the research involved student interviews, which sought to establish what students find difficult about the subject. Subsequently, the intervention was delivered to a year 11 class where verbal feedback was given following a summative assessment. Findings indicate that students find RS difficult for two reasons: first, the vast amount of specific subject knowledge required, and second, lack of experiential knowledge and understanding of the religion studied. One method that could be used to address the challenge with subject knowledge is to implement 1:1 meetings to support revision. It is recommended that these are modelled on the intervention. However, some further research into teaching and learning techniques that would embed specific subject knowledge would be beneficial. Moreover, this is a small scale project and therefore it is difficult to claim that these findings are true for all of RS, however, the research methods could be replicated in other settings in order to corroborate this.

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Introduction

The purpose of this research and development project is to investigate the issues that impact students' ability to achieve their full potential within the context of the religious studies (RS) curriculum. This is an issue of importance in my professional context because, as a teacher and subject leader, I am accountable for the progress of the students that study RS. Moreover, one of the greatest professional challenges in the past academic year has been the GCSE exam class. These students have chosen to take GCSE RS as an optional subject, however, there were many students in this class that were not on track to reach either their target grades, or grades that they would be happy with, which for most would be a 'pass', meaning a level 4 or 5. Many of these students are boys. My initial assessment of this problem lead me to assume that the boys were not reaching their target because RS is an essay based subject and boys generally achieve less well when there is extended writing. However, I am aware that I have made a number of assumptions. On closer inspection, there were students of both genders at varying levels that were not reaching their target. There are likely to be a variety of reasons for this, which could be related to the student or the subject itself. Further, investigation of the factors affecting these students' attainment is required, to find out what is hindering their progress and what could be done to mitigate against any barriers. This would benefit the students concerned, as well as students following this year group, therefore any learning regarding attainment could also benefit the department and the wider-school.

Another reason that the attainment of this year 11 class demands particular attention is that they will be the first to sit their GCSE exams for two years. In the past two years'

students have experienced two extended periods of national lockdown where for at least nine months 1 in 7 children have been required to live under a stay-at-home order (UNICEF, 2021). Consequently, schools had to move to online learning during these periods. At the time this occurred, my school stated that it was obvious 'some students will have thrived on home learning while others may not'. The year 11 class concerned would have experienced online learning during two out of three years of their GCSE study. This year the exams boards issued a package of changes including advanced guidance to help students revise, in order to mitigate against the impact of lost learning (AQA, 2022). Several writers have made it clear that COVID19 will impact on both student attainment and emotional wellbeing (Andrew et al, 2020, Watson, 2020). There is also general agreement in the literature that home learning will exacerbate the attainment gaps that already existed (Andrew et al, 2020, Watson, 2020). Professionally, the absence of exams in the past two years created significant pressure in the run up to the summer 2022 exams because students have missed so much face to face learning time. This is important context that must be understood however, the impact of it on student attainment remains to be seen as the summer results will not be available at the time of writing.

Fundamentally, the main theoretical framework through which attainment is understood in education is a long standing educational issue known as "The Attainment Gap". Attainment is explained by Marcus as the 'measurable progress which children and young people make as they advance through and beyond school' (2016:26). This progress includes a range of both skills and knowledge that students need in order to succeed in learning, in work and in life beyond the education system (Marcus, 2016). The Department of Education summarises the problem thus:

‘Evidence shows that disadvantaged children generally face additional challenges in reaching their potential at school and often do not perform as well as other pupils’ (2022). Evidence suggests that the gaps that are present at secondary school actually begin during early years and only grow throughout school (Andrews, Robinson and Hutchinson, 2017). This leads to pupils ‘…end[ing] primary school over a year behind their non-disadvantaged peers and are over two years behind by the end of secondary school (Andrews, Robinson and Hutchinson, 2017:10). Therefore, at secondary school by ‘…Key Stage 4, the gap in progress between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged pupils is 0.48 points: almost half a grade in each GCSE subject’ (Andrews, Robinson and Hutchinson, 2017:13). These statistics refer only to the impact of socio-economic measures; however, they give a clear picture of the challenge that is faced with regards to attainment in secondary schools.

The literature on the attainment gap focusses on three main factors that can prevent a student from making sufficient progress, including gender, ethnicity and socio-economic factors, therefore each of these will be addressed in turn, according to the significance placed on them within the literature. Following this, whether the attainment gap can be closed will be investigated. However, as my research questions focus on attainment in RS, some understanding of the nature of RS and its aims, as well as how it is assessed will be required. The literature review will then be followed by a research based intervention designed to address the research questions. The research design was permeated by collaboration with teachers and students in order to gather data that was a genuine representation of the professional context within which the research was conducted. Therefore, staff were consulted though a focus group, and students were consulted through 1:1 interviews. This preceded the

intervention for teaching and learning, which involved 1:1 meetings that provided verbal feedback to students.

Professional Context

Alexander School (anonymised) is a growing secular academy school, with two campuses comprising almost 3,000 students, aged 11-18 years. It is based in a large, modern and ethnically diverse town. In the academic year 2021-22 25% of students were considered eligible for Pupil Premium. Alexander Schools' improvement priorities for at least the past two years have focussed on raising attainment levels amongst two specific groups; firstly, disadvantaged or pupil premium students' and secondly, the attainment of boys in comparison to girls.

Within the RS department AQA GCSE and Pearsons A-Level qualifications are taught. Key-Stage 3 classes receive three sessions per fortnight in order to meet the national requirement for statutory Religious Education (RE) (DfE, 2014). The department itself is in a privileged position because it is staffed, in the main, by subject specialist teachers. In line with the schools' improvement priorities the department has also focused on improving outcomes for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, implementing a range of strategies, such as an invitation only book club, a core focus on knowing your students, using targeted questioning to engage Pupil Premium students, or providing additional resources to Pupil Premium students. However, the department has not had such a focus on raising the attainment of boys, thus some greater understanding of what could be effective for enabling boys to achieve success in their attainment would be beneficial.

Literature Review

What are the Significant Issues that Impact on Student Attainment Within Secondary Education?

National and International Context

> ‘Equipping citizens with the knowledge and skills necessary to achieve their full potential, to contribute to an increasingly interconnected world, and to convert better skills into better lives needs to become a more central preoccupation of policy makers around the world’ (OECD, 2018:2).

This opening statement from the OECD, PISA 2018 report encapsulates the focus of this project. It is evident here that there is a drive to understand and close the attainment gap between the more affluent and poorer pupils in the United Kingdom and across Europe. Several authors provide an understanding of the international concern in this area including: the OECD reports of 2012, 2014, 2018, as well as Parsons 2016, Oppedisano and Turati 2011, Clifton and Cook 2012, and Sousu and Elis 2014. In many countries, socioeconomic background remains one of the largest predictors of the quality of education a student acquires (OECD, 2018). Evidence suggests that:

> '…the 10% most socioeconomically advantaged students outperformed their 10% most disadvantaged counterparts in reading by 141 score points, on average across OECD countries.' (OECD, 2018:5).

However, the OECD also warns that '… social disadvantage does not automatically lead to poor educational performance for students and schools...' (2018:10) and we would be wrong to assume this. Although, the statistics regarding attainment remain very concerning. For example:

> 'Over ten million students represented by PISA in 2018 were not able to complete even the most basic reading tasks – and these were 15-year-olds living in the 79 high- and middle-income countries that participated in the test' (OECD, 2018:5).

This is terrifying! Moreover, the literature makes the long-term impact of the 'attainment gap' clear. When students achieve below that of their more advantaged peers, the result is that they are less likely to continue their education past compulsory age, and therefore are likely to have a lower income and to have poorer health and a greater propensity to become involved in crime (Andrews, Robinson and Hutchinson, 2017, Sosu and Ellis, 2014, Marks 2008). For students, society and the economy, the impact of the attainment gap is severe.

However, despite this rather dismal picture, some hope can be found. A number of countries have seen improvements in their OECD rankings, including Estonia and

Portugal (OECD, 2018). Plus, in 2018 some countries including Albania, the Republic of Moldova, Peru and Qatar saw remarkable improvements in their students' performance (OECD, 2018). The OECD suggests that where countries have a '…determination to build a first-class education system…' they can achieve this despite economic circumstances (OECD, 2018:10).

However, disappointingly the OECD report is not specific in terms of giving clear and detailed examples of what is being done across different countries to make said gains. It purely states that:

> 'In working to achieve these goals, more and more countries are looking beyond their own borders for evidence of the most successful and efficient education policies and practices' (OECD, 2018: 2).

Whilst this is beneficial, to make similar gains, it is necessary to know what strategies are working.

However, the UK provides an example of a policy that has been implemented to enable schools to improve outcomes for disadvantaged students. In 2011 the coalition government introduced the 'Pupil Premium' (Roberts, Foster and Long, 2011, DofE, 2022). This is funding that is available directly to schools for those students '…who are eligible for free school meals, or have been eligible in the past 6 years …' (DofE, 2022). The funding is not required to be used for individual students and therefore school leaders have the flexibility to use it as they deem most appropriate, in order to

raise the attainment of disadvantaged students. This policy correlates with the advice of the OECD which states it is important to ensure that interventions are targeted at those students and/or schools who are socio-economically disadvantaged (OECD, 2018). Although, the OECD warn it would be a mistake to assume that all low performance is related to socio-economic status (SES), as evidence shows that 'the strength of the relationship between a student's SES and his or her performance varied greatly across countries and economies' (2018:17). Whilst SES compounds low performance, the OECD suggests that schools with low performance should receive adequate resources and support regardless of SES status (OECD, 2018). It is beyond the scope of this project to give a full evaluation of the effectiveness of the Pupil Premium. However, a summary of the literature reveals a mixed opinion. On the one hand, Brown suggests that in Early Years the Pupil Premium is not particularly effective due to issues with administration and eligibility (2020). However, this was a geographically focussed study therefore, it is difficult to draw conclusions that can be applied to the whole of England (Brown, 2020). On the other hand, both Craske (2018) and Gorard, Siddiqui and Huat (2019) suggest that Pupil Premium could be having a positive impact. The challenge in assessing the impact of the Pupil Premium is that funding is allocated directly to schools, and therefore the evidence of the impact is firstly 'contingent on specific context and purpose' (Gorard, Siddiqui and Huat (2019), and secondly, it is difficult to communicate the impact of the funding in a way that is understandable and quantifiable to external agencies (Craske, 2018).

The Attainment Gap: Ethnicity

The literature on ethnicity and the attainment gap is dominated by the work of Steve Strand. Moreover, much of the recent work in this area is heavily influenced by the

question of decolonisation of the curriculum, however this is beyond the scope of this project, and therefore this section will be based largely on the work of Stand. Strand suggests that there are two groups of students that appear to make the least progress in comparison to their peers: Black Caribbean boys and White British boys (2010 & 2015). Strand's 2010 study 'analyses the educational progress of an entire national cohort of over 530,000 pupils in England between age 7 … and age 11 …' (289). This work states that Black Caribbean boys (non-FSM) make the least progress in comparison with their peers. He concludes that this is a 'systemic problem not an issue with low-quality teaching in school' (Strand, 201:289). In addition, Strand also suggests that among pupils entitled to FSM all ethnic minority groups achieve greater success than White British pupils at age 16, with the only exception to this being middle and high SES Black Caribbean boys (2015). However, it is worth noting that Bradbury argues that there is an issue with the way in which the government monitors attainment in schools which 'reinforces differences in attainment by ethnicity' (Bradbury, 2011:277). Bradbury's argument is that 'the growing importance of the 'contextual value added' scores '…in schools threatens to engender practices that systematically disadvantage pupils from certain ethnicities' (Bradbury, 2011:277). Strand's work gives a clear picture of the statistics concerning attainment, however it does not provide much insight as to *why* this is the case. Understanding the reasons why some groups of students are underachieving is important in teaching as it gives a greater insight into the appropriate strategies that could be used to increase attainment. Bradbury gives some insight into the factors that influence measuring attainment, however further insight would be valuable. On the other hand, Strand observes that whilst an ethnicity achievement gap remains, the data suggests that it can and has been significantly reduced, particularly in comparison to the gender and socio-

economic gaps (2015). Strand suggests that the FSM gap remains the largest factor affecting attainment (2015). An overarching assessment of the available literature supports this as much of it focuses on disadvantaged students, and therefore it appears the emphasis has moved away from the impact of ethnicity on attainment.

The Attainment Gap: Gender

The gender attainment gap has traditionally assumed that girls outperform boys in reading but lag behind boys in Mathematics (Marks, 2008, Guiso et al, 2008, and Owens, 2013). However, Jones and Ramachand believe that the gender gap has been given too much attention in literature, in spite of evidence that suggests it is rapidly narrowing or in many cases even reversed (2016). For example, the PISA 2012 report indicates that whilst boys do perform better than girls in Math, this was found to be evident in only 37 out of 65 countries, which is just over half (OECD, 2014). Therefore, a positive reading of the data would say that girls perform *as well as* boys in Mathematics, in *almost half* of the participating countries. In addition, girls *outperformed* boys in Mathematics in five countries (OECD, 2014). Owens assessment of this data suggests that the gender gap is reducing for girls that lag behind in Math, however, the gap for boys in reading is widening (2013). This conclusion is evident in both PISA 2014 and 2018 (OECD, 2014, 2018).

Furthermore, work has been done to rectify the lack of equality for girls in the education system. Guiso et al (2008) suggest that where there is greater gender equality girls' underperformance in Maths is eliminated. However, the same cannot be said for boys in reading: boys scores are always higher in Maths than in reading (Guiso et al, 2008).

In addition to this the gap is then actually further exaggerated in gender-equal societies because girls close the gap by becoming *better* in reading and in Maths, therefore the gender gap in reading expands even more (Guiso et al, 2008, Marks, 2008). Marks notes that most industrialised countries have adopted policies to improve the educational outcomes of young women (2008), and therefore it is logical that girls have begun to close the gap. Consequently, it is suggested that where policy has been implemented to promote educational outcomes for girls, the gender gap in Mathematics significantly reduces or disappears entirely, but the gender gap for reading remains large. However, several authors (Parsons 2016, Hutchinson, 2004 and Salisbury, Rees and Gorard, 1999) agree that the higher achievement of girls in school does not always translate to higher achievement at university and in the job market, but, Owens notes that the reading gap is only exacerbated as boys grow into men (2013).

The literature clearly demonstrates that boys are not progressing in reading, in the same way that girls are overcoming underperformance in Mathematics. Marks attributes this to policy implementation: where policy has been implemented to reduce the attainment gap for girls in Maths, it has widened the gap in reading (Marks, 2008). The problem is that the implementation of policy to support girls' attainment is then having a detrimental impact on the attainment of boys, and therefore it is a question of which is more tolerable and to what extent is this acceptable in order to address the attainment gap (Marks, 2008). Surely this begs the question that if the same attention was now given to implementing strategies that would raise reading attainment amongst boys, would this then close the gap completely? The PISA 2012 study attributes boys' low levels of performance in reading to low levels of engagement with

school and reading (OECD, 2014). It suggests that policy needs to be directed towards addressing boys' engagement and proficiency in reading (OECD, 2014). Overall it is concluded that

> 'The gender gap in student performance *can* be narrowed considerably as both boys and girls in all countries and economies show that they can succeed in all three [CORE] subjects.' (my italics OECD, 2014: 9).

How this can be done will be explored in a subsequent chapter.

The Attainment Gap: Socio-Economic Status

By far the most significant factor within the literature on the attainment gap is the impact of SES. Several writers, including Sirin (2005), Demie and Lewis (2011) and the OECD (2014), investigate this area and agree that is has a strong influence on student attainment. For example, Sirin's meta-analysis of research conducted between 1990 and 2000 in the USA concludes that the family's SES is one of the strongest influences on academic achievement. Moreover, Demie and Lewis agree that SES is a significant determinant of achievement in England however, they claim that the high achievement of the English school system masks the problem (2011). SES is clearly a factor influencing student attainment globally, as the OECD PISA data says that:

> ‘Although poor performance in school does not automatically stem from disadvantage, the socio-economic status of students and schools does appear to exert a *powerful influence* on learning outcomes’ (my italics, 2014: 13).

The literature also demonstrates that there are a number of factors within SES that contribute to low-attainment. These can be divided into influences at home and at school. For example, home factors may include things like: lack of support, lack of access to resources and the type of school the child attends due to social capital and the area within which they live (Sirin, 2005, Demie and Lewis 2011). Students from low-income backgrounds are likely to experience low-literacy levels because of low parental education and therefore also low parental aspirations for the students. This often results in a disinterest in learning which makes the cycle of underachievement difficult to break (Demie and Lewis, 2011). Whereas, parents whom are ambitious for their children will motivate and guide them in their learning, and consequently will create conditions that are conducive to academic success and skill acquisition (OECD, 2014). This pattern is evident in the early findings of the impact of school closure during the COVID19 pandemic. For example, the IFS suggests that lower income families did less home learning, than those from a higher income (Andrew et al, 2020). This is due to having more resources, a better home learning set up and parents feeling more able to help their children (Andrew et al,2020). The ISF believes that whilst the impact on attainment is yet unknown, ‘…it is already clear that the COVID-19 crisis is very likely to exacerbate pre-existing inequalities in educational attainment by children’s economic backgrounds’ (Andrew et al,2020: 18, Watson, 2020).

In addition, some of these economic factors are also replicated in school, such as a lack of access to resources. This may occur due to the type of school attended or due to low income becoming a barrier to accessing the required resources. This then causes students to score less well in comparison to their more affluent peers who have access to additional resources in school and at home (Owens, 2013). Plus, Sirin suggests that students attending school in less affluent areas may be impacted by less experienced teachers and a larger teacher student ratio (2005). In addition, for students whose parents have not had successful educational experiences themselves, the relationship between parents and the school may also be weak, which could then be a limiting factor for students (Sirin, 2005). For instance, Thrupp writes from experience of working in schools of different SES. He describes how, when running overnight hiking trips, the middle class schools had good uptake, students paid their fees and had all the required kit, which enabled the activities to be successful. However, in schools of low-SES the experience was very different (Thrupp, 1999). Thrupp argues that level of achievement is significantly impacted by the social composition of the school (1999). Oppedisano and Turati (2011) agree that schools' characteristics are important determinants of inequalities in achievements among students, therefore they argue that it is important to look within schools at which factors contribute to raise students' outcomes.

In addition to this Sirin argues that the factors that influence academic achievement, are different depending on the ethnic background of the students (2005). Sirin observes that SES was a significant factor for white students but there was only a weak relationship between SES and attainment among minority students (2005). For example, Demie and Lewis, acknowledge that:

> '… one of the biggest groups of underachievers is the White British working class and their outcomes at each key stage are considerably below those achieved by all other ethnic groups' (2011:245).

This correlates with Stands (2010) work on gender which identifies the same ethinici groups who are lower attaining. Overall, SES, gender and ethnicity all play a role in '…prevent[ing] pupils from fulfilling their potential across a range of areas' (Demie and Lewis, 2011: 263).

Closing the Attainment Gap – A realistic Possibility?

Can the Attainment Gap be Closed?

Firstly, the question of whether it is a realistic possibility to close the attainment gap must be addressed. When searching the literature to investigate whether the attainment gap can be closed, it has been found that current literature focuses on the on disadvantaged students. This is not to say that other factors such as culture, ethnicity, gender, sexuality and disability do not influence a pupil's performance in school (Marcus, 2016) but that these factors are no longer the main focus of the majority of the literature on attainment. Within the literature there is agreement from several authors that it is possible to reduce the attainment gap. For instance, Sosu and Ellis suggest that because there is considerable freedom for professionals to make localised decisions, therefore there is the potential to address the achievement gap caused by poverty (2014). Moreover, the authors of the OECD PISA review: '*What 15-year-olds know and what they can do with what they know'* conclude that

'…improvement is possible, whatever the starting point for students, schools and education systems' (2014:8). However, it must also be acknowledged that the progress which is currently being shown in closing the attainment gap is minimal according to Andrews, Robinson and Hutchinson (2017). They state that whilst there is evidence that the gap is closing it is still persistent and 'If we carry on at this pace, we will lose at least a further 3 generations before equality of outcomes is realised through our education system' (Andrews, Robinson and Hutchinson, 2017:7).

How to Close the Gap: The School Vs Policy Debate

Secondly, the question must be asked: whether addressing educational disadvantage is a problem that lies at the door of the school system or not. Within the available literature there are two contrasting answers. One is to suggest that the school system can play a vital role in securing equality of outcome (Andrews, Robinson and Hutchinson, 2017, Marcus 2016). London has been recognised as a successful example of closing the attainment gap, which needs to be replicated (Andrews, Robinson and Hutchinson, 2017). Although, Greaves, Macmillan and Sibieta (2014) and Blanden et al (2015) both look deeper into the success of closing the disadvantaged gap in London. They conclude that both the mixture of pupil background and prior attainment at KS2 are significant factors which may explain the apparent success. The focus of this project does not warrant further investigation into this issue, beyond acknowledging that the key finding of Greaves, Macmillan and Sibieta were that policy makers should focus on the power of primary schools to address attainment inequality, and that the role of secondary schools is to keep students' progress on track and prepare them for access to KS5 (2014).

On the other hand, a more prominent strand of thought within the literature argues that school intervention may be a part of the solution, but *cannot* and *should* not be the sole answer to addressing educational inequality. This argument can be traced chronologically through the literature. For example, Thrupp (1999) has acknowledged that there is an argument which stems from educational research on 'school effectiveness and improvement' which tries to find ways to improve schools and classrooms in order to address the problems of SES, however, he believes this message has been overplayed. Following this, Demie and Lewis argue that the question of social class and poverty needs to be addressed by the government, particularly for the White working class (2011). In addition, Parsons (2016) argues that reducing the proportion of children growing up in poverty will have a bigger impact on raising the average attainment levels of socially deprived students than focusing on in-school factors. He argues that policy is focussing on the wrong interventions, aiming to adjust

> '…in-school factors (better teaching and discipline, improved school leadership, differentiation, progress-chasing via regular pupil assessment) rather than interventions to lift people out of poverty' (Parsons, 2016).

Moreover, Mowat (2018) argues that a research based approach which is not just about school intervention is required to reduce the attainment gap. As a secondary school teacher I am inclined to agree that a sole focus on in-school factors may be misguided. Trying to address the wide variety of factors that may influence a students' ability to achieve their full potential has always felt like an up-hill battle considering that the attainment gap is present from early years and continues to grow as children

progress through school (Andrews, Robinson and Hutchinson, 2017). That being said, there is evidence that the complexity of addressing the attainment gap has been acknowledged by some authors and politicians, and that perhaps a middle ground where the issue is tackled from both perspectives is required. For example, Florian states that there is not one 'gap' and therefore there is not one 'solution' for how to close the gap (2016). Moreover, Marcus notes that because there are economic as well as moral issues at stake within education, the situation is complex. Plus, when outlining the government's future plans in her address to the Scottish parliament, Nicola Sturgeon stated that 'ensuring equality of opportunity for young people starts well before the school years and extends far beyond the school gates' (Sturgeon, 2016). It is clear that whilst in school intervention may help enable some students to make progress, and open opportunities for them to move forward into KS5 and beyond, explanations for success in school do not results from one single strategy, policy or intervention (Marcus, 2016). Therefore, through this small scale research project the effect of school intervention must not be overstated, as Kerr and West state:

> 'school effects must not be overstated, as they have sometimes been by national policy-makers…[because]…schools inevitably reflect the massive inequalities that exist within British society' (2010: 39).

Therefore, the intervention in this project will have the purpose of trying to find out how effective a strategy could be in one particular context, but it will be acknowledged that addressing the attainment is a complex issue that requires more than one intervention, within the school context and beyond.

How to Close the Gap: Conditions for Progress

Within the literature there were several examples which indicate the attainment gap has successfully been addressed. These give suggestions of the approaches schools could take to address issues of attainment. In chronological order, the Department for Education and Skills produced a document in 2004 which focussed on schools that had been successful in raising the attainment of minority ethnic pupils using the Ethnic Minority Achievement Funding (EMA). The guidance demonstrates that the most successful schools had a common aim, namely the creation of an inclusive school community (DFES, 2004). There were no quick fixes; to create a genuinely inclusive school community takes time and effort and expertise within the leadership team (DFES, 2004). This suggests that success in raising attainment is most likely to be effective when it is addressed from a cohesive school wide approach led by informed leadership.

Secondly, the OECD reports look at overcoming socio-economic disadvantage. The 2018 PISA results conclude that:

> ‘In fact, in Australia, Canada, Estonia, Ireland and the United Kingdom, all of which scored above the OECD average, more than 13% of disadvantaged students were academically resilient.’ (OECD, 2018:10)

‘Resilience’ was characterised by the OECD as including: attending more lessons, motivation and self-confidence (OECD, 2011), as well as support from parents, a positive school climate and having a growth mindset (OECD, 2018). Here we see the opposite of the factors that inhibit and cause disadvantage, particularly those related to low income and SES. What can be learnt from this is that if we want to see more students become ‘resilient’ to their disadvantage then policy and practice must enable the characteristics described; for example, supporting students to spend as much time learning in school as their peers, or providing more learning activities that engage, motivate and build self-confidence (OECD, 2011).

Lastly, in 2011 the government introduced the ‘Pupil Premium’. This is funding provided to state schools in order to support the education of disadvantaged students (Roberts, Foster and Long, 2011). School leaders have the freedom to choose how to use the funding, however, the Department for Education (DfE) gives some evidence based recommendations on strategies that might be beneficial to raising the attainment of disadvantaged students. The DfE recommends providing high quality teaching and targeted academic support, as well as wider strategies, such as supporting attendance, addressing behaviour and providing social and emotional support (DfE, 2022). Several key themes can be identified from these approaches. First, focus on the school’s ethos, creation of a cohesive and inclusive community is important. Secondly, prioritising the quality of classroom teaching and thirdly, supporting students with issues outside of the classroom such as barriers to attendance, behaviour and emotional support. Together these strategies may enable increased ability to learn and therefore to attain.

What are the Significant Issues Associated with Attainment in Religious Studies?

Political and Educational Context of Religious Studies

In order to gain a coherent understanding of the issues surrounding attainment within RS, some understanding of the subject itself must be given. Conroy et al state that RS 'assumes the form of the curriculum in general while often being defended by professionals in the field as different and distinctive' (2015:35). An exploration of what this means and why it is the case would be beneficial context for the discussion on attainment.

Let us begin with the value of the subject and its status within the education system. RS is a compulsory subject for students whilst they are in formal education, whether a formal qualification is completed or not. For example, even 'academies and free schools are contractually required by the terms of their funding agreements to make provision for the teaching of RE' (NATRE, 2021). However, RS is unusual because unlike other compulsory subjects, it does not follow a national curriculum. Instead, it is organised by local Standing Advisory Council's (SACREs) (NATRE, 2021). The SACRE's are responsible for producing a locally Agreed Syllabus, which maintained schools are required to follow, and many academies and free schools choose to follow (NATRE, 2021). This makes RS quite distinctive.

In my professional context having the freedom to shape our schemes of learning is a privilege however, Ofsted notes that '…there are a wide variety of ways that schools can construct and teach a high-quality RE curriculum' (Ofsted, 2021). Therefore, this could also be a challenge for the subject, as it may lead to inconsistency and confusion, and not 'high quality RE' at all (Ofsted, 2021). Whether there should be a national framework for RS as recommended in the Commission on Religious Education (CoRE) report, is a debate beyond the scope of this project, however, what can be said is that the CoRE report claims that RS is an academically rigorous subject but the quality of RE that is delivered varies widely across the country (Tharani, 2018). This would conquer with Ofsted's description of RE, which states that RE at its best is '…is intellectually challenging and personally enriching' (2021), yet it acknowledges there is no single way to teach high quality RE (OFSTED, 2021). This inconsistency could lead to the subject being undervalued within schools, and may have an impact on the quality of assessment, and consequently on student attainment.

Despite RS having a mandatory presence in school, it's value as a compulsory subject has been called into question. This is not a new challenge, but something that has been present throughout the history of RE for example, H,A.Guy warns the scripture teacher not to '…be influenced by the heresy that Scripture is "not a suitable subject for examination" (1947: 90). He argues that children will consider the subject not worth studying if it is not assessed, they will be as eager to gain good results in this, as in any other subject, if they see that it is 'examined' as any other subject (Guy, 1947). Guy is not referring to national examinations, but to summative assessments. Clearly, even at this time RS faced the challenge of being viewed as an academic subject. Moreover, it is notable that RS is not always given the time and resources which other

compulsory subjects receive. For instance, Ofsted's review of RE states that most locally agree syllabuses assume that RE will be given 5% or more curriculum time, however, the 2017 state of the nation report demonstrates that this was only met in 62% of schools, and 44% of academies (REC, NATRE and RE Today in OFSTED, 2021). Moreover, it is often taught by non-specialist teachers or added to the umbrella of PSHE in order to meet the national requirements (APPG, 2013).

More recently RS has been challenged because it remains a mandatory subject despite there being a decline in religious affiliation within society (Lundie and Conroy, 2015). The Theos Report states there is a decline in the number of pupils entering for public examinations in RS as well as there being a decline in the number of schools offering the subject, despite it being a legal requirement (Cooling, Bowie and Panjwani, 2020). This trend continues at higher education level as evidenced in a recent report by the British Academy (Kain and Clark, 2019). Both within secondary school as well as higher education RS has '… had to respond to the … complex changes in religiosity and societal attitudes towards religion' (Kain and Clark, 2019:2). This challenge is something that I face on a regular basis; an antagonism towards having to study RS when the learner and their parents cannot see the relevance of studying religion. This attitude is evident in a YouGov survey of school pupils:

> '... only 12% of the 4000 surveyed pupils spread across the 6-15 age range were prepared to admit to enjoying RE a lot '(in Cooling, Bowie and Panjwani: 8)

It is as a result of this challenge that both the CoRE and the Theos Reports have arisen. The CoRE report argues that the subject is relevant for all pupils regardless of family background or belief (Tharani, 2018). It also claims that RE has changed overtime in response to the changing nature of society, however, further change is required. The report recommends that in order to reflect the wide variety of beliefs that are present within society the subject should be renamed 'Religion and World views' (Tharani, 2018). The Theos report conquers with this approach, claiming to offer a vision of the potential outcomes of an academically rigorous approach to RE that is framed by the worldview idea (Cooling, Bowie and Panjwani, 2020). The debate over whether this is the best way forward for RS is beyond the scope of this project however, there are two significant points that must be noted. First, that they challenge any questions regarding the value of RS. Both reports agree that the study of religious and non-religious views are extremely valuable. RE equips students to tackle complex issues in life, and prepares students for the world they are about to enter where '…they will need to live and work well with people with very different worldviews from themselves' (Tharani, 2018: 3) and will need the skills gained from this subject '…to deal positively with controversial issues, to manage strongly held differences of belief and to challenge stereotypes' (Tharani, 2018: 5). The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) also support this argument, stating that:

> 'Good-quality religious education can transform pupils' assessment of themselves and others, and their understanding of the wider position of the world in which we live' (2004: 5).

In addition, the same reasoning can be seen in the political justification for RS remaining a compulsory subject, for example, Michael Gove stated that the study of religion will enable young people to become confident in their own beliefs and values and therefore gain respect for '…the religious and cultural differences of others…' (2013 in NATRE, 2021). Therefore, proponents of RS argue that gaining an in-depth understanding of religious views is important for the learner. It provides students with valuable skills for their future, and politically it enables governments to show understanding, and tolerance, as required by the guidance on teaching British values in school (DFE, 2014).

The Aims of Religious Studies

It is becoming clear that RS occupies a distinctive position within the education system. Conroy et al state that RE is distinctive because of '…the nature of the language, the nature of the personal involvement and the nature of the social expectations' (2015:37), as we have seen when discussing the value of RS. To better understand the issues that surround attainment within RS it will be necessary to also review the available literature on assessment, however, that review must be couched in an understanding of the aims and purpose of RS, as without this the nature of assessment cannot be understood. There are two strands within the literature on the aims of RS. Firstly, the CoRE report states that there is confusion over the purpose of RE. The report aims to address this by proposing a new vision for the subject, including the proposal of a common National Entitlement (Tharani, 2018). The reasons for the confusion over the purpose of RS should be apparent. There is considerable variation in the delivery of the subject across the UK, which could be related to questions over its value, given the decline in religious affiliation. However, it is also clear that a lot is

being demanded of RS. It is required to be an academic discipline, holding its position alongside other compulsory subjects, yet without a national curriculum to unify it. It is being asked to encourage students to develop their sense of identity and belonging through investigation and reflection on the subject matter (QCA, 2004). RS is expected to play a crucial role in creating and supporting tolerant and self- aware citizens, as per the governments guidance on teaching British values in school (DFE, 2014). It is unsurprising that there may be some confusion regarding its purpose.

However, one central theme is common through throughout the literature: that understanding and appreciating the beliefs of others is a core aim within RS for both political and pedagogical reasons (Lundie and Conroy, 2015). This aim can be seen as the subject has developed over time. For example, it can be assumed that RS has moved beyond the 'scripture lesson' as H.A.Guy refers to it (1947), meaning it is no longer a lesson about personal devotion or religious experience. Conroy, Lundie and Baumfield state that RS is no longer about the 'search for truth', but is about the 'search for meaning', and it is this that now shapes the discourse about the purpose of RE (2012: 309). The authors are referring to how RS has adapted over time in relation to the changing nature of society. It is no longer purely the learning of facts about religion, although religious knowledge remains an important part of RS (Tharani, 2018). For example, it is a requirement that in the UK students study Christianity as part of the compulsory entitlement but also that their study includes knowledge of other principal religions represented in Great Britain (NATRE, 2021). Students must then apply that knowledge and infer meaning from it. For example, in the AQA GCSE RS syllabus: Component 1 is the study of religions, beliefs, teachings and practices which makes up 50% of the GCSE (AQA, 2017). Students are required to be able to '…refer

to scripture and/or sacred texts where appropriate' (AQA, 2017: 9) which would require students to memorise scripture. Moreover 'Students should study the influence of the beliefs, teachings and practices studied on individuals, communities and societies' (AQA, 2017: 9). Therefore, students need to be able to apply their knowledge to *what* people do and *why* they do it. Essentially this is what is referred to in the literature as 'learning about' and 'learning from' religion; the knowledge *about* religion underpins and gives the ability to learn *from* the religion.

This is a demanding and sometimes personal process, something students may not be faced with in other subjects. For example, one of the locally agreed syllabi speaks of creating an environment of 'trust and respect' in order for the students to be able to share and discuss ideas, beliefs and understandings (2021:6). It also describes RS as something that is 'deeply personal' (2021:9). Students are required to understand and appreciate the beliefs of others, as well as to evaluate their own views, within a safe and respectful environment. There is an expectation that students go further than learning facts; they weigh up what they are taught in order formulate their opinions. However, if this is considered the central aim of RS, and it must be noted that not all the literature agrees that it is, then this aim itself is not without its changes. Conroy, Lundie and Baumfield state that:

> 'The displacement of a more traditional, epistemologically loaded study of religion by such personal 'meaning making' was intended to enhance the relevance of the subject and its efficacy as a resource for living with oneself and with the other (2012: 309).

However, in their study into how ‘meaning making’ is shaped in the classroom, they reach the conclusion that ‘…RE, so dependent upon meaning for educational justification, is too frequently a site which witnesses failures of meaning’ (Conroy, Lundie and Baumfield ,2012: 308). This study illustrates that what is being asked of RS is not necessarily as easy to enact in the classroom as hoped for.

Therefore, the question is, where does this confusion and complexity surrounding the aims of RS leave students with their ‘attainment’. Grant and Matemba claim that the problems of assessment within RS relate directly to the aims of RS (2013). They argue that in order to assess it clearly RS has been reduced to lower cognitive levels, assessing basic religious facts but it needs to allow students to discover and critique (2013). Therefore, they claim that in order to assess RS more effectively teachers need to develop increased skills of assessment technique and to equip students to self and peer-assess (Grant and Matemba, 2013). This argument mirrors the progression of the RS over time, however, it suggests that in order to implement the higher order skills of ‘learning from’ and ‘meaning making’, assessments must appropriately reflect the aims of the subject. Contrastingly, Osbeck acknowledges that there has been a move in Sweden towards learning about religion which has coincided with more tests in the education system, including within RE (2012). However, she agrees with other authors such as Conroy, Lundie and Baumfield that there is a lack of meaning in such an approach and therefore a need for meaning in many RE classrooms today (Osbeck, 2012). From professional experience, one of the questions that students struggle with at GCSE are those that ask students to explain the *influence* of a religious belief or practice. Many students can explain the information about the belief in question, but not what the *impact* of that belief would be on a

believer. However, Lundie and Conroy acknowledge that the kind of approach they are advocating requires committed openness and an active commitment to a pluralistic encounter (2015). In other words, it requires a particular set up of the classroom environment, which may not be consistently present in RS. Again we return to the issue of, as Schweitzer points out, what constitutes RE is so broad that it is difficult to compare different forms of RE (2004 in Osbeck 2012.)

Assessment in Religious Studies

To provide a complete understanding of the factors that contribute to students' attainment within RS, we must further consider the specific issues that surround assessment in RS, informed by the previous discussion of the aims of RS. The scope of this project will not extend to a review of the entire literature on assessment in RE; it will exclude discussion of broader topics such as formative vs summative assessment and the use of AfL. It will focus primarily on whether, and how we can assess 'meaning making' in RS. The primary source that has been used to inform this analysis is an overview of the last 60 years of research on assessment within RE (Fancourt, 2016).

Fancourt acknowledges that issues of assessment are, of course, a central concern for most governments' educational policies (2016). This is also evident internationally within the OECD PISA reports (OECD, 2014). Although it must be noted that not everyone agrees with PISA's growing power as an authority on international education standards (Meyer and Benavot, 2013). However, the point remains that because assessment is a key focus within education internationally, there has therefore been an increasing focus around the world on assessment in RE, for example Osbeck et al.

2015 (in Fancourt, 2016). However, the literature also suggests that there is continuing need for further study on the process of exam and assessment within RE (Fancourt, 2016, Blaylock, 2000).

The question this project focuses on is whether RE can be assessed, considering the lack of clarity over its aims, and the focus on learning from religion. This is a question which has been debated throughout the history of RE, for example, both Guy (1947) and the Institute of Christian Education (1954 in Fancourt, 2016) address concerns of examinations not being suitable for the subject. Moreover, Fancourt states that in the 1990's government policy documents contradict each other about whether 'spiritual development' was assessable or not (Fancourt, 2015). Moreover, there remains a debate over the value of examination in RE which has not dissipated overtime. For example, the All Party Parliamentary Committee (APPG) claim that a significant factor in the challenges facing RS are the changes to EBacc and GCSE short course qualifications made by the Coalition government. They claim these changes lower the status of RS in some schools (APPG, 2013). On the other hand, Fancourt warns that a desire for the value of accreditation that comes with formal public certificates must be considered with care for it '… has implications for how the learning outcomes can be defined, especially given that examinations typically need to give a differential spread of results '(2016: 12). Consequently, it is apparent that the question of how RS should be assessed is not a new one.

Whilst the literature does not provide one conclusive formulae, there are several threads that may be of benefit. Firstly, Blaylock argues that assessment in the RS

classroom should be largely based on the teachers' judgements (2000). He argues that forms of assessment borrowed from other subjects do not work (Blaylock, 2000). This is understandable given that what RS is trying to asses is not akin to other curriculum subjects, as previously outlined. Nevertheless, Fancourt's work on self-assessment concludes that students could assess the wider attitudes and values that underpin their learning using summative self-assessment (Fancourt, 2010). However, Fancourt also suggests that the assessment career of the student should be an important consideration in the implementation of assessment, as it helps understand the students' reaction to summative assessments as well their potential for self-reflection (2013). In other words, students bring a set of experiences to the classroom and this must be considered by the teacher when preparing assessments. Finally, in 2004, the QCA produced the first Non-statutory national framework in England, to support maintained schools. The framework provides attainment targets which are divided into 'learning about' and 'learning from' religion for each key stage. It also offers level descriptors up to level 8, plus exceptional performance. It is recommended that because learning about and learning from are so closely related, that when assessing attainment both should be considered (QCA, 2004). It should be noted that for KS4, it is recommended that the national qualifications are the main means of assessment. The framework offers guidance to teachers, allowing for the consideration of both learning about religion and learning from it, however, many schools will not be using this framework as they are not bound by it. Furthermore, the QCA states the following in answer to whether all the elements of RS can be assessed:

> 'It is important to note that 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 (2004: 35).'

Consequently, it must be concluded that whilst the literature provides some guidance on what assessment might include within RS, there will always be benefits of learning that are not tangibly measurable but nevertheless are intrinsically valuable.

The Question of Religiosity and Attainment

One further issue which appears within the literature on student attainment in RS is that of whether religious students attain higher than non-religious students. Overwhelming the consensus is that they do not (Van Heck, Kraaykamp and Wolbers, 2016, Fancourt, 2016). The reason given for this is that religious students frequently fail in examination because they consider their personal knowledge of their faith sufficient, and in fact they do not have an accurate understanding of the syllabus (Fancourt, 2016). From professional experience I can understand why religious students may make this assumption, however, I also believe that religious students may have some advantage when it comes to meeting demands of the syllabus at KS4 in terms of the depth of religious knowledge required. They may be able to understand how a belief *influences* a religious person from their own experience, as well as support beliefs with specific memorised scriptures, which they have learnt as part of their faith. However, this is not to say that non-religious students could not also achieve this.

In addition, within the literature where there is evidence that religious students achieve higher results, there are also alternative explanations for this. For example, Khattab and Modood (2018) found that where young Muslims achieved notably higher results, this could be explained by factors within the home, such as high expectations of going to university, or parents' high expectations and discipline in relation to school-work at home. In addition, there is a wider argument that church and faith schools produce better results (Fancourt, 2016), however, this could be because those schools are also selective both by ethnic group and by economic background (Allen and West 2009). It is claimed that religious schools educate, in the main, pupils who are from more affluent backgrounds and with higher levels of prior attainment than pupils in non-religious schools (Allen and West, 2009). Based on an understanding of the attainment gap, if schools are selecting students by ethnic group and SES then this will have an impact on attainment, thus it may not be the *religion* of the student that is influencing attainment.

Research Questions

The aim of this small scale research project is to investigate barriers to attainment in RS. Therefore, the literature review focussed on two areas; understanding the attainment gap, and the issues with attainment in RS which relate to its aims and how it is assessed. In both cases the aim was to gain a greater understanding of the issues and to consider possible solutions. It has been found that there are a variety of factors that influence students' attainment in secondary school, including gender, ethnicity and SES. However, the two issues that stand out the most because they pertain to my professional context are the fact that boys lag behind in reading (Marks, 2008) and that the largest issue impacting attainment remains SES (Strand, 2015).

The literature also provides some insight into ways to address the attainment gap, including, to focus on the school's ethos (DFES, 2004), as well as supporting students with issues that may impact learning such as poor attendance, behaviour and emotional support (DfE, 2022). In other words, addressing the attainment gap is a whole-school issue and therefore some factors need to be approached holistically, within the wider-school context. However, it is also the case that the quality of classroom teaching is important in removing or mitigating against barriers to learning (DfE, 2022).

With regards to barriers to attainment in RS, there appears to be a gap in the literature. It was demonstrated that RS should assess more than just facts, and allow students' the opportunity to critique (Grant and Matemba, 2013). This was verified by the shift in emphasis within the subject from a focus on 'the 'truth' of a religion to a focus on 'meaning-making' (Conroy, Lundie and Baumfield, 2012). However, it was stated by the QCA that not all elements of RS can be assessed, for example, it is not possible to assess students' formulation of personal opinions (2004). Although contrastingly, review of the literature on assessment revealed that self-assessment may be a valuable tool to enable students to assess their wider attitudes and values (Fancourt, 2010). Moreover, it was found that consideration should be given to the students' assessment career, (Fancourt, 2013) as this will give valuable insight into the student's perspective and therefore their own barriers to attainment.

However, there was little information that specifically addressed what make RS a difficult subject in which to attain successfully. Therefore, the research questions that will guide the intervention are:

1. What are the barriers to students' attainment in RS specifically?
2. How can these challenges be mitigated against in order to increase students' attainment?

Methodology

Research Design and Intervention

When designing this small scale research project, I have chosen to use a variety of qualitative data collection methods to address my research questions. This is because I needed to find out two types of information, firstly, '*what'* barriers there are to attainment, and secondly, *'how'* those factors could be addressed. In order to answer these questions, I need to source information from both the teachers' and students', and therefore I have chosen to use different data collection methods for each because each method is the 'best fit' for the demographic (Menter et al, 2011, Pring, 2004). However, the methods I have used sit mostly in the category of qualitative data (Creswell, 2014), with the exception of a questionnaire which used both quantitative and qualitative questions. In the main the approach is qualitative as the focus of the study is exploring meaning which the individuals involved ascribe to the problems, plus in interpreting the data I have also looked for meaning (Creswell, 2014). Creswell

suggests that those whom engage in qualitative research 'honour an inductive style…focus on individual meaning, and the importance of rendering the complexity of a situation' which is an accurate description of this project (2014).

Phases One: Collaboration with Colleagues

Phase one of the research was designed to gather teachers' insight on strategies which would address barriers to attainment. This collaboration allowed me to maximise the use of my colleagues professional' expertise and experience. Teachers are accountable for the continued progress of their students and therefore are likely to have a good understanding of what impacts upon attainment and which strategies may be most effective to support it. I chose to use a nominal group technique (NGT) focus group (ASQ, 2022) to seek insight into what strategies or methods could be employed to increase attainment. This was because it is a structured method that can be used for group brainstorming, which encourages contributions from everyone and facilitates agreement (ASQ, 2022). This method is also beneficial when there are group members that are more vocal than others, and when there are group members whom are new to the team, both of which apply to my team and were considered in choosing this approach.

Within the department there are four full-time teachers, one of whom is holds a Senior Leadership role within the school, another holds the position of subject leader for philosophy at our sister campus, and another of whom is a non- subject specialist. Two members of staff joined the team this school year. Three out of four colleagues participated in the focus group meetings. Colleagues were asked if they would be

willing to participate in the research and all signed consent forms. I recorded the sessions so that I could listen back to them at a later date. I gave a brief verbal introduction to the aims of the research and then gave each colleague some paper and asked them to consider the question: 'What strategies or methods could be employed to mitigate against issues that hinder student's attainment?' I asked each colleague to write down their ideas. I then asked each person to feedback back one idea, one person at a time, until we had exhausted all the ideas given. My intention was to immediately seek agreement on which of the suggested strategies would be the most effective and could be implemented with the least cost to teacher workload, by asking colleagues to rank each strategy between 5 (most achievable and high impact) and 1 (not achievable and low impact). However, there was not time to complete this face to face. I asked colleagues to complete this ranking on a word document which I sent electronically. However, I only received one response. A limitation of this collaboration was firstly, finding the time with colleagues to complete the process, and secondly, teacher buy in. I anticipate that my investment in completing the focus group process was much higher than that of my colleagues as it is not their work, but an additional task that is being asked of them, therefore it was not considered a priority.

Phases Two: Collaboration with Students

Phase two of the research involved gathering data from students to investigate what they find difficult in RS and what they think would enhance their progress. I decided to use purposive sampling when choosing participants to interview (Cohen et al, 2017) because I am aware that a major weakness of conducting interviews is that they are time consuming (Cohen, 2017, Menter et al, 2011), and one of the disadvantages of

practitioner research is that there are significant time constraints. For example, I could not take students out of tutor time as I was teaching at the same time and there were very few people I could ask to cover me. I was also required to avoid taking students out of core subjects. I was able to use a non-contact session instead. I choose to do this as I did not want to ask participants to give up their social time as I felt that this would affect the students' willingness to participate. Therefore, to mitigate against the time constraints, I chose four students to interview. This is a small sample size; I considered increasing it by collaborating with colleagues and inviting students to participate in the interviews from other GCSE classes, however, this would have increased the demands on my time even more and therefore I decided not to do this. Moreover, having a small sample size for an interview is not necessarily unusual given the qualitative nature of the data being collected (Cohen et al, 2017). Plus, Cohen et al state that researchers '…often need to be able to obtain data from a smaller group a subset of the total population in such a way that the knowledge gained is representative of the total population (however defined) under study' (Cohen, et al, 2017: 202), which I have done.

To choose student's I was guided by the literature, and a review of the classes mark sheet. I looked for students who were in the Pupil Premium category because SES is the most significant factor affecting attainment according to the literature. I also looked for students whom were underperforming in comparison to their target grade based on the latest data point. The table below describes each student's profile (anonymised). Student 3 participated in the interviews because one of the students originally selected was unavailable. However, despite the student not being Pupil Premium, the interview has been included in the data because the responses given

were valuable in addressing the questions asked. It was deemed that if students did not fit this criterion it would not negatively impact the data.

	PP Status	Current Attainment	Target Grade	Any additional information
Student 1 – boy	PP	1= 2 grades below target	Target Grade 3+	SEN Ethnicity: English Religion: unknown
Student 2 – girl	PP	2- 3 grades below target	Target Grade 5+	Ethnicity: Other Black African Religion: unknown
Student 3 – girl target	Not PP *	3 = On target *	Target Grade 3=	Ethnicity: refused
Student 4 – girl	PP	7 – 1 grade below target	Target Grade 8-	Ethnicity: other Black African Religion: Muslim

Table 1 Student Profiles for Interviews

Despite interviews being time consuming, I felt it was important to use an interview because 'Interviews enable participants … to discuss their interpretations … and to express how they regard situations from their own point of view (Cohen et al., 2017: 506). According to Punch interviews are '…one of the most powerful ways we have of understanding others' (2014: 182). The aim was to understand students' experience of the subject and what *they* find difficult. I also decided to conduct the interviews 1:1 rather than in a group because I felt that I wanted to gather students' opinions without the influence of others. Moreover, I chose to use a semi-structured interview because it would allow me to ensure that I could cover all the ground necessary to obtain the relevant data whilst also leaving '…space for spontaneity' and the opportunity to '…press not only for complete answers but for responses about complex and deep issues' (Cohen et al., 2017:506). I also choose to record the interviews, with students' consent, for practical purposes; so that I did not have to take notes and I could listen more attentively, enabling me to be more present. This also reduced the interview time

and kept the flow of conversation as there was no time spent waiting for me to finish writing. These decisions were made based on assessment of practical restraints and the type of interview, with particular consideration given to the fact that I was working with students whom had been taken out of lesson time during their final GCSE year. Therefore, I wanted to do all I could to honour their voluntary participation and not take too much time away from their learning (Punch, 2014: 191).

Phase Three: Intervention for Learning and Teaching

Phase three of the research was the intervention, which aimed to explore my second research question: how can these factors be mitigated against in order to increase students' chances of reaching their full potential. I trialled a new teaching strategy, which was giving feedback verbally to my year 11 class and then gathered students' opinions on the effectiveness of this approach.

The design of the intervention was based on information gathered from the Education Endowment Fund (EEF), Teaching and Learning Toolkit (2022). This is an online resource that can be used by teachers and school leaders. It takes a research based approach to improving student outcomes. I filtered the toolkit according to strategies that were ranked as having the most impact on attainment, but also were cost effective and could be implemented during the academic year. By doing this I found that feedback is a strategy with high impact for low cost, and also has a significant research base to support it (EEF, 2022). The top three strategies (metacognition and self-regulation, reading comprehension strategies, oral language interventions) were ruled out for use in this intervention because they would be difficult to implement within the timescale available. I designed the intervention to include giving verbal feedback

following marking the second mock exam paper of the year. Normally I would feel a tension between wanting to give detailed feedback, but being limited by the amount of time it takes to write detailed comments for all students on a paper of this size. Plus, there is also a time constraint when marking as the results are required by the school within a certain time. Research suggests that appropriately timed feedback is important and consideration should be given to the timing of feedback appropriate to the task set, the needs of the pupils and the class (Collin and Quigley, 2021). Also considering that feedback should improve students' learning (EEF, 2022), but that written feedback can be costly in terms of teacher time, verbal feedback might be an appropriate solution. Moreover, the EEF states that 'Studies of verbal feedback show slightly higher impacts overall, over written feedback (+7 months) (EEF, 2022). Consequently, this strategy was selected to trial as it fitted the requirements for the intervention.

I implemented the intervention by firstly, marking the students' work. When doing so, I made brief notes for myself following the guidance on effective feedback from the EEF. Therefore, I aimed to provide 'specific information on how to improve' (EEF, 2022), but also included feedback on what went well as the guidance suggests it is important to give feedback 'when things are correct - not just when they are incorrect' (EEF, 2022). There is evidence to suggest that if feedback is clear, actionable, and the information given informs the students understanding of their specific strengths and areas of improvement, then it may have a greater impact on disadvantaged and lower prior attainers, which is exactly what I am looking for (EEF, 2022). Secondly, I planned independent revision activities that students could work on whilst I used lesson time to give 1:1 feedback. I explained to the class what would be happening

before beginning. It took two lessons of 50 minutes each to complete the 1:1 meetings. The meetings consisted of verbally sharing what I thought the student had done well, and what I thought they needed to do to improve as they embarked on revision for their final exams. Students were provided with a feedback sheet with a breakdown of their marks for each question, and an overall percentage and equivalent grade before the feedback. Students were advised that they could write my comments in their own words if they wanted to. Students were also given an opportunity to ask questions once they had received their feedback.

Finally, in order to evaluate the impact of this intervention I used a questionnaire to gather students' opinion on whether it was an effective way to deliver feedback. I chose to use this method of data collection because I wanted to gather information from the whole class, and I have judged this to be the most appropriate method because it is able to reach a larger number of respondents (Cohen et al, 2017). When designing the questionnaire, I had to consider not putting too much strain on the respondents as this could lead to poor quality responses (Cohen et al, 2017) and therefore careful consideration was given to the questions that were asked and how many questions were included. I limited the questions to four, as I wanted students to be able to complete the questionnaire in lesson following their verbal feedback meeting. The proximity of the completion of the questionnaire was significant. It would be ideal to record the students' opinion whilst the experience was fresh in their mind, and I believed that if they took the questionnaire away they would be unlikely to remember to return it. I chose to use the following types of question: question one was a multiple choice, asking what kind of information they valued the most as part of their feedback. Question two used a rating scale for students to say how useful they found the verbal

feedback. I included a follow up question to enable me to understand why students selected the rating option they did, following the guidance from Pring: 'It is always reasonable to ask further what a person meant by answering the question in the way that he or she did' (2004: 38). I then included two open questions following the advice of Cohen et al: 'The open-ended question is an attractive device for smaller-scale research or for those sections of a questionnaire that invite an honest, personal comment from respondents in addition to ticking numbers and boxes (Cohen et al, 2017:475). The questions aimed to understand what had been useful about the feedback and also to understand if any students would have preferred written feedback and why.

This intervention was implemented with one class, the year 11 class who had inspired this project. I considered expanding the trial of the intervention to other GCSE classes, however at my school there is one class per year group, each with a different teacher. In order to do this, I would have had to rely on collaborative working with colleagues which I felt may be hampered by teacher workload. For example, there is another year 11 class that is taught at our sister campus by my fellow subject leader. I asked him to trial the intervention with his class, explaining the methods and providing copies of the questionnaire. He agreed to participate however, was unable to complete the intervention. Again, this may be to do with teacher buy-in to a project that is not their own work.

Research Design and Intervention as Collaboration

The research design was permeated by collaboration, with my colleagues and with students. It was central to the research process to use the knowledge and expertise of my colleagues and therefore the final phase of the project included presenting the findings of the intervention to my colleagues to seek their professional opinion on the results. This supported my analysis of the data and contributed towards the implications for future practice. As this research aimed to understand and improve outcomes for students, it is essential that all staff are involved and buy in to any strategies that may improve those outcomes. Teachers may not be on board with implementing new approaches to their teaching that have had no part in deciding or do not agree with, or moreover, cannot see the justification for. Consequently, I wanted to seek their input on how this research can shape teaching and learning within the department moving forward. To gather this data, I decided to produce a document which summarised the research: it included a brief summary of the research questions and literature review, as well as the intervention and the findings. I included a summary of the strategies that were suggested during the focus group, as well as questions and responses from the student interviews, and some of the comments on verbal feedback from the student questionnaire. I then posed three key questions:

- Do you have any comments on which of these strategies would be most effective in your professional opinion, also considering restraints of cost and time/ teacher workload?
- Do you have any comments on these findings or thoughts on how this feedback could be used?
- Do you have any thoughts or comments on the use of verbal feedback?

My colleagues and I met together as a group. I presented them with the written document and gave time to read through it. I then asked each colleague in turn to feedback their thoughts on each question, addressing one question as a time. I recorded the discussion for reference purposes, so that I could listen back to it at a later date and not have to take notes, therefore being available to listen and facilitate the discussion.

Research and Professional Ethics

As part of the research design for this project an application was made to the appropriate CUREC subcommittee for review and approval in order to ensure the correct ethical considerations had been made. This approval was granted before any data collection began. The application was made under the modus operandi for the MSc (Learning and Teaching). As a teacher I already work under high professional standards and the research which I have conducted uses the same methods that I would normally employ within my classroom context in order to evaluate teaching and learning strategies. Permission from the head teacher to conduct this research was sought in writing and agreement was received.

Particular consideration has been given to the following issues. The first was my responsibility to ensure I gained informed consent as this is a founding principle of ethical research (University of Oxford, 2021). To ensure that teachers and students were able to give informed consent I produced an information sheet which summarised the aims and purposes of the research, as well as provided information regarding voluntary participation, what would happen during the research process and how the

data collected would be stored and used. Plus, how to address any concerns regarding the research process or my professional conduct should they arise (BERA, 2018). This information sheet was given to teachers, and also to students whom participated in interviews. This was done to ensure that all participants were fully informed as to what they were consenting to (University of Oxford, 2021). Following the guidance from CUREC a written consent form was used, which required participants to confirm consent for each clause (University of Oxford, 2021). Gaining informed consent played an important part in ensuring that there was no deception, and that all aspects of the research process were transparent and clear to all participants. However, for the intervention implied consent was used (University of Oxford, 2021). This was because no personal details were collected when students completed the questionnaire and participation was confined to this task (University of Oxford, 2021). Even though this was the case, to ensure that there was no deception, I made it clear verbally that the questionnaire was a research tool and also communicated the aims of the research, and how the data would be used in order to honour the ethical guidelines regarding transparency (BERA, 2018).

Secondly, in order to ensure participants privacy was respected several steps were taken. Firstly, all data that has been collected has been anonymised during the process of data analysis. Participants were also made aware of this before providing consent. Secondly, it was made clear to all participants that they had the right to withdraw and how to contact me in order to do so (BERA, 2018). As stated in the CUREC guidance on the right to withdraw, notification of withdrawal was required prior to the data being anonymised during data analysis and therefore this was stipulated in the written and verbal information pre-amble before informed consent was collected

(CUREC, 2020). This was done in order to show due respect to participants' and to demonstrate that participation was voluntary. Thirdly, as part of professional practice in teaching it is important to be aware of the correct process for storing sensitive data and relevant GDPR guidance. This was also applied to the research process in order to assure participants that any data they contributed would be stored securely to maintain confidentiality (BERA, 2018). Therefore, electronic data was stored securely using the universities Nexus365 cloud storage because it has been approved by the University's Information Security team (CUREC, 2020). This was of particular importance as several parts of the research design included audio recordings and transcripts as well as records of participants' consent, all of which had to be stored appropriately. Any paperwork that was produced was securely stored in a locked location. The decision to audio record all of the face to face meetings, including the initial staff focus group, student interviews, and second staff focus group, was taken with due consideration given to the necessity of recording. It was decided that there was a clear need to audio record for the purpose of obtaining a complete and accurate record of the data that was collected (CUREC, 2020).

Finally, a significant ethical challenge that was given much consideration during the research design was the issue of power dynamics that may impact the research process. There was potential for this to occur both when working collaboratively with colleagues in the dual role of researcher and subject leader, but also when conducting interviews with students in the role of research and teacher. In both situations, I would normally be in a position of authority over the participants, which could impact the honesty of the participants. This is a difficult issue to address, however there are several techniques I have used to mitigate against this. For example, I have

specifically chosen to use the NGT method for the focus group, because it puts me in the role of facilitator and gives a clear structure which enables all participants to contribute in turn, and therefore shifts some of the power dynamic towards those involved as collaborators in the research. I have also thought carefully about the wording of the questions to use in the student interviews, choosing a semi-structured interview because it allowed me to phrase questions at the appropriate language competency (adapted from Holmes, 1998: 22-24 in Punch 2014) for students. I am aware that teachers use academic language but when speaking to students we switch register to a more informal tone, and a 1:1 interview allowed me to adjust my register to suit the student, hopefully permitting them to feel more comfortable during the process and addressing the power dynamic. In addition to these specific choices, I have taken particular care to ensure that participants do not feel under obligation to take part (CUREC, 2020), for example, I have endeavoured with both the staff focus group and student interviews, to arrange them at times that do not infringe on personal or social time in order to not burden the participants. In addition, fully informed consent was gathered following due process (CUREC, 2020, Menter et al, 2011). The focus groups and interviews were recorded, so I also offered the opportunity for each participant to access the recordings and paper records if they wished in order to redress the balance of power (Menter et al, 2011).

Despite the above considerations being made, I found that during the intervention one student refused to receive the verbal feedback that I had intended to provide, thus withdrawing his participation form the research process. As Punch says, ‘Ethical challenges in research arise in all designs and approaches and at all stages of a project…’ (2014: 58). In order to respect his privacy and right not to participate, his

reluctance to participate was respected and feedback was provided in written form for him to process in his own time.

Findings and Data Analysis

There were a variety of qualitative approaches used to analyse the data. Phase one of the data collection, the NGT focus group method, produced a list of strategies that could be used within teaching to enhance the learning and outcomes of pupils. This data was then presented back to my colleagues at the end of the research process, and colleagues were asked which strategies they thought would be the most effective for students but also able to be implemented by staff.

Secondly, the student interviews were transcribed these using Microsoft Word Online software. Once I had done this I then reviewed the transcripts, taking a thematic approach to coding the data. I looked for patterns and repeated ideas, as well as phrases or comments that gave clear examples of these themes (Punch, 2014). I decided not to use an existing system of coding, but to code the data myself because I am aware that '…any set of qualitative data can be looked at from different perspectives' (Punch, 2014: 218), and therefore it seemed important that I interpret the data myself. However, to safeguard against bias, I have presented the results of all phases of the research to my colleagues, to seek their professional opinion.

The first step in analysing the intervention was to review the statistical data of the whole class, as this would give me a framework for analysing the attainment (Appendix

1). The following categories were created based on the literature: ethnicity, gender and SES (PP). Following this I also reviewed attainment using data from the most recent assessment point (mock paper 1, November 2021). I used a proforma produced by a colleague which allows you to compare the students' current performance with their target grade and then provides an overview of how many students are performing above target, on target, one grade below or more than two grades below target (Appendix 2). Once I had input the attainment data I cross referenced it with the previous categories (ethnicity, gender, PP and SEND status) to give me an overview of whether the attainment was influenced by the factors identified within the literature. The second step in analysing the impact of the intervention was to collate the findings of the student questionnaire. To analyse this data, I used a combination of quantitative analysis, which involved tallying the number of responses for each option in answer to question one and question two. These questions were designed to give an overview of how useful the intervention was to the class. However, I also coded the answers to the open questions, following the same approach that I used for coding the interviews. This was because the answers to these questions provided qualitative data and therefore required an appropriate method of analysis. I used the same approach to coding when I reviewed the audio recording of the collaboration with my colleagues regarding the findings of the project, I looked for key comments and any repeated themes. As I have analysed the different data sets I have used the following guidance:

> '…. qualitative analysis is a process of continuous search for patterns and explication of their meanings, through progressive focusing, reflexive iteration and grounded interpretation, which aims to generate rich accounts of the phenomena studied (and link them to literature)' (Punch, 2014: 219).

Findings

This project has found two areas that impact students' attainment within RS, firstly the vast amount of specific subject knowledge required, and second, a lack of experiential knowledge and understanding of the religions studied. Collaboration with students and staff also found several strategies that will be taken forward to mitigate against these barriers to attainment. The findings are outlined subsequently, in response to each research question.

1. What are the Barriers to Students' Attainment in Religious Studies Specifically?

Quantity of Subject-Specific Knowledge

Coding the student interviews in response to the question 'Is there anything that you find difficult about religious studies?' presented two main themes. First, that the amount of knowledge that students need to learn and retain was a challenge for them. For example, one student said: *"…cause there is a lot of information to take in and I just keep forgetting."* In different ways all four students identified an element of there being a lot to learn, for instance, students specifically identified the amount of different information to learn, as well as learning information about Buddhism in particular, and learning keywords and memorising religious teachings. For example, one students said: *"There's a lot of keywords that you need to revise, and if you don't revise that you won't reach your target grade."* In my professional experience this is true, as understanding these words can help you understand what the exam question is asking, so it is the first step in being able to approach the question.

Lack of Experiential Knowledge

In addition, several students mentioned that learning about Buddhism was the most difficult. There was more than one reason for this. The first was that one student found it difficult not to confuse the information from Christianity and Buddhism.

> *"I would say that the two different religions and … the differences between them. So … you could really get, like, mixed up really easily … Christianity, Buddhism, there's some stuff that [is] quite similar, …so it's hard to remember with different information about the different two religions."*

This was something that my colleagues were surprised by. One colleague pointed about that he felt the two different religions were very distinct, *'the language, the concepts, the mythology, the origins of the stories, they are so distinctly different that for me they stand out as different.'* He described this as surprising and interesting, and said *'Unless it's about there being too much information to recall.'* To me, I think there could be several factors that could explain why this student confuses the two religions. Firstly, she is working three grades below target and identified that she needs to focus more on the things she doesn't know in her revision, including Buddhism. Secondly, in the interview she also identified that she felt there was a lot more to learn than she has expected. Thirdly, from the professional relationship I have with her, I know she has a religious faith that is not either of the religions studied, and therefore perhaps lacks familiarity with the basic religious concepts of the Eastern traditions. This raises several questions to be considered as a department in planning for the next academic year and beyond: How can we help students to better tackle the amount of religious knowledge which they need to retain? How can we help students to remember the vast number of key terms and teachings?

In addition to this, another student who referred to Buddhism being more difficult gave the reason that it was due to a lack of familiarity with Buddhism outside of the classroom:

> *"Like for example, in Buddhism that is something that you don't really come across in your day to day life, especially in Britain, so you know it's…yeah, it's just trying to understand the content was a bit hard."*

It appears to me what she is saying is she doesn't have any context or existing understanding to place the ideas and concepts that she is learning into; she does not have a reference point and that makes learning Buddhism more difficult than Christianity. This leads me to ask: How can we help students to better understand Buddhism as it is a religion they are so unfamiliar with? Addressing the departments contribution to students 'cultural capital' is already something that we are aware we need to work on, and this finding adds to the necessity to support students learning beyond the classroom.

2. How can these Challenges be Mitigated Against in Order to Increase Students' Attainment?

Revision

Analysis of the interview data demonstrates two clear themes in answer to the question about what they thought would help them make progress towards their target grades. These were revision and practice of exam questions. Three out of four

students said they needed to ‘focus’ and ‘do more revision’. Interestingly, all students’ said that they had the revision resources which they needed in order to do this. As a teacher this makes me wonder what can be done to enable or encourage students to use the available resources more effectively in order to get the revision done which they are identifying is necessary? The data suggests two concepts that may be beneficial: firstly, one of the students specifically identified that she needed to spend more time revising the content that she found difficult, as she largely focussed on what she already knew.

Interviewer: “Is there anything that you think would help you reach the target grade that you have?”

Student 2: “Yeah, I think it's focusing on that stuff that I don't really know, ‘cause I revised Christianity more than I do Buddhism, so I feel like if I took more time on the other one, then I could do better.”

Similarly, one of my colleagues identified the same idea when I asked for their feedback on the initial findings of the project. He said:

“We have way more Christians than Buddhists, so people want to sit in their comfort zone …it’s [Buddhism] not as near at hand because they don’t prioritise it, they prioritise the pleasure of looking at things that are comforting and near to them.”

This comment highlighted something that I may not have otherwise noticed in the data; that when given the opportunity to revise students will focus on what they know first, and not the content that is harder or less familiar. Clearly, this is not highly beneficial as it will still leave them with significant knowledge gaps. Therefore, finding ways as teachers to help students focus their revision on what they need to learn the most

would be beneficial. Moreover, the interview data and intervention provided a potential strategy for doing this: 1:1 meeting with their teacher. One student suggested this as a method that she would find helpful to enable her to increase her attainment:

Interviewer: "OK, what do you think would be helpful if there were support sessions?"

Student 3: "Like probably 1 :1 to like, talk about what you're struggling on and what could help you achieve your target grade."

Interviewer: "Oh okay, and then what would you do once we've had that conversation? How do you think that's going to help you then, with your revision?"

Student 3: "Well, I feel like it would like boost my energy to revise more to like 'cause if I get told my target grade I would try like reach it by revising and like listening to what you said as it would help me like reach my target grade."

My understanding is that she is suggesting that regular guidance from the teacher as to what to focus on, and what she needs to do within her revision to continue to make progress would be beneficial, as it would be something that keeps her focussed and on track. This is not dissimilar to the intervention which used verbal feedback to give students guidance on how to make progress following their second mock exam, and was received positively by both students and staff.

Exam Technique

The second area that was highlighted in the students' interviews was working on exam questions.

> *Student 4: "I'd say practising like with exam questions, and yeah, trying to practise my timing and techniques, yeah on how to answer different questions."*

There was only one student out of the four participants who cited this, and therefore caution must be taken when drawing conclusions from this. However, it is clear that this student felt that it was not a knowledge issue but a skills issue that would draw her closer to her target. Again, this student cited that she had the correct resources but *"… I guess just trying to use, the resources that I have to their full extent."*

Therefore, again, there is a question of how to enable students to *use* the resources they have been given. Moreover, when my colleagues were asked to select strategies which they thought would have the biggest impact on student progress but also be time and cost effective (in effect possible to implement) two of the strategies they selected directly link into enhancing students' exam technique. The first was scaffolding of 12 mark questions. The teacher described, beginning in September by using 12-mark question sample answers to show students what they are aiming to produce, and gradually removing the scaffold over time. This would include marking against the exam board criteria. He felt that there would be no financial cost, however, it would take some time to implement in terms of preparing resources. He also cited that it would fit with what teachers were already doing in terms of marking and feedback. The benefit to students was described as:

> *"…they are building up an understanding of how to approach a 12-mark questions and applying relevant knowledge and skills to that particular question, as long as they have the knowledge they can apply it in the structure that is required' and 'the benefit is that they will get improved results and move close to their target because we know it's the 12 marker that they'll fall down on."*

This seems as though it would benefit those students for whom their subject knowledge is good but the issue with their attainment is skills based. The second strategy that a colleague suggested was modelling of exemplar answers. He recommended spending an increased amount of time in lesson looking at exemplar answers from the exam board and getting students to dissect the difference between different levels of responses. The perceived benefit for students would be that: "*It's full of vocabulary and gets them thinking about what extra do they need to put in," "It throws in subject specific vocabulary in its context".* This strategy is aimed at enhancing students' ability to use subject specific vocabulary and written skills by showing them what is expected, just as scaffolding is. It is also a strategy that could be implemented within lesson by requiring a small amount of planning time but no other cost.

Intervention for Learning and Teaching: Verbal Feedback

Students and staff gave largely positive comments regarding the use of verbal feedback. The student questionnaire was completed and returned by 13 students out of a total of 19. As can be seen in Table 3, ¾ of the students who completed the questionnaire said they found verbal feedback 'very useful', and none of the students selected that it was 'not at all useful'.

Please rate how useful you found verbal feedback in comparison to written feedback

Very Useful	Somewhat Useful	Not at all Useful
~~IIII~~ ~~IIII~~	III	-

Table 2 Student Questionnaire Q2

The most common reasons why the students found verbal feedback useful were that it gave them an understanding of how to improve, for example:

> *'It helped me understand more what is needed to improve my writing…"*
>
> *'Because it helps me focus on the things that I'm not confident in so I could do better next time. Shows me/tells me what to focus on'.*

This was also evidenced when students were able to give a myriad of very specific responses to 'How has your feedback helped you?' which evidenced that they had taken away something that they now needed to work on. For example:

"I know I need to work on time."

"It has helped me by learning tricks in exams to be able to get marks needed to improve."

"I know what to revise the most."

"Showed me what I needed to work on".

"It helped me focus on the topics I don't know too much about so I spend more time on it".

"It helped me learn how to answer 12 mark questions."

"Practising things I need improvement on and knowing what I do well so I can see what is good about it and apply it to other answers."

"I now understand my weakest points and know how to overcome them ahead of my GCSEs."

In addition, several students' responses also noted that verbal feedback was useful because of how it is conversational, and therefore has different benefits in comparison to written feedback. For example, students felt I was able to explain in more depth, they were able to ask questions to clarify if needed and they were also able to interpret what I said and process it on their own terms, as exemplified in the following comments:

"I think it is helpful to have the conversation as it means it can be explained in more depth."

'… you could talk to me and not be completely limited by just words on a page.'

'Student gets to write their feedback in their own words which helps me understand it more.'

'It meant that I could ask questions regarding my work.'

These comments made me realise that it can be more difficult for students to ask questions about your comments when you have given written feedback, responding to feedback in the classroom becomes an independent learning activity. This is partly because students have to vocalise to ask a question in front of their peers, which some may not be comfortable to do, plus it is more difficult to facilitate as a teacher when you are trying to support an entire class with understanding your comments and what you want them to complete as a response. Whereas one comment in particular about the benefits of providing feedback verbally stood out to my colleague and I. The student said: '*Makes me feel better that my teacher actually cares about my education.'* I believe that verbal feedback conveys this to students in a way that written feedback would not. My colleague commented that she had assumed her students knew she cared, but this made her reflect on whether they actually did and if they didn't, then how could this be better demonstrated.

Equally my colleagues appreciated the value that students placed on verbal feedback. One member of staff said:

> *'It's nice to know that it's true that they see that as more valuable than written because its quicker than spending a whole evening doing written feedback.'*

Plus, staff were extremely positive about the idea of using verbal feedback more regularly. One colleague agreed with students, that verbal feedback is beneficial

because it allows you to say more, and to be more specific and in-depth, with less time spent: *'… if you make it more precise about them, individualised in terms of feedback, its better, more in-depth, you can explain more in depth than ticking a box.'* Two of the three colleagues I spoke with had used verbal feedback in previous roles for giving feedback on specific pieces of work, and both suggested using it again, for example, at key assessment points such as mock exams.

However, it was also found that there are several factors that need to be considered if this were to be a strategy that was implemented at key points. The first, is consideration of students' privacy when giving verbal feedback. One student stated on their questionnaire that they preferred written feedback, because '… people will not hear on what I did wrong'. Unfortunately, it would be difficult to give 1:1 feedback when there were no other students present, this would then have to be done in the students' own time. Moreover, there was also one student who refused to participate in the verbal feedback process, and therefore written feedback was given as an alternative. The student would not give a reason or explain why they refused to participate, however their preference was respected. Significantly, another student commented that they also thought that written feedback had benefits for them because of the way they learn: *'A visual learner so seeing it written is better'.* Introducing an increased use of verbal feedback within the RPE department must consider these limitations.

Discussion

1. What are the Barriers to Students' Attainment in Religious Studies Specifically?

Factors Related to the Attainment Gap

In order to support the delivery of 1:1 feedback for the intervention, I analysed the classes attainment data from the most recent assessment point, which was mock paper one (November 2021) (see Appendix 2). The analysis showed that only 38 % of the class were working on or above target, and most of those were girls (all except one). This left 62% of the class working below target grade. It was also noticeable that all the Pupil Premium and SEND students were working below target. In addition, 60% of those working below target were boys. These statistic correlate with the literature on factors that affect attainment. For example, the literature suggests that boys' attainment in reading is persistently lower in comparison to girls as Guiso et al state: 'boys scores are always higher in Maths than in reading' (2008). Despite the fact that reading is not the only skill required in RS, it is a highly significant one and therefore some correlation between underachievement in reading and RS is likely, plus it is also reflective of a disinterest in education which could also impact attainment in all subject areas (OECD, 2014). I am aware the underachievement of boys in comparison to girls is a longstanding issue within the RPE department at my school. The literature suggests that policy needs to be directed towards addressing boys' engagement with reading and proficiency in reading ability (OECD, 2014), in the broadest sense. However, the findings of this project also suggest that as a department we need to look at strategies to raise the attainment of boys in particular. The school is implementing a school wide strategy called 'Read to Succeed' which is designed to encourage a greater focus on reading in order to support success across the school curriculum. I am also aware that previously staff within the department have run a book

club, aimed at engaging specific students in the subject, and there is a desire to implement this again during the next academic year. This may be a starting point towards addressing the issues of boys underachieving in RS.

Moreover, it was evident that all Pupil Premium students were underachieving, and the literature also indicates that SES has a strong influence on student attainment (Sirin (2005), Demie and Lewis (2011) and the OECD (2014)). There are many reason for this both at home and in school. For example, home factors may include things like: lack of support at home, lack of access to resources and the type of school the child attends due to social capital and the area within which they live (Sirin, 2005, Demie and Lewis 2011). Whilst some of these factors cannot be mitigated against by the classroom teacher, there is the possibility that lack of support from home could be mitigated against by implementing 1:1 revision support. Whilst this has not yet been trialled, it was clear from the student interviews that it could provide valuable guidance, and moreover, the responses to the verbal feedback intervention demonstrated the potential for the 1:1 meetings to offer focussed and specific support, in the context of the teacher students relationship. This provides the opportunity for the teacher to convey their concern and care for the student and offer the support and encouragement which may be lacking from the home environment. However, I am aware that implementing this is dependent on a number of factors, such as timetabling, staff availability and consideration of staff workload. Plus, it would also require student buy-in, and therefore requires careful consideration. In addition, the literature notes that lack of resources both at home and in-school can be a significant factor that causes students to score less well in comparison to their more affluent peers who have access to additional resources in school and at home (Owens, 2013). The RPE

department have provided revision guides on loan to all year 11 students in order to mitigate against this, however, the research findings demonstrate that many students have not been using them, or using them successfully. Therefore, a learning point going forward is to think about how we can enable students to use these resources more effectively.

Quantity of Subject-Specific Knowledge

One of the main findings that will impact my teaching is that students feel the amount of knowledge they need to learn and retain at GCSE level RS is vast. It is more than they expected and there are many specific key terms and religious teachings that they need to understand, be able to recall and use appropriately. This correlates with the CORE report (Tharani, 2018) and Ofsted's description of RE (2021), both of which argue that RE is an academically rigorous subject, even if there is not agreement on how that subject should be framed moving forward (Cooling, Bowie and Panjwani, 2020). It is a subject that deserves its place as a mandatory subject within the curriculum. As a result of this project, enabling students to tackle the vast amount of knowledge required is something that I have already raised with my team and I will continue to revisit this as we work on curriculum design during the next academic year. However, the school is also about to launch a school wide initiative called 'Flex Your Lexis' which is designed to support students in being able to understand and use the vast amounts of academic language required across the curriculum. Part of this requires each department to look at the key terms (subject specific vocabulary) that we require students to know, and to audit what it is and when it being taught and when it is being revisited. I anticipate this would help students with tackling the amount of knowledge that they need to understand and retain.

Lack of Experiential Knowledge

A further key finding that I will take forward in my department development plan for the next academic year is that it was identified that Buddhism is more difficult for students than Christianity. One reason for this is that students in my school do not have any reference point or experience of Buddhism. This makes sense of why students then struggle to tackle exam questions which ask about the impact of a belief on the believer. Students cannot put themselves in that position, to think about how would this idea/view/teaching *influence* someone? As the literature suggests, it would be a mistake to assume that students whom are followers of a religion achieve better results, as overwhelming the consensus is that they do not (Van Heck, Kraaykamp and Wolbers, 2016, Fancourt, 2016). This is because religious students often consider their personal knowledge of their faith sufficient, and in fact they do not have an accurate understanding of the syllabus (Fancourt, 2016). However, the findings of this project suggest that having no experience or prior knowledge of the religion is equally problematic. As a department were recently asked to review the grade descriptor for each aspect of the Ofsted school inspection handbook (2022) and rate how well we think we are doing at meeting each aspect as well as which areas require further development. My department highlighted several aspects which relate to developing 'cultural capital'. For example, we specifically highlighted the phrase under personal development which says 'The curriculum extends *beyond the academic*, vocational or technical and provides for *pupils' boarder development'* [my italics]. (Ofsted, 2022). This is because all our learning is focused on the academic, in classroom experiences, which is largely due to the COVID19 pandemic. With our main focus on settling students back in to school and catching up on lost learning time, we have not yet been

able to put provision in place to take students beyond the classroom curriculum. This finding gives an even greater reason to look into taking students outside of the classroom to enhance their understanding of Buddhism and therefore enable some further aspects of their broader development. This will be something we aim to do in the upcoming academic year and beyond.

2. How can these Challenges be Mitigated Against in Order to Increase Students' Attainment?

Revision

These findings add to the existing body of research in Religious Studies by identifying specific strategies that could be used to support students' progress towards increased attainment. However, the timing and year group that were used to collect the data for this project must be considered when analysing the data. It is possible that if the same project were repeated with either a different year group or a different Key Stage altogether, the findings would differ. Year 11 are more likely to be focussed on revision as their exams are imminent, whereas other year groups may not be. However, my colleagues were keen to use the existing research questions, with different GCSE year groups to give greater understanding to these questions that surround attainment. This is something that could be done in the future.

The findings suggest that students feel they need to focus on revision in order to make increased progress towards their target. As a teacher, it is a reassuring finding that

students identified firstly, the sheer amount of knowledge as a difficulty in the subject, but also identified that to address this issue a greater focus on revision was needed. Two ways to support students to do this were, firstly, to help them focus on the areas where they lack knowledge, in order to spend more time working on their weaker areas of knowledge. As Grant and Matemba suggest, this may require an increased ability for students to self or peer assess in order to identify their weaker areas (2013). It was also suggested that 1:1 meetings with the teacher could be used to keep students focussed and on track with revision. This is something I will consider implementing, dependent on timetabling and availability of staff during the next academic year. I have already decided that going forward students will be provided with revision folders, so that any revision they complete can be kept together and used continually throughout the GCSE, as I often find students lose their resources by the time they have reached year 11. This is a practical effort to support students ongoing revision.

Exam Technique

It was also found that students and staff both focussed on exam questions and exam technique as a way to increase attainment. There are several strategies that could be implemented to address this moving forward. The first is to think about how to enable students to use the revision resources, which include access to exam questions and exam question preparation tasks in their revision guides. Grant and Matemba as well as Fancourt (2010) have written on self-assessment in RS. Grant and Matemba suggest that part of the key to assessing RS effectively is to enable students to self and peer assess (2013). This may be a useful strategy for a number of reasons, firstly, it would enable student to use the resources they have, because they can then self-

assess their responses. It removes the barrier that students won't complete exam practice questions unless they know it will be marked by the teacher. It is not possible for teachers to mark every pieces of written work. Moreover, verbal feedback during 1:1s that are focussed on revision could be incorporated to incentivise students, without overburdening teachers' workload with additional marking. Secondly, teachers suggested scaffolding teaching of exam technique and using exemplar answers. Self and peer assessment could go hand in hand with these strategies as a way of increasing students understanding of what is expected in exam answers. This in turn may lead to better results in written answers and therefore overall increased attainment.

Intervention for Learning and Teaching: Verbal Feedback

The use of verbal feedback was received positively by students and staff. It was viewed as allowing the teacher to say more than when using written feedback, therefore enabling the teacher to be specific and detailed with the feedback they give. Moreover, it was also beneficial as it is more immediate, and conversational, allowing for questioning so that the students fully understand the feedback that is given. These results support the views of assessment given in literature. Blaylock argues that assessment in the RE classroom should be largely based on the teachers' judgements (2000). Giving verbal feedback allows teachers to deliver specific and informative feedback based on their assessment of student work. Moreover, Grant and Matemba also suggest that for assessment in RS to be effective teachers need to be skilled in assessment technique (2013). Using verbal feedback could provide an additional tool for assessing students work in a timely manner that benefits both students and

teachers. However, as Punch says, ethical challenges can arise in all research designs, at any stage of a project (2014) and this was the case with providing verbal feedback. It was found that one student refused to engage in the process. As an alternative, feedback with given in writing. This demonstrates that if verbal feedback were to be introduced on a more ongoing basis then consideration must be given to those who are not comfortable with it, for whatever reason.

Closing the Attainment Gap

Whilst the literature suggests that it is realistic and possible to make progress towards closing the attainment gap (Sosu and Ellis, 2014 and OECD, 2014), the intervention within this research project could not provide evidence of the gap being closed. This is because it was focused on year 11 whom have already left school and their final exam results will not be released until after the time of writing. Therefore, no comparison data is available to measure whether the strategy trialled was effective for increased attainment. To measure this the intervention would need to be trialled on a longer term basis. It must also be considered that schools, especially secondary schools, are limited in what they can do to mitigate against the factors that affect attainment. Greaves, Macmillan and Sibieta suggest policy makers should focus on the power of primary schools to address attainment inequality, and the role of secondary schools is to keep students' progress on track and prepare them for access to KS5 (2014). This small scale research project has found a number of strategies that could be trialled in my school context and in any RS classroom, to attempt to do just this.

Conclusion

The purpose of this small scale research and development project was to investigate the issues that impact students' ability to achieve their full potential within the context of the RS curriculum. The literature review provided an overview of the attainment gap, concluding that there are several factors that can influence a students' attainment: gender, ethnicity and most significantly SES. To overcome the barrier of SES schools, need to look to form a cohesive, school wide approach that focusses on the specific difficulties that students within the school face, whether it be attendance, wellbeing, resourcing or other factors (DFES, 2004, OECD, 2011). The literature suggests that there is hope of overcoming the barriers of the attainment gap however, progress thus far has been slow (Andrews, Robinson and Hutchinson, 2017). The literature review also gave an overview of the aims and challenges of RS as a mandatory subject in the context of a national picture of decline in religious affliction (Lundie and Conroy, 2015). This was followed by an overview of the aims of RS as well as some understanding of the history and type of assessments used in RS, in order to provide an understanding of attainment with the subject.

Following the literature review, the research questions focussed specifically on what the barriers to attainment within RS are, and how these barriers could be addressed. Through the collaborative intervention into teaching and learning within the RS classroom, this project found that students find RS difficult for two reasons: first, the vast amount of specific subject knowledge which is required for GCSE is challenging and secondly, students lack experiential knowledge and understanding of the religions studied, particularly Buddhism in this school context. The intervention showed that one

method which could be used to address the challenge with subject knowledge is to implement 1:1 meetings to support and guide students through the process of revision. Students and staff also gave positive responses about the use of verbal feedback. This could be used at key or pinch points within the academic year to enable staff to provide effective feedback whilst alleviating time to then be able to implement more 1:1 work with GCSE students.

This project has been significant in providing research based evidence as to why students struggle in RS and what precisely they find difficult. It has offered insight into the challenges students face with GCSE study, as well as providing strategies that could be implemented within classroom teaching, curriculum design and the organisation of the RPE department. Essentially, it has provided insight to offer students a greater chance of success in RS. As a result of this I would be keen to continue using a research based approach to problem solving within school in future. This is something that my colleagues informally agreed to. Moreover, as a result of this project, in addition to the specific findings that will be implemented, I found that each member of staff highlighted a different strategy for raising attainment, including increased use of scaffolding and modelling of exam answers, as well as targeted questioning. To develop a research based approach, it may be possible to ask each person to trial embedding the suggested strategy to see what impact it has on attainment. This may yield even greater learning on raising attainment within RS.

However, in the process of the research design I am aware that the practicality of being able to implement the intervention played a part in the chosen intervention.

Therefore, if I were to develop this project further, given the findings, I would want to investigate strategies that focus on supporting knowledge retention, as it was concluded that one of the significant barriers to attainment was the amount of specific subject knowledge required. Moreover, if I had the opportunity to continue the project or to take it further, I would focus on further issues that impact attainment which were outside the scope of this project, such as SEND and mental health.

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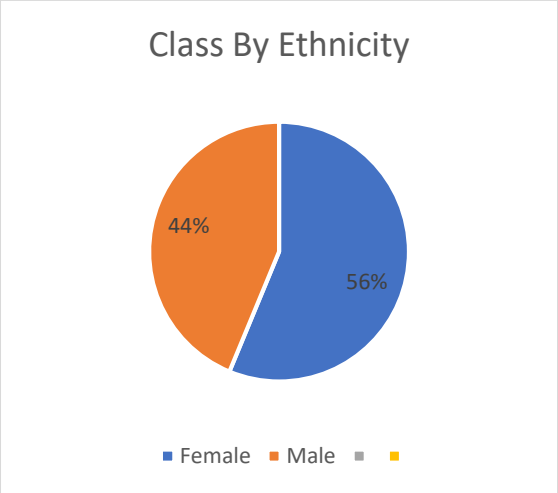
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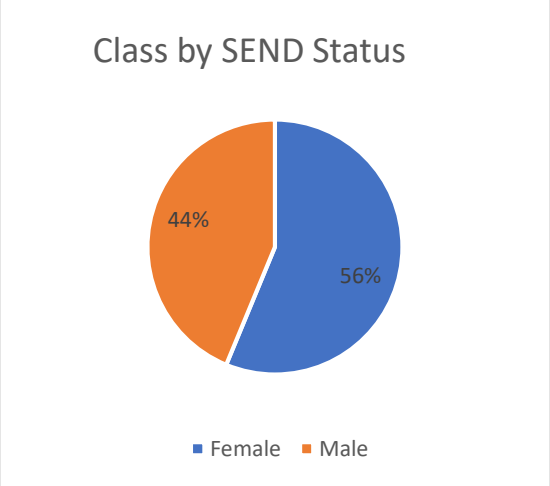
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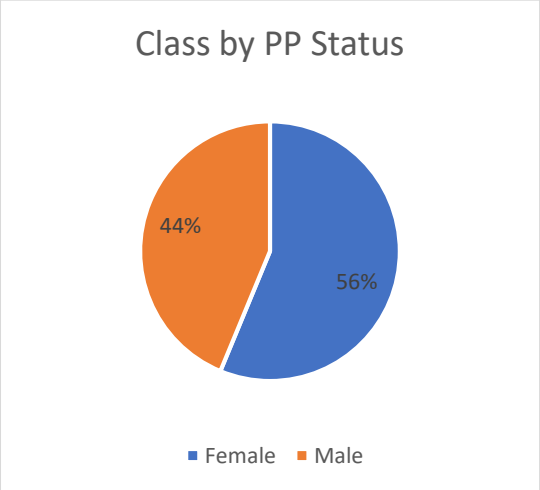
Appendix

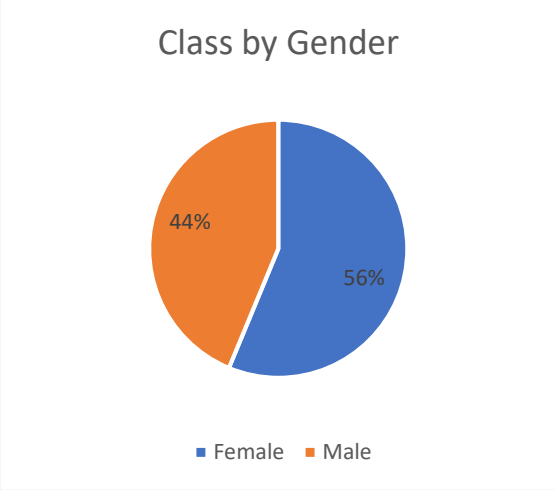
Appendix 1

Class Data by Category









Appendix 2

Class Data Post-Autumn Term Mock Exams

Students above target: **CD** **LM** **GW**	Analysis/ Comment Attainment: 3 Students above target Gender: All girls Ethnicity: One Black African ethnic origin, one refused to state, one white British. PP Status: None
Students on target: **SC** **ES** **SS**	Analysis/ Comment Attainment: 3 students on target, all target grade 3. Gender: 1 boy, two girls. Ethnicity: one refused to state, White Other, White – English. PP Status: none
Students 1 grade below target: **NF (PP)** **JG (SEN)** **RN**	Analysis/ Comment Attainment: 3 students 1 grade below target Gender: 2 girls, 1 boy. 1 Ethnicity: Other Black African, White – English, Other Black African PP Status: PP x 1, Other: 1 SEN (other factors to consider)
Students 2 grades or more below: **OH (SEN)** **TI (SEN)** **JK** **MS (PP)** **ES** **SS (PP)** **HK (PP)**	Analysis/ Comment Attainment: 7 students 2 or more below target Gender: 5 boys, 2 girls Ethnicity: Black – Somali, White – English x 4, Other Black African, Bangladeshi PP Status: PP x 3 Other: 2 SEN (other factors to consider)