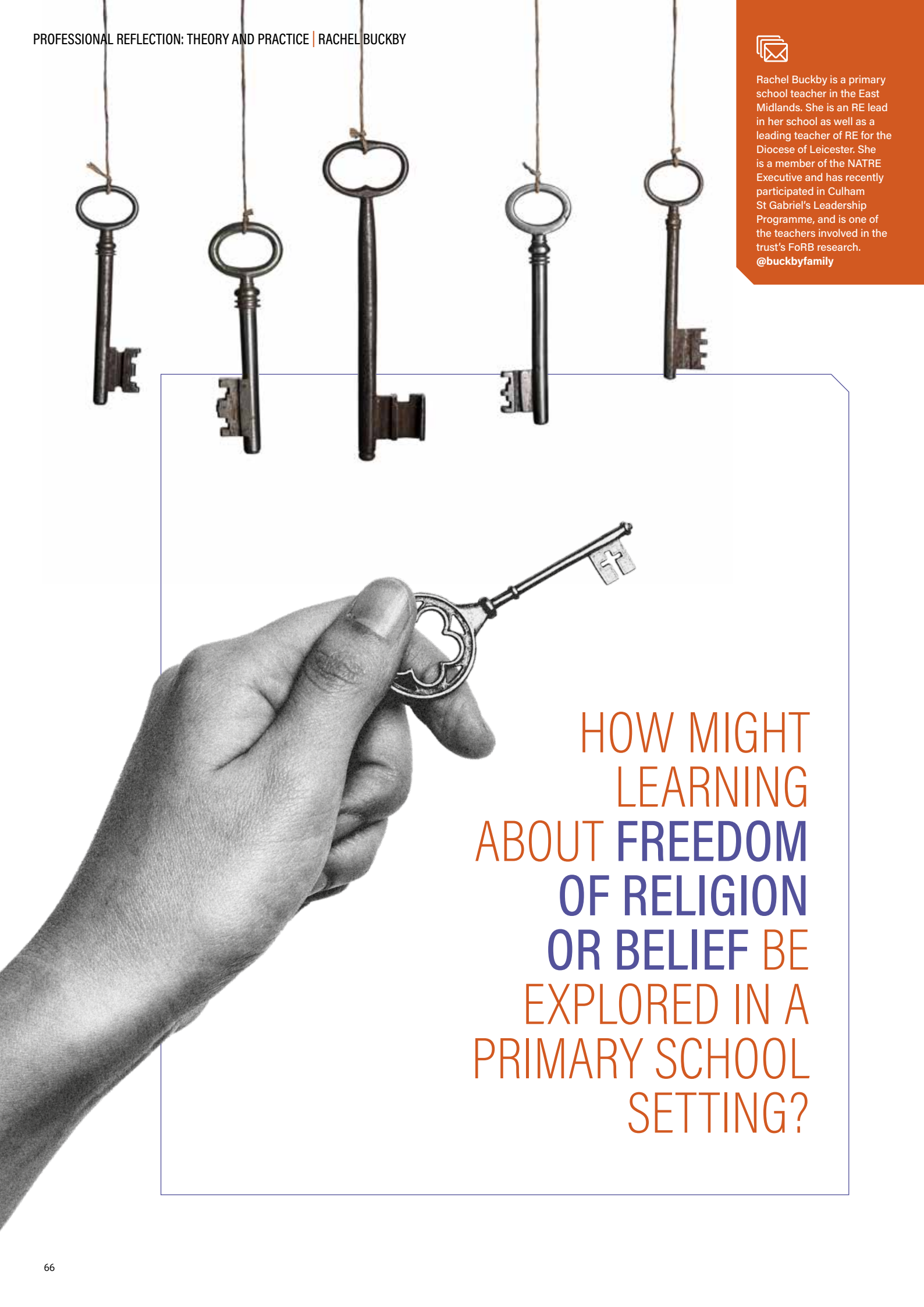




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HOW MIGHT
LEARNING
ABOUT FREEDOM
OF RELIGION
OR BELIEF BE
EXPLORED IN A
PRIMARY SCHOOL
SETTING?

Introduction

In 2022 there was an International Ministerial Conference on Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) in London. The conference reported on Article 18 from the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which concerns the right to freedom of religion or belief. At that conference a statement was issued on FoRB and education that recognised the importance of education in promoting respect for human rights, including FoRB. Commitments made at the conference included: 'prioritising inclusive curricula and teaching ..., supporting teaching that promotes the equality of all individuals regardless of their religion, protecting educational establishments ... promoting international efforts to support education reform' (HM Government 2022; see also Cass 2023).

Following the conference, Culham St Gabriel's Trust (CStG) undertook a project to investigate ways to develop education on human rights, and in particular FoRB in primary settings in England. A research group was formed, of four teachers and a team from the trust, to promote understanding of FoRB principles using two research questions:

1. How can we introduce FoRB principles with primary-age pupils?
2. How can we assess the impact of these interventions?

In November 2022, I was asked to participate in the project as one of the teachers.

The FoRB project

The purpose of the project was to develop, deliver and assess lessons that were intended to promote an understanding of FoRB with primary children. I was keen to become involved as I was interested to see how this fundamental human right might link with a religion and worldviews approach to the teaching of RE. I was also participating in the CStG Leadership Programme, so this project became part of that commitment.

The school at which I teach is a large, three-form-entry Church of England aided school in the East Midlands. It has a very diverse population in terms of both cultural and religious heritage, including those of no faith. The school has a strong Christian vision based around building communities and developing links with many religious and non-religious groups in the local area. It also has a set of Christian values that are a visible part of daily life and relationships within the school. This was commented on in our most recent Ofsted report:

Pupils are kind and tolerant. They are animated about their own religion and that of others.

(Ofsted 2023)

British Values are also embedded throughout the school in its daily life, including teaching within the PSHE curriculum and through the school's values.

The first stage of the project was preparing to teach FoRB in schools. Planning meetings were held between teachers and the CStG team to familiarise teachers with FoRB and its potential in an educational context. This context included consideration of the Toledo Guiding Principles (OSCE 2007), and expectations in religious and citizenship education. A set of learning outcomes were constructed and FoRB was further defined:

FoRB is the freedom to have, choose, change or leave a religion or belief and the freedom to practice or manifest a religion or belief, including non-religious beliefs such as Humanism and Atheism. It asserts the right to protection from coercion and discrimination in matters of religion or belief, including the right for parents to bring up children in accordance with their beliefs.

(Cass 2023, p. 1)

The project was founded on a recognition of a relationship between teaching RE that enabled pupils to explore and understand FoRB and the importance of the idea of FoRB as an underlying principle in RE teaching. Both aspects could benefit from this project's focus.

These are the essential elements highlighted by the research team for the project:

- establishing learning outcomes to assess the impact of interventions
- understanding the contexts of individual schools and pupils
- taking a flexible, responsive approach
- carefully crafting questions
- ensuring there is institutional and community support

In addition, these were the elements identified for Key Stage 2 interventions, as my class is Year 6:

- moving from the general (human rights) to the specific (FoRB)
- using a range of resources
- building on prior knowledge (Cass et al. 2023, p. 2)

At the beginning of the project, teachers met with their senior leadership team and RE/PSHE leads to ensure

everyone understood the project and committed to it. In addition, the key stage teachers of the classes involved were briefed about the project, and parents were informed so that they were aware of the topic to be taught (Cass et al. 2023).

Preparing for teaching about FoRB

Developing my own understanding of FoRB through reading around this subject was crucial. It was helpful to have guidance on suitable documents to read from CStG's team, as well as being advised about ethical processes around research. With the agreement of the head teacher, parental permission was sought, and if consent was not clearly given, those pupils studied the same material but none of their responses were recorded.

The initial stage of the project within school was to consider if and where FoRB featured in our school curriculum. This involved an audit of our PSHE scheme of work and RE curriculum, and my initial thoughts were that it would be difficult to find. In PSHE we teach units of work on rights and responsibilities where FoRB could be emphasised through a focus on the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC 2010). Here FoRB is clearly linked to Article 14:

Article 14 (freedom of thought, belief and religion). Every child has the right to think and believe what they choose and also to practise their religion, as long as they are not stopping other people from enjoying their rights. Governments must respect the rights and responsibilities of parents to guide their child as they grow up.

(UNCRC 2010)

Originally this was covered quite briefly in our curriculum, but with a new emphasis on FoRB I made sure when talking about human rights that I specifically used FoRB as an example of a human right.

When auditing our school's RE curriculum, I found no specific references to FoRB in any units of work. This then became a focus for the project.

The next stage was an initial conversation with a group of pupils to establish what they already thought about issues that would arise from teaching about Article 18. I had interesting conversations where pupils enthused about learning about the role of religion and beliefs in people's lives. They talked about the importance of learning in RE as it helps them to respect people of different faiths. They also spoke about developing

an understanding of other people's lives: Even though we will never know what their lives are like religiously, it is good to learn what we can. (Pupil comment)

Pupils told me that they enjoyed sharing their own knowledge and experiences, particularly acting as experts when studying their own religion or worldview, and some pupils enjoyed finding out about diversity within a particular religion. These attitudes contrasted with a conversation I had previously had with a colleague who found some pupils were quite forthright in their views and reluctant to see that other people might do things differently.

This led to some intriguing points for me to reflect on. The conversation indicated that they had a potential starting point for understanding FoRB because they remembered having looked at the UNCRC several months earlier. They had a general idea of human rights being about people being treated equally and fairly.

One child said, 'If we didn't have human rights the world would be a disaster', which demonstrated how they saw human rights as central to an organised world. They were also able to articulate the value they placed on the RE they had been learning, which also echoed the values of the school of forgiveness, resilience and compassion.

Once I had explained FoRB principles, they spoke about being able to practise any religion that they wanted, converting to and from religions. There was an example given of a violation that one pupil had witnessed where the father of someone who became a Christian got really angry about that decision and threatened to damage the church building.

When asked to consider what it would be like not to have FoRB, they thought that there would not be an option to change your religion. They talked about having freedom to live religion in your own way – for example, to choose not to attend church, but still be a Christian. They also recognised that some people might be forced to adhere to a particular religion due to their parents' choice. They considered that in this instance people would not be living happy lives.

I also asked if they thought this right was upheld around the world. Through discussion they decided it was not, because the world was not perfect and some places in the world might not know this right. They commented that some leaders were strict and ruled badly, but they thought that everyone should be able to have FoRB.

It was important to record the level of their prior knowledge about FoRB issues,

so that I could plan lessons to develop their knowledge and understanding. Initially I was unsure where these attitudes could have come from, as they had at least some knowledge from outside school teaching. When asked, they spoke about watching the news, and the conversations with and attitudes of parents, as well as learning in RE and PSHE. Although I had not identified specific FoRB learning in our RE schemes of work, this encouraged me to reflect on the role of incidental learning through conversations in the classroom and the impact of school values on their attitudes.

The lessons

I planned five lessons to deliver on FoRB that were taught during and after the SATs period of the summer term. The research design was practitioner research monitored through my reflections and some class observation by a CSTG consultant. I designed the lessons with assistance from other teachers and the CSTG team.

Lesson	Learning outcomes	Resources
1: Human rights – emphasis on FoRB	Children begin to understand that human rights affect how we experience the world and that some people, in some parts of the world, do not enjoy the same rights as they do. They begin to understand that this extends to the right associated with religion or belief.	Amnesty International video on human rights: www.youtube.com/watch?v=x9_lvXFEyJo <i>We Are All Born Free</i> book and PowerPoint
2: Upholding and violating human rights	Children develop their understanding that human rights affect how we experience the world. They identify and explain some examples of injustice from resources.	Amnesty International's 'Right Up Your Street' – picture
3: Focus on FoRB – upholding rights, understanding violations of them	Children give examples of ways in which the fundamental rights associated with religion or belief might be violated. Through a variety of sources, they know about how they and others might experience these violations.	<i>Freedom of Religion or Belief – Human Rights</i> , video by the Geneva Office for Human Rights: www.youtube.com/watch?v=YK0d43Hxg9U Case studies – classroom versions and teacher notes
4: Promoting FoRB in RE	Children have some understanding of the role everyone can have in promoting and protecting human rights. They discuss this, using a wider human rights vocabulary.	<i>Nobody Stands Nowhere</i> , video by Theos Think Tank: www.youtube.com/watch?v=AFRxFK-FJos
5: Revising FoRB vocabulary	Pupils demonstrate they have a wider human rights vocabulary and understanding.	Ideas covered during the project: bystander; activist; campaign; Article 18; FoRB; freedom of thought, conscience and belief; conversion; freedom to change your religion or belief; protect the person, not the religion; discrimination, violation

Brief discussion of sequencing and assessment

Resourcing the lessons with suitable material proved difficult, and this issue was discussed among the research group. I eventually decided on using some from Amnesty International as I wanted to include a wider look at human rights before moving into a focus on FoRB. The book *We Are All Born Free* (Amnesty International 2008) was my starting point.

The biggest challenge was finding real stories from around the world of lived experiences where FoRB had either been protected or violated, which were age appropriate for Upper Key Stage 2. Josh Cass, Lead Consultant on Advocacy for CStG, created some resources that could be used (Cass et al. 2023, Appendix 3). Where appropriate I provided written questions that were answered individually, and I then reflected on their responses using written notes made during or soon after the lessons and from their work.

All of the lessons I planned involved paired or small-group tasks, involving conversations and feedback to the class. This approach worked well as pupils were involved in conversations, making decisions and facing challenges within the safe space of the classroom to change their minds about what they may have initially thought. This happened when they discussed whether religious holidays from different religions should be allowed. During a group discussion, one child, who was overheard initially stating that people should not have more holidays, later responded more empathetically by suggesting that this should be possible.

In Lesson 4 pupils were also invited to critique the *Nobody Stands Nowhere* film and consider whether this resource, which supports a religion and worldviews approach to RE, goes far enough or whether something else could be added to the video to support the principles of FoRB. Their comments included:

Everyone, every human is responsible for ensuring the right of FoRB is promoted and protected.

Nobody can stop you from changing religion.

Everyone has the same rights, even though we are different.

Reflections

Pupil interviews were held with a focus group after each lesson and it was clear that they gained knowledge after each session, as they continued to refer back to some of the work that they had done a few weeks after the lessons. This happened after they had looked at the 'Right Up Your Street' image from Amnesty International, where some rights had been violated, and when using a case study about an employee who could not ask for time off to celebrate a religious festival.

I was impressed with the pupils' engagement, as they were keen to consider the fairness of different situations. By the end of the project they keenly asked 'Are we doing FoRB?' and welcomed the thinking generated by the lessons. They clearly were engaged by the definitions and examples of FoRB we used and understood the relationship between the UN Right and the content of their RE lessons, with its clearer emphasis on Article 18.

As stated earlier, I was interested to see how FoRB might link with a religion and worldviews approach. At this stage I think that the use of individual case studies enabled pupils to talk about different experiences of lived religion and allowed more nuanced understanding. I also think that the process of expressing values during the project and discussing attitudes enabled them to experience listening to and interacting with some different aspects of worldviews within the class. I shall consider this area further in the next iteration.

As I reflect on where I might move forward with this, I have considered teaching it at a different time of year, trying to weave in some FoRB work with our RE units of work and looking further into the role of a school's vision, ethos and values and how these impact on pupils' understanding of FoRB. For anyone interested in developing FoRB understanding in their classroom, I would recommend careful planning of groups to consider different dynamics, an initial interview that records pupils' thinking before the lessons occur and careful selection of appropriate materials for each class. It is also very important to establish the classroom as a safe space for discussions on this topic, if necessary, emphasising class rules to maintain respect and support for pupils who find it more challenging to speak on what can be very sensitive subjects. A fuller report of this project, with ideas for Early Years and Lower Key Stage 2, is available now. (Cass et al. 2023).

This project has enabled me to see a clear way through carrying out a research project and to continue to value research that happens in the classroom. I really enjoyed being a part of it and am indebted to the CStG team for the support they have provided. I know my class enjoyed it too, as a note on my desk at the end of term said: 'Thank you for everything and thank you for FoRB!' ■

FoRB READING

RE:ONLINE: www.reonline.org.uk/research/signposts-guidance-for-re-teachers-from-the-council-of-europe-and-a-related-teacher-training-module/

European Wergeland Centre: <https://theowc.org/resources/religious-diversity-and-intercultural-education-a-reference-book-for-schools/>

FoRB RESOURCES

Amnesty International: www.amnesty.org.uk/primary-schools-education-resources and www.amnesty.org.uk/we-are-all-born-free-universal-declaration-human-rights-pictures

FoRB Learning Platform: www.forb-learning.org/raise-awareness/flute-and-drum/

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United Nations (1948), *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights

