

An introduction to Pondering Time in Living Difference IVⁱ

Including opportunities for children and young people to make some choices about what they would like to encounter and study in religious education can contribute to a school meeting the intention of religious education 'playing an educative part in the lives of children and young people as they come to speak and think and act in the world' (Living Difference p.2). Introducing Pondering Time can be a way of doing that.

Teaching and planning curriculum to achieve the purpose of RE in Living Difference IV

As a head of religious education in the secondary or subject leader in primary and special school contexts, we know that those children and young people most likely to achieve their best, are often those who are also attentive, curious and imaginative.

As teachers we will often wonder if these qualities are already present in the young child when they arrive in school, or is this something we have the responsibility to cultivate in some way? We sometimes see that even when children arrive in the early years of school with these qualities of attentiveness and curiosity, they can lessen over time.

In the research, review and revision stages of preparing *Living Difference IV* we thought carefully about how teaching can be re-thought so as to bring children to attend first to their own experience, and where curiosity and imagination can flourish.

Thinking carefully about how we teach, all children and young people, is as important a responsibility as for the curriculum we make.

Attentiveness and curiosity

Attentiveness and curiosity and need time to emerge. Paradoxically they cannot be forced or compelled.

In a content heavy curriculum which is driven hard by the teacher and tested until all the love is gone, it seems this is almost never likely to grow.

One way, that has begun to capture the interest of educationalists and employers alike around the world in various contexts, is the idea of 20%Time. This has been taken into *Living Difference IV*. The idea is quite simple: to set aside around 20% of the total curriculum time for children and young people to choose what they would like to encounter and study, to explore topics of their choice, at their own speed alone or with others who share their interest.

For those of us working in Religious Education, where in general we have about 1 lesson per week, this would translate into about half a term a year.

Some background to 20% time

This is not just an educational initiative. Several commercial companies have introduced 20% time and found it to have increased creativity and innovation. When explaining the idea to those for whom this is a new idea, school Governors for example, it may be helpful to show how commercial companies have worked with the idea to raise innovation and productivity. These are also ways of being needed for this point in history.

One example is with the company 3M. 3M started way back in the 1950's with what at that time was called the 15% Project. Two key outcomes of this are things we take for granted in our school life such as post-its and masking tape.

Another company developing the idea in practice has been Google, and is credited for being influential in ensuring the 20% Project exists as we understand it today.

Google gave its employees the chance to spend 20% of their employed time, to explore and develop a pet project. This was to be some kind of a project that their job description absolutely did not cover. The consequences of this for Google were remarkable. For example, as a result of 20% the Project at Google - Gmail, AdSense, Google News, and the Google Teacher Academy all now exist.

Google is a large 'tec' company and not a school, but what this shows is that the idea of using 20% Time is not just some dreamy vision. Rather, that the kind of opportunity to bring new ideas into the world and the kind of people who can think for themselves, be curious, attentive to detail as well as the bigger picture, innovate and work collaboratively. Discernment about what is of value is also needed to bring what is an idea into the world.

In the workplace 20% time has been shown to give the opportunity for new ideas and projects to flourish. All projects may not all be equally successful. Indeed, along the way there will be some projects that bring stunning outcomes and others that need redevelopment and reflection. It will be this reconsideration and redevelopment where the new discoveries will be made.

What is important is the process, the thinking, the journey of exploration and discovery, without some of the usual constraints.

20% time in education

Living Difference IV is clear about what religious education should intend to achieve. Further there is an appendix outlining more detail the educational position of *Living Difference IV*.

One thing will be to ensure children and young people can access the qualifications and intellectual where-with-all, to be able to move onto the next stage of their life. We also want to ensure children and young people can take their place and participate fully in our democratic society. However, there is also the need for the child / young person to have had some time to work out 'who' they are in the world,

to consider what kind of person they want to be as well as what kind of world they want to live in.

Pondering Time along with the teaching approach in *Living Difference IV* is likely to be something that as part of a carefully made curriculum will assist with all three domains of educational purpose.

Commonly asked questions:

What will children and young people 'do' in Pondering Time?

When thinking this through we can all benefit from talking with our colleagues in the Early Years. The idea of 'child-initiated play' is taken for granted as being a critical part of the way in which small children learn. By the time children are in secondary school teachers often seem fearful of letting go of the reins. Hardly surprising then that teenagers seem less able to think for themselves and we find ourselves re-teaching this to them.

Will we just let young people work on ANYTHING?

Where **Pondering Time** is set as a stand-alone half term unit, often children and young people will be able to develop their own enquiry question. The teacher's role here is to support and where necessary guide their research. However, of course if you consider the question a child or young person has chosen to be in some way inappropriate, we will use our teacherly skills to guide them towards something else.

Ultimately, we need to think, "Will this topic sustain this child or young person for the length of the project?" and occasionally "Could this project be detrimental to the child or young person's well-being?" Having said that young people never cease to amaze us; they may be seeing something new and valuable that we have missed.

Be prepared to be amazed and surprised!

Will there be a community element?

Occasionally the child or young person's project could involve research some other direct engagement with the wider school and local community. If this could mean the young person, or group being outside in school time, regular risk assessments must be made to ensure children and young people are safe.

What will children and young people achieve during the class time?

The children and young people will need ways for researching and thinking together. One school is envisaging a particular classroom being available for this with banks of computers and tables set out so as to enable conversations and collaborations between young people. Another school envisages much of the research being undertaken outside class time.

We have all discovered a great deal during the pandemic about creative ways for children and young people to research independently and upload their findings into shared platforms on the school website. We can bring the best of this practice into our pondering time.

In the primary school we envisage time in the taught curriculum being made in such a way that the children can be encouraged to ask questions about what they have already encountered and studied in RE with their teacher and fine elements that they would be interested to follow up at greater depth, to follow their own interests. This will look slightly different in each school context and may be a separate 'unit' altogether taking half a term or could be woven into an existing unit. With primary age children, engaging parents in the approach is also likely to be invaluable.

With secondary school students we envisage young people by creating and working on projects inside as well as outside of class (see above question). We would encourage teachers to ensure there is a small time at the end of each lesson for young people to reflect on what they have been doing during this particular session. However, do remember it is the process that is being cultivated here and observed by ourselves as the teacher, not only the end product.

Will you allow children and young people to work in groups?

The Pondering Time/ 20% project should always allow for the ultimate in personalisation and for this reason there may be strong reasons to suggest that children and young people will benefit most from exploring their 20% project individually. However, in many cases collaboration in groups will cultivate more curiosity and imagination as children meet new ideas they might not have considered themselves alone.

If children and young people to work together in groups, at least in the first instance it will be useful to set (perhaps with the group) some group perimeters. For example, at the beginning to give time for each group to make and commit to a set of norms for working with each other. This could be formalised by you as the teacher making a copy of the norms for each group member and yourself. This could be a way of ensuring that were there one member of the group was less inclined to cooperate to be seen in clear sight rather than the group having to 'tell' or complain about one of their members. We are looking for self-regulation and the development of shared sense of responsibility in all this. We are seeking to interest the young people in taking steps into adult ways of living, and this is a journey also.

What Pondering time offers

Pondering time offers children and young people the chance to:

- (i) ... ***become more attentive to their own experience and interests to be able to research a field or question that has importance for them***, either alone or with a small group of people. To become more attentive to their own experience and that of others.
- (ii) ... ***create interesting ways of responding*** to the question, to deviate from the line of enquiry only offered by the teacher and explore parallel questions as they arise and which are of interest to the child/children young person/people.
- (iii) ... ***engage and study with increasing intellectual open-mindedness***.
- (iv) ... ***gather and organise information*** in relation to the question they're interested in.
- (v) ... ***make reference to other literature or sources*** (with older children this can even include making formal citations) not mentioned in the regular lessons
- (vi) ... ***publish – write up their project in some kind of creative way***. This could be a formal essay but there would be a myriad of other ways to put their findings out into the world before ... Use the school or class website. Draw on the skills everyone has gained during the lock down in terms of using online platforms
- (vii) ... ***showcase –their findings*** on the school or (in secondary school) on the department website the findings of the project.
- (viii) ... ***discern value in what they have encountered and studied***, both for the communities explored in their enquiry as well as for themselves and their lives. Our research is beginning to show that where children and young people are following their own leadings and interests, the capacity to discern value increases and is transferrable to other units which are more teacher-led.

Further reading:

Kevin Brookhouser (2015). The 20Time Project: How Educators Can Launch Google's Formula for Future Ready Innovation. [The 20Time Project : Kevin Brookhouser : 9781502305244 \(bookdepository.com\)](https://www.bookdepository.com/The-20Time-Project-How-Educators-Can-Launch-Google-s-Formula-for-Future-Ready-Innovation/9781502305244)

Denise Krebs (2020). [The Genius Hour Guidebook: Fostering Passion, Wonder, and Inquiry in the Classroom](#)

Other online information

20time in education – website: [20-Time In Education Inspire. Create. Innovate.
\(20timeineducation.com\)](http://20timeineducation.com)

[The 20% Project for Schools - A Modest Proposal, by Derry Hannam - Progressive Education](#)

ⁱ This piece is adapted from an original piece intended for secondary teachers, and published in the summer 2021 edition of Secondary RE News.