

'Serving the spiritual needs of young people today – a 21st Century Catholic Religious Education Curriculum'

Hannah Fogell

Head of Religious Education
St Peter's Catholic School, Guildford

"I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." (John 10:10)

Aims

- To examine young people's experience of Religious Education
- To identify which elements of the current curriculum help or hinder students' engagement with faith and spirituality
- To evaluate the impact of Religious Education on young people's faith and spiritual development

Ultimate question:

How can the RE curriculum better serve students in their faith and spiritual development?

Context (1)

- Topical debate over pedagogy in RE:

“... some favour a phenomenological approach, others prefer a more human-development approach or a critical realist model.” (Lewis, 2018)

- Impact of Young's 'powerful knowledge' thesis on revised GCSE
- 2018 Commission on Religious Education – 'Religion and Worldviews'

Context (2)

- Role of RE in fostering faith and spiritual development:

“The primary purpose of Catholic Religious Education is to come to know and understand God’s revelation which is fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ . . . Religious Education helps the pupil to know and experience the meaning of this revelation in his or her own life . . .” (Catholic Bishops’ Conference of England and Wales 2012, p.3)

- Current reform of Religious Education Curriculum Directory for Catholic Schools in England and Wales

Context (3)

- Declining role of the Church in the lives of the young
- For some, school is the only opportunity to experience the faith
- Rise of individualism, a la carte spirituality

“... the change in spirituality has been so substantial that not to take it in to account would constitute a failure in the mission of the Catholic school religious education.” (Rossiter, 2010)

“Surely you don’t believe Jesus came back to life again, do you Miss?” (Year 8 student)

Context (4)

- Impact of a more densely packed, theological GCSE:

“What I am seeing, increasingly, is that rather than bringing them to the faith, we’re simply reinforcing and consolidating all their negative suspicions and fears about it: ‘Why am I doing this? What’s the relevance of this? Why are we reading this?’ They just don’t get it.” (School 15D) (McGrail and Towey, p.293)

Methodology

- Small scale qualitative research
- 3 co-ed Catholic comprehensives in the South-East (similar schools)
- For each school – one KS3 interview (Year 8) and one KS4 interview (Year 11)
- Focus groups of 6-10 students, mix of boys and girls
- Range of faith positions represented
- AQA, Edexcel and Eduqas GCSE RE specifications represented

Interview questions

A. Setting the scene

- 1) How are you enjoying your current work in RE?
- 2) What do you think are the most and least interesting topics?
- 3) What are the most difficult and straightforward topics?
- 4) Is RE harder or easier than your other subjects?

Interview questions

B. What you study in RE – on a scale of 1-10:

- 5) To what extent do you feel you have sufficient time in RE lessons for discussion and to explore issues connected to the topics you are studying?
- 6) Where would you place the importance of Jesus' teachings in your life?
- 7) Where would you place the significance of church practices in your life?
- 8) How highly do you value the studies you have made of other religions?

Interview questions

C. RE and you

- 9) Can you give any particular examples of something you have studied in RE that has influenced your opinion or beliefs?
- 10) Have any topics or activities in RE helped you develop an appreciation of what some people call the sacred / the holy?
- 11) Do you have time in RE lessons for prayer, reflection and visiting the chapel? Do you find such time helpful to you?
- 12) Ultimately, do you think the purpose of RE is a knowledge thing like any subject or is there is more to it than that?

Positive factors for student engagement with faith and spirituality in RE

Year 8	Year 11
Bible stories with a message that can be related to life today and help you think about your own faith	Ethics was generally seen as the most interesting part of RE, because students explore opinions and beliefs; it's seen as being relevant to life today
On the whole students viewed the teaching of both Jesus and the Catholic Church as being relevant to their lives	Studying eschatology, relationships and family
Prayer in RE lessons on an occasional basis – time to stop and reflect	Debates and having the opportunity to think for themselves

For both year groups:

- Studying other world religions
- Having modern day, real life examples that students can relate to
- Having teachers who are passionate about faith and who give time to the personal side of the subject

Negative factors for student engagement with faith and spirituality in RE

Year 8	Year 11
Repetition of content from primary school	Catholic Church teachings that were seen as irrelevant to their lives
Content that was seen as uninteresting or irrelevant to their lives	Church practices and factual content that had less scope for expression of opinions
	Heavy emphasis on learning facts in GCSE course was seen as detracting from faith and spiritual development

Student comments – Year 8

"... he [the class teacher] makes us feel comfortable to like open up and explore like what we believe in and what we don't believe in."
(Student 1C)

"I like it when there are questions and it makes you really evaluate like how you saw the Bible."
(Student 1A)

"I think if we more learnt about like real life scenarios, like scenarios that happen like right now it would be more helpful for us."
(Student 2B)

"I feel when we have RE and we learn about [God] it helps us all make up our minds on what think about it."
(Student 4A)

"Jesus's teachings, they are like important, but they're not really very relatable because his teachings were more for like when he was alive . . . But like we've progressed and everything's changed."
(Student 1A)

"We use it [RE] in our everyday life because we reflect like on the choices that Jesus teaches us, like to love one another, like love our enemies, we take that into our everyday life and with our friends and actions towards other people as well..
(Student 1A)

Student comments – Year 11

"I think it definitely affects your morals a lot in RE because you can change a lot of your opinions on certain things."
(Student iA)

"So to me personally this stuff on gender and gender equality in the church, after kind of learning about that ... after kind of like hearing men's role, women's role - it really made me kind of think well if the church doesn't value what I'm capable of doing, why should I value the church and why should I value my faith. (Student iB)

"I believe they [teachers] focus too much on the actual basic understanding and just memorisation of content, and what happens, it stagnates, a lot of people become disinterested and they don't take the opportunity to actually develop anything else."
(Student iC)

"... eschatology ... that's helped me to reflect on my actions and like how that might impact me after death, and also redemption ... Obviously when I was younger I knew that yeah Jesus died for our sins but I never understood what it actually meant and it's helped me to like understand the whole concept of why we believe in God." (Student ivB)

"I feel the Catholic Church is extremely forceful in their views ... So if we talk about Jesus and our relationship with Jesus we think of it as very accepting, very loving, very trusting - then I feel like we get to the Catholic Church and it's kind of maybe not so much that love." (Student iB)

Findings – key points (1)

- Common agreement across the focus groups that RE was more than just an academic subject. Students could see a clear link between RE and faith development.
- Students appreciated that RE gave them the space to examine big questions in life and to explore their own beliefs.
- Students identified that RE has a positive impact on their morality, helping them appreciate different points of view and formulate their own opinions.
- Students appreciated learning about other faiths, for understanding others and reflecting on their own beliefs.

Findings – key points (2)

- Most students said they generally didn't pray in RE lessons and only visited the chapel for reflection days, not in RE. If students did have prayer in RE, they liked it if the prayer was made relevant to what was going on in the world.
- Year 11 students felt prayer was well-catered for in their school outside of lessons and that if people wanted to pray, they could do it in their own time.
- Hostility from some Year 11s towards the Catholic Church, who perceived it to be restrictive and hypocritical in its teachings.
- Year 11 students commented that whilst there was some discussion time in lessons, it was more limited than at KS3 and was linked to exam questions rather than being a freer discussion.

Analysis

- Students engage more positively in the subject if it can be related to their life today, if they can see how it impacts on them.
- Students appreciate the opportunity to examine the 'big questions' in life and to debate philosophical and moral issues.
- The 'content heavy' nature of GCSE courses limits scope for reflection on one's own beliefs.
- Repetition of content in RE, particularly from primary school, can mean students lose enthusiasm for the subject.
- Teachers enthuse students through their own passion for their faith, providing a real-life example to students that Christianity is a credible option.

Areas of tension

Repetition of
content

Lack of experiential
RE

'Irrelevant'
theological content

Facts at the expense
of self-reflection
(‘teaching for the
exam’ approach)

Perception that the
Church is hypocritical

Recommendations for how the RE curriculum can better serve students' faith and spiritual development

- Ensure prior learning is developed and extended, not repeated
- Introduce more reflective plenaries/homeworks, where students can consider the impact of beliefs and teachings on their own lives
- Create more experiential RE lessons to be incorporated into schemes of work
- Optimise use of 'big questions' and opportunities for debate, especially relating to Catholic Church teachings