

Religious Education and Human Rights

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Our debate this evening is about religious education in Britain, but there's a danger that we get so sucked into our own national preoccupations that we lose perspective.

My own research on the Religion and Society Programme and at Warwick looks at schools across the UK, but my work also extends into Europe, and it is from this wider European perspective which I want to speak tonight. Above all, I suggest that – along with the rest of Europe – we need to ground our thinking about religious education in a human rights framework.

Since 9/11 the Council of Europe, which was set up to protect human rights, and whose remit extends to democratic education, has started to take religion in education much more seriously. I have been involved in this work, and in promoting the 2008 Recommendation from the Committee of Ministers of the 47 states, including the UK, about teaching religions and other worldviews in schools.

What this amounts to is a recognition that every young person in Europe has a right to hold a particular view, whether religious or secular, within the limits of the law. I think we can move forward in our own debates if we take this commitment to liberal democracy underpinned by human rights as our starting point, and treat it as, in principle, inclusive of all.

I also believe that we must not lose sight of the importance of an education which covers *all* areas of human experience - including mathematical, scientific, aesthetic, philosophical (including ethical), linguistic, historical, and religious/spiritual. I wish politicians would go back more to breadth in education, related to the whole human person, and not just contemporary utility. However, instrumental reasons *are* important, whether about students' personal development or about social issues, such as developing cultural understanding or promoting social cohesion. A combination of intrinsic and instrumental justification is needed to give attention to all aspects of human experience, as well as addressing pressing issues.

So what does this mean for religious education in Britain today? Let me start with RE in state-funded schools, and then move onto faith schools.

Religious Education in Fully State Funded Schools

When I refer to 'religious education', I am thinking mainly of the subject in fully state-funded schools in England and Wales.

Here are a couple of observations based on my team's recent research:

First, many of the adolescents we surveyed give strong support to applying democratic principles in classrooms and see the classroom as a potential 'safe space' for dialogue, and want peaceful coexistence based on: (a) knowledge about each other's religions and worldviews (b) sharing common interests /doing things together. On the whole students with a firm religious or secular commitment do not feel threatened by dialogue with others or learning about others; but some (especially those from religious minorities in the classroom) feel vulnerable.

Second, many religious students cannot identify with the portrayal of their own religion by some teachers and in many books and electronic resources. They do not recognise themselves or their own families in the descriptions given. Too many teaching materials provide only superficial factual information and do not address issues of meaning in relation to religious language and the experience of religious people.

From these findings follow three suggestions for improving RE:

1. the geographical and social contexts of schools must be taken seriously and demand different starting points and approaches in teaching
2. dialogue between students should be taken more seriously. There are some interesting experiments in moderated *pupil to pupil dialogue* taking place. For example, the Tony Blair Faith Foundation uses this approach in its Face to Faith project which we are currently evaluating with secondary students from the UK and beyond.
3. Although the primary aim of religious education in state-funded community schools is concerned with *understanding religions*, such education may also increase the *religious understanding* of young people from religious backgrounds – and that is good. RE is best when it is fully inclusive.

Faith-based Schools

I turn now to the issue of faith-based schools. Linda has explained that England has a long tradition of partially state-funded faith based schools.

The first thing to say is that they are extremely diverse. So diverse, in fact, that the label 'faith school' is often pretty meaningless.

At one end of the spectrum, they are inclusive and outward looking, introducing young people to religious diversity in society. They do not use their status in order to proselytise, but as a basis for serving the community. At the other extreme, there are faith-based schools which maintain exclusivity. Their core activity is to transmit a particular faith tradition and they avoid contact with other types of school.

Non-faith-based schools also vary in the ways they relate to issues of religion. At one end of the spectrum, schools recognise and respect religious and ethnic difference in society. They create links with the community, including with different religious bodies, and are generally inclusive and outward looking. At the other end are schools showing no interest in religious diversity, and giving little support to RE as a subject.

As for the justification for publicly-funded faith-based schools in a democratic society, I return to my starting point: We need to refer to international law based on human rights principles concerning the rights of parents and the rights of children. In European law, parents have the right to bring up children in their own religious tradition. Whether the state is willing to fund such education is up to the state. Children also have rights, but their autonomy is governed by judgements about their maturity. Advice from legal specialists suggests that disputes between parents and children claiming maturity would need to be dealt with as individual cases.

Conclusion

In conclusion, a European perspective reminds us that the right to hold a particular viewpoint within the law, and to have one's children educated as one sees fit, are fundamental freedoms which we must respect within the context of our different national histories of educational provision. Faith schools are justifiable on these grounds.

And, with regard to all types of schools, we need better RE provision – through strengthening its place in the curriculum and teacher training, and through high quality resources.