

What's happening to religious education in schools is a disaster for Britain

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In 2008 I embarked on a major three-year study of RE in Britain, funded by the AHRC/ESRC Religion and Society Programme. Our research question was simple: 'Does RE Work?' Although there are some schools in which the answer is 'yes', the findings as a whole do not make comfortable reading. Even where RE is taught magnificently, it is so against the odds. RE in Britain is under-resourced, torn between competing aims, and has become overburdened by having to include other subjects (from sex to citizenship). Whilst governments insist on RE's importance in theory, they marginalise it in practice – as Michael Gove has recently done by refusing to treat it as a core subject.

Does it really matter? If RE is really in such a state, shouldn't it be allowed to wither on the vine? My answer is a resounding 'no', and that 'no' is based on what we saw in those schools where RE is done well. What they reveal is that good RE is about something absolutely fundamental: a space for serious, critical exploration of the meanings and values by which we live. To live good lives, individually and together, we need to be able to make sense of our world and ourselves – and RE offers the only place in the curriculum where that can still be done systematically.

Good RE

What does good RE look like? We came to our conclusions on the basis of in-depth observation and interview in 24 schools across the UK. We looked at the full spectrum of their activities, both formal and informal. We involved a broad range of religiously and non-religiously denominated schools, both urban and rural. The schools were self-selecting as places that offered 'good' religious education. This self-

identification was important, as it is never difficult to identify poor examples of any practice and pathologise the whole field.

The first characteristic of the good RE we observed is that it involves close engagement with the community in which a school is located. The best schools for RE were not necessarily religiously denominational, but were those schools that recognised the religious composition of the community they served and were willing to engage with it – not least in relation to the beliefs of their own pupils. It did not matter what the religious profile was: one of our most outstanding schools had pupils primarily from the Indian sub-continent with a range of faiths, another was almost entirely Muslim, some were largely Christian. What they all had in common was the belief that religious education was important in relation to the community that they served.

A second characteristic is that in the best RE, teachers do not merely describe, in an exam-obsessed way, the basic ‘phenomena’ of a religion or a secular tradition. They explore with students the kinds of meanings which underlie ritual, social and personal practices. For example, in one lesson, Muslim students were allowed to explore the underpinning theology of *salat* (the ritual act of praying five times a day), a practice which is often simply a ‘given’ in their community. In another example, a teacher did not shy away from pupils’ desire to discuss Islamic terrorism, but taught them about different interpretations of ‘jihad’, and allowed them to explore in some depth the claims often made by terrorists to see how far these were indeed theological.

The point is that if we really intend that children should learn from religion as well as about religion then they must be introduced to the intellectual practice of trying to understand a particular set of beliefs and practices in their own epistemological terms, and then be allowed to apply critical faculties to religious claims. Such teaching does not turn religion into something foreign which ‘others’ do, but into something much closer to home in which we all participate – for we all have

beliefs and attachments, and we all have to make sense of life and death.

Poor RE

It probably goes without saying that another feature of good RE is that it is well resourced. Success depends on adequate time, accurate description, good resources, well-educated teachers, high-quality materials, and institutional support. Despite the often heroic efforts by many of the individual teachers we met, we found that these elements were too often missing. Good resourcing was frighteningly dependent upon the personal disposition of the headteacher with regard to religion in general. RE's squeezed place in the curriculum and its low status only compounded the problem.

But what marked poor provision, above all, was teaching which contented itself with introducing students to the surface phenomena of religion. We saw RE teachers fall into the trap of responding to serious student questions ('but why does it matter that Jesus died on a cross?') by deflecting it or asking another student to answer. Prima facie this looks like the democratisation of the classroom but, at a deeper level, it is often driven by a fear of making substantive or normative claims, combined with limited time and resource and exam pressures. Such strategies lead to superficiality—as one student put it in a focus group when asked about the 'usefulness' of RE: 'Let me put it this way, if a Jew came round for tea, I would know what to feed them!' Learning about 'facts', important as it is, too rarely translates into a serious grasp of the shape of another's life world.

A fatal ambivalence

The problem goes much deeper than individual teachers or schools. It is symptomatic of a crippling ambivalence about RE which runs through British society, and infects educational policy. It is seen in Michael

Gove's decision to retain religious education as a Foundation subject but downgrade its importance and refuse to have it included in the EBacc.

It is also seen in the lengthy and often incompatible set of aims and objectives with which RE is freighted. These include: Religious literacy; Citizenship education; Multicultural awareness; Social cohesion; Philosophical understanding; Moral development; Understanding heritage; Sex and relationships education. All these things are important, but RE cannot carry them all. Our study found that in most state schools £1.00 or less is spent on each child per annum on materials and books for RE. And even when RE is included in the examination portfolio of a school, teachers are too often expected to deliver the GCSE/Standard Grade syllabus in a shorter time than that allowed for other subjects.

Religious education matters as never before. We cannot understand our own culture without religious knowledge, let alone that of others. As religious and secular diversity increases, students need to be able to articulate their own beliefs, and engage seriously with those of others, as never before. Respect and social harmony depend upon it. What is happening to RE in our schools is a scandal for which we will have to pay a high price in years to come.