

Why religious education has an important role to play in our society.

<https://www.irishtimes.com/news/education/why-religious-education-has-an-important-role-to-play-in-our-society-1.1853105>

Opinion: ‘The suggestion that time might be taken from RE in order to increase the focus on literacy, numeracy, science or IT is educationally inappropriate’

By Dr Gareth Byrne. Thu Jul 03, 2014 - 00:01

The current critique of denominational education, and of denominational religious education in particular, risks undermining the place of this core subject in all schools, just at a moment when deeper reflection on religion, belief, spirituality and ethics could contribute enormously to the emergence of a society that seeks to embrace difference and is comfortable to celebrate the presence of a variety of religious and other belief systems. This, of course, means respecting the beliefs of those of the majority religious tradition, too, and seeking to contribute to the religious and spiritual literacy of all young people and of adults. Some recent commentary appears to indicate a lack of knowledge of, or perhaps interest in, the transformation of religious education (RE) after the renewal of the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s and since. It has changed from a wholly content-focused subject to a student-focused one; from learning off questions and answers to discussion of personal experience and response; and from difference being defined denominationally within the Christian tradition, to an acknowledgment of the variety of people in Irish society today and respect for the diversity of their religions and beliefs. RE in schools contributes not only to the personal reflection and development of young people but should also heighten respect for the beliefs of the other and help build a diverse but cohesive society. To neglect RE is to neglect the future. The suggestion that time might be taken from RE in order to increase the focus on literacy, numeracy, science or IT is educationally inappropriate. The debate in the 1990s, during the preparation of the Education Act, 1998, emphasised in the first instance the importance of preparing young people for the jobs market and for strengthening the nation’s economy. Reflection on this important but limited understanding of the person led to confirmation of the need for a holistic approach to education that values and seeks to educate the whole person “: . . for personal and home life, for working life, for living in the community and for leisure” (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment: general definition of education).

Freedom of conscience.

RE contributes significantly, indeed uniquely, to the education of the whole person. Defined in a way that is appropriate for the young person’s age and stage of development, good RE honours the freedom of conscience of the young person while revering their family faith and/or belief

traditions and expectations. This requires a high level of training among teachers. At primary level, RE provides a place in the younger child's day to reflect on belonging and being cherished within a community of religious faith or other belief system. For example, in a Catholic primary school, RE will focus for Catholic pupils on their experience of growing into their own faith community and on respect for others (See Irish Episcopal Conference, Share the Good News). Contrary to recent suggestions, pupils do not participate in faith formation in schools in Ireland in any faith tradition if their parents/guardians are not content. An updated curriculum is being finalised for religious education and formation in Catholic primary schools, and a variety of other such programmes are now being provided for too. At Junior Certificate level, RE has become one of the most popular subjects for State examination. For teenagers of all religions and none, whether taking it as an examination subject or not, RE creates a safe space to test one's own identity and reflect with others in a respectful manner on the search for meaning and values. At senior cycle level the emphasis is on becoming a "critical questioner and reflective searcher". Over a period of time, RE contributes enormously to the development of the young person's literacy across a wide range of texts and resources and of challenges to the human psyche. The ability to express the big questions in words, story, art, song, ritual and prayer, for example, has an impact at a whole series of levels on the developing knowledge, understanding, skills and attitudes of the young. They are confronted not only cognitively but affectively and through activity- based approaches, encouraging them to become actors in the world, particularly in support of those in most need.

Good practice.

The Irish Centre for Religious Education researches and promotes good practice in religious education at primary, secondary and higher levels. Doctoral students along with a network of RE lecturers, North and South, are now actively engaged in exploring appropriate models of RE, not only for schools but also at home, in faith communities and as a contribution to the wellbeing of society. RE in schools is valued by individuals and communities who understand its contribution. Reasonably, it can be expected that in the future there will be different emphases placed within RE provided in different kinds of schools. RE should, however, be a core subject for all pupils, appropriately, in all schools.

Dr Gareth Byrne is head of religious education at Mater Dei Institute of Education, Dublin City University, and Co- Ordinator of the Irish Centre for Religious Education. He is the editor with Patricia Kieran of *Toward Mutual Ground: Plurality, Religious Education and Diversity in Irish Schools* (Dublin: Columba, 2013).