

RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN THE PRIMARY SCHOOL

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Goreu Diwylliwr Athraw Da

School of Education
University of Wales
Bangor
2004

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2004

ISBN 1 84220 059 3

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RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

in the

PRIMARY SCHOOL

Religious education (RE) as it is taught in the schools of Wales today has three main strands. First, it seeks to enable pupils to develop a knowledge and understanding of religious beliefs and practices. Since Christianity has played such a significant part in the historical development of this country, its beliefs and practices feature prominently in the RE programme of most schools. However, the law makes it clear that pupils should also be given opportunities to develop an understanding of the religious beliefs and practices of the other major religions represented in Great Britain as well. The religions that are usually taught in schools include Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and Sikhism in addition to Christianity. It is not suggested that all these religions have to be taught to young pupils at the same time. In fact, it would be folly to do so. Which religions and at what level they will be taught obviously depend on the age of the pupils, the nature of the school and the stipulations of the locally agreed syllabus. What is important is that pupils learn what it is like to be an adherent of a religion practised in the world today.

The second strand of the subject is its contribution to pupils' spiritual development. Spirituality is a complex area, which transcends any definition. The best we can do is to describe some of its aspects. Spirituality is concerned with what it is to be human and to make sense of life's experiences. It involves trying to find answers to such fundamental questions as 'Is there life after death?', 'Why am I on this earth?', 'Why do innocent people suffer?', and 'What is right and what is wrong?'. It is concerned with the development of personal beliefs and appreciating the beliefs of others. Experiencing a sense of awe and mystery is another key aspect. It also

involves making sense of human relationships and, for some, making sense of a relationship with God. A further aspect is responding to challenging experiences. Whilst every area of the curriculum has the potential to contribute to children's spiritual development, religious education by its very nature is a key contributor.

The third strand of religious education is exploring and responding to religion. This involves the development of positive attitudes and skills. Key skills are defined variously from publication to publication but typically include investigation, empathy, synthesis, interpretation, evaluation, application, reflection, analysis, and expression. The following are characteristic of the key attitudes included for personal development: commitment, fairness, respect, self-understanding and enquiry (SCAA, 1994a and 1994b).

A religious education programme consisting of these strands can make a very positive contribution to children's spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. It can also help to prepare them for life. Such an educational programme is relevant to all children, regardless of their religious or cultural background.

The next section seeks to give a brief outline of the history of RE with particular reference to the situation in Wales.

RE in the curriculum

Religious education has been part of the curriculum of Welsh educational establishments ever since Christianity was first introduced to this country. Until comparatively recently, religion has played a dominant part in the history of the Welsh people. Almost half of the people featured in *Famous Welshmen* (University of Wales Press, 1944) made their mark at least partly because of their contribution to the religious life of Wales. The first schools were the creation of religious bodies and the transmission of religious

teaching was part of children's education from the outset. From the monastic schools set up by the Celtic saints to the remarkable work of people like Griffith Jones, Llanddowror, in the eighteenth century (whose circulating schools were responsible for teaching no less than 158,237 pupils in 3,495 classes, thus making a huge contribution to making Wales a literate nation) these schools had one thing in common – their primary aim was to save souls.

By the nineteenth century, and the dawning of the new industrial society, there was clearly a great need for a more extensive schooling system, which could cater for the educational needs of children throughout the land. Two societies were set up during the early part of the nineteenth century to try to ensure that pupils were given adequate schooling. The first was the British and Foreign School Society which was established in 1814 (emerging from the Royal Lancastrian Society which was founded in 1808) and supported by non-conformists and liberal Anglicans to promote 'the education of the labouring and manufacturing classes of society of every religious persuasion'. The second was The National Society, established by Anglicans in 1811 to promote 'the education of the poor in the principles of the established church'. In addition to this, the Catholic Poor Schools Committee was created in 1847 for the educational and spiritual needs of Catholic children. These bodies made valiant efforts to open schools, which not only provided an elementary education for their pupils but also afforded them with a confessional religious education. No distinction was made in the schools between religious instruction and worship. As McCreery (1993) notes, 'one prepared children for participation in the other'.

Despite their hard work and undoubted successes it became clear by the second half of the nineteenth century that there were still huge gaps in the educational provision. While a few, mainly urban, areas offered a choice of schools for parents, there were other areas where the choice was limited to one type of school or as often happened no school at all. Having more

finance at its disposal, the National Society was able to build a significantly higher number of schools, thus forcing the largely nonconformist Welsh population to choose to send their children either to a church school or to no school at all.

The 1870 Education Act, which was a response to the concerns and discussions of the time, made provision for two different types of school - voluntary and board schools. Voluntary schools (run by the denominational voluntary societies) would continue to receive financial assistance from the state. In addition to this, local school boards were set up to build schools where there was inadequate local provision. The board schools were non-denominational and open to all. The voluntary schools could continue to provide denominational religious instruction. Board schools, on the other hand, could decide whether or not to provide religious instruction. If they decided to do so, it had to be non-denominational instruction in accordance with the Cowper-Temple clause, which stated that:

No religious catechism or religious formulary which is distinctive of any particular denomination shall be taught in any school provided by a school board. (1870 Education Act, Section 14.2)

Despite the inclusion of this clause, some feared that the churches would try to proselytise through the new schools. As a result of their concerns the government introduced a conscience clause, which gave parents the right to withdraw their children from religious instruction.

The 1902 Education Act transferred educational administration from the hands of the 2214 school boards to 333 local education authorities. The LEAs were also given control over secular education in voluntary schools. Both state schools (now called provided schools) and voluntary schools (now called non-provided schools) were to exist together as part of the one public educational system. This provoked much anger from the nonconformists, particularly in Wales, who were reluctant to see their rates paying for the upkeep of Catholic and Anglican schools.

Between the two world wars there was a growing realisation that religious instruction could be taught more effectively if there was agreement on the content of the provision. This realisation encouraged LEAs to draw up and develop their own syllabuses for religious instruction. By the late 1930s almost all the educational authorities had adopted an agreed syllabus and the importance of religious instruction and school worship in all schools was widely recognised. This was a positive step, which contributed greatly towards the raising of standards in the subject.

An important milestone in the history of religious education was the passing of the 1944 Education Act. The teaching of religious instruction according to an agreed syllabus and an act of daily worship became compulsory in schools. Together, these two practices were described as 'religious education'. The conscience clause, which allowed parents to withdraw their children from religious education, was retained. Local education authorities were to have the power to constitute a standing advisory council on religious education to advise the authority upon matters connected with the religious instruction to be given. The 1944 Education Act also established two classes of voluntary school - controlled and aided. Voluntary aided schools retained the right to provide denominational religious instruction and worship. Voluntary controlled schools were to give religious instruction according to the locally agreed syllabus, although parents could ask for denominational teaching.

The Act did not state which religion or religions should be taught. It was assumed that Christianity was the only faith which would be required. By learning about and responding to Christianity, the nation's children would be able to learn moral and spiritual values.

During the second half of the twentieth century several changes conspired to require educationalists to re-think radically about the nature of religious education in schools. These included changes in the nature of society, the

ethnic composition of the country, educational theory, the concept of the church's role in religious education, and in psychological understanding. The failure of much traditional RE led several educators to question the way the subject was being taught in schools.

In the years following the 1944 Education Act, several different approaches to teaching RE were developed in both primary and secondary schools including the confessional approach, the implicit religion approach and the phenomenological or explicit religion approach (see Schools Council (1977) for a full discussion of these methodologies). For some, the differing approaches led to confusion regarding the nature of the subject. However, the positive outcome of these discussions was that by the 1980s there was growing agreement about the aims of the subject in our schools. These included enabling pupils to develop knowledge, understanding, skills and attitudes in relation to Christianity and other world religions and opportunities to make positive contributions to their own personal quest for meaning and purpose in their own lives.

The 1988 Education Reform Act

The 1988 Education Reform Act has had a considerable impact on the teaching of religious education in schools. It sought to build upon many of the stipulations of the 1944 Act and to make the subject relevant to the modern age.

The Act stipulated that the curriculum for every state maintained school should comprise a basic curriculum which included provision for *religious education* for all registered pupils at the school; and a curriculum for all registered pupils at the school of compulsory school age (to be known as the 'National Curriculum'). In other words, religious education was to be a compulsory subject with a unique status. Being part of the *basic* curriculum rather than the National Curriculum meant that, although it was to be of equal standing with other subjects, it was to remain free from any

government control and was to be placed firmly in the hands of the local education authorities. The Act made it the duty of every local education authority to constitute a standing advisory council on religious education, which was to:

advise the authority upon matters connected with religious worship in county schools and the religious education to be given in accordance with the agreed syllabus as the authority may refer to the council or as the council may see fit (1988 Education Reform Act, Section 11.1a).

Henceforth, RE was to be taught in accordance with an agreed syllabus drawn up by the LEA or by another authority and adopted by the LEA. All the new agreed syllabuses had to 'reflect the fact that the religious traditions in Great Britain are in the main Christian whilst taking into account of the teaching and practices of the other principal religions represented in Great Britain.' For the first time ever, an agreed syllabus was unacceptable unless it included reference to Christianity and the other major religions. The balance between Christianity and other religions was not specified. The meanings of the phrases 'reflect the fact' and 'take account of' were unspecified, which suggested that the balance should be left to individual authorities to decide. Most post 1988 syllabuses have made reference to five religions in addition to Christianity, namely, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and Sikhism.

Withdrawal rights were maintained. Parents had the right to request that their children be partly or wholly excused from religious education or from worship. Teachers, who on conscience grounds felt that they could not teach religious education, could also request to be exempted from teaching the subject.

The legal requirements pertaining to religious education outlined in the 1988 Education Reform Act 1988 were confirmed by the Education Acts of 1996 and 1998.

Agreed Syllabuses

Theoretically, it was possible for as many agreed syllabuses to exist as there were education authorities. In practice, however, many authorities used the same schemes. Two popular schemes on which a number of syllabuses were based were those produced by Westhill College, Birmingham and by Exeter University. In England, the School Curriculum and Assessment Authority published Model Syllabuses in 1994. These were designed to help LEAs in the production of their own syllabuses. They had two attainment targets:

AT1 Learning about Religions

AT2 Learning from Religion

Welsh LEAs based their first syllabuses post 1988 to varying degrees on the Westhill scheme. Thus, all the agreed syllabuses in Wales have the following three common features:

Knowledge and Understanding of Religion

Pupils are to be taught about the beliefs and practices of Christianity, as the main religious tradition of Great Britain, and the other principal religions also represented in Great Britain.

Awareness of life experience

Pupils are to be taught to make sense of their experience and of the natural world and human relationships and to be sensitive to the issues and questions that are raised by them. In the process, pupils are to be made aware of the difficult and fundamental questions that confront all human beings.

Exploration and response

Pupils are to be taught a range of skills that will enable them to explore religions and human experience for themselves. In particular, they are to be encouraged and enabled to ask their own questions and to offer personal responses to their own and other people's questions.

(Estyn, 2000:1)

In addition to this, agreed syllabuses in Wales also contain common aspects (sometimes called areas) including:

- key beliefs that distinguish specific faiths;
- questions and issues that religion raises and addresses;
- ways in which believers worship and celebrate their faith;
- lifestyles that derive from religious belief;
- sources of authority for believers, with particular reference to sacred writings, key historical figures in religious traditions and contemporary community leaders;
- key stories and events in religious traditions;
- the nature of local and broader faith communities.

(Estyn, 2000: 1)

In recent years there has been a trend for agreed syllabuses to become more prescriptive. Following the lead provided by the School Curriculum and Assessment Authority Model Syllabuses, some now advise schools on the number of religions to be taught at each key stage. The SCAA syllabuses recommended that Christianity and one other religion should be presented at KS1 and Christianity and two other religions should be presented at KS2. All LEAs have not, however, followed this trend.

While some variations may exist between syllabuses regarding their stated objectives of RE, it is unlikely that they will differ significantly from the following, which were outlined in the SCAA syllabuses, namely, to provide opportunities to:

- acquire and develop knowledge and understanding of Christianity and the other principal religions represented in Great Britain
- develop an understanding of the influence of beliefs, values and traditions on individuals, communities, societies and culture
- develop the ability to make reasoned and informed judgements about religious and moral issues with reference to the teachings of the principal religions represented in Great Britain
- enhance their own spiritual, moral, cultural and social development

- developing an awareness of the fundamental questions of life raised by human experiences and how religious teachings relate to them
- responding to such questions in the light of their own experience and with reference to the teachings and practices of religions
- reflecting on their own beliefs, values and experiences in the light of their study
- develop positive attitudes towards other people and their right to hold beliefs different from their own, and to living in a religiously diverse society.

(SCAA, 1994a, 1994b)

No mention is made of encouraging pupils to acquire certain religious beliefs. Rather, the process is educational and aimed at enabling children to explore and make sense of their own personal experiences and to develop an understanding of religious beliefs and practices.

Planning Religious Education

Good planning is essential if RE is to be delivered effectively. One of the criticisms that used to be made of RE provision, particularly when it was delivered entirely through the thematic approach, was that it often lacked continuity and progression. According to Bates (1992), the main criticisms of this approach were 'its lack of coherent structuring, its piecemeal approach to knowledge, its repetitiveness and lack of progression'. Happily, the situation has now changed for the better. Today, all schools are aware of the need for careful long, medium and short term planning in RE as well as in other subjects.

The long term planning should reflect the demands of the locally agreed syllabus together with the school's own religious education policy. Its purpose is to identify what is to be taught to pupils at each stage across the different age groups thus ensuring appropriate continuity and progression.

Medium term planning usually outlines how each unit within the long term planning is to be delivered. This should be a whole-school activity with the RE co-ordinator having a significant input to ensure adequate progression. Short term planning refers to the planning of a series of lessons, each of which should include specific learning objectives, teaching and learning activities and identified assessment opportunities. Clearly, in Wales, thought needs to be given to incorporating the Curriculum Cymreig at each stage of the planning.

Excellent advice on short, medium and long term planning for religious education can be found on the Standards website produced by the Department of Education and Skills: www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/schemes2/religion/. A different exemplar unit is planned for every term within the primary school year and reference is made in each unit to: how the unit fits in, prior learning, vocabulary, resources and expectations of pupils. Each unit is divided into topics for which learning objectives, possible teaching activities, learning outcomes and points to note are identified. As well as providing an exemplar scheme of work for primary religious education, the website provides detailed guidance on how these can be adapted and how teachers can create their own scheme.

Teaching Religious Education

Recognising good practice in primary school religious education is easier today than it has ever been. One reason for this is that several publications have been produced in recent years outlining in specific terms what is meant by good practice (see Copley, 1994; Read et al, 1992; Bastide, 1987, 1992, 1999; Hammond et al, 1990; Smith, 1990; Jackson and Starkins, 1990; Cole and Evans-Lowndes, 1991; Kinkaid, 1991; Broadbent, 1993; Copley and Copley, 1993; Langtree, 1997). These publications suggest a number of teaching strategies for developing concepts, attitudes, skills and knowledge (CASK), which are appropriate for learning in religious education. Key skills vary slightly from publication to publication but typically include empathy,

reflection, communication, reasoning, enquiry, analysis and evaluation (Langtree, 1997). The following are characteristic of the key attitudes included for development: self-esteem, respect, open-mindedness, sensitivity, critical awareness, appreciation and wonder (Langtree, 1997).

There is a strong emphasis in most recent RE publications and in agreed syllabuses on giving pupils first hand experience of religion. This will almost certainly include providing pupils with opportunities to visit places of worship, to receive visits from members of different faith communities, and to explore religious artefacts.

Places of worship are an invaluable resource for religious education. They are found in almost every community and are often places that welcome and encourage visits from schools. Pupils can be taken on visits to places of worship for a variety of reasons and it is essential that the teacher is clear about the purpose of the visit from the outset. For example, an RE visit to a church can become a history activity when the main emphasis is on the historical artefacts found in the building.

From a religious education perspective there are at least two reasons why a school might take pupils on a visit to a place of worship. One of these is to enable the pupils to experience the atmosphere. Many buildings, especially places of worship, have the power to evoke feelings within us. Many teachers ask their pupils to sit quietly for a minute or two after they have entered the place of worship and then ask them to describe how they felt, what they could hear, see, smell, sense; and what thoughts came into their head. Giving pupils an opportunity to be still and quiet so that they can reflect on how the building 'speaks' to them is an invaluable RE experience. The author has experienced a variety of responses when undertaking such an activity ranging from 'wow' experiences in which pupils claim to experience the awe and wonder of the building to pupils who have admitted to being frightened by the vastness and coldness of the place. The second type of response may

raise questions for religious communities that are experiencing decline in numbers regarding how to make their places of worship more welcoming. The response will naturally depend to a large extent on the building chosen. If one of our aims in undertaking such an activity is to promote positive attitudes towards religion then it follows that we should choose the places we visit very carefully.

A second purpose of a visit might be to help pupils to identify some of the key features of the building and help them to understand their significance to the worshipping community. Clearly, such an experience can make a significant contribution to pupils' understanding of religious facts, concepts and symbolism. A visit to a church, for example, can help pupils to understand why the building is special to Christians. Looking at the church from the outside can help them to recognise its distinctive features. Looking at the inside can provide opportunities for pupils to gain an understanding of the significance of key features such as the altar, the pulpit, lectern, pews, font, stained glass windows and the organ and key objects such as crosses, crucifixes and altars. Notice boards and church magazines can help the pupils to gain an understanding of some of the activities in which the church community is involved.

From an educational perspective, the best time to visit any religious building is when worship is taking place. This will enable children to gain a greater understanding of the activities associated with it. A visit to a Hindu mandir, for example, can enable pupils to understand that devotees take off their shoes as a mark of respect when they enter the building and that they spread their hands over the flames to absorb the goodness of the light during the arti ceremony. However, for a variety of reasons, visiting during times of worship is not always possible and, in such cases, the use of an appropriate video can help to support learning.

Teachers are sometimes discouraged because they are concerned about their own lack of knowledge. A preliminary visit by the teacher and some background reading will obviously prove beneficial. However, teachers will almost certainly find that if they choose their place of worship carefully, representatives of the faith communities will happily provide them with the necessary information. A successful visit will often involve both preparatory and follow up work. Preparatory work can involve looking at pictures of the different parts of the place of worship or reading an account about the experiences of someone else's visit. It will also almost certainly involve a discussion of the social skills necessary for such a visit. Learning about the need to show respect and how this should be done should be seen as a key aspect of any RE visit. Many KS2 teachers wisely ask pupils to write a code of conduct prior to a visit of any kind. Some places of worship have special stipulations regarding what should be worn as well as expectations regarding conduct and these should have to be made clear in any preparatory work. Follow up work obviously depends on the age of the children and can involve discussion, art work, written activities such as letters of thanks as well as further research activities to be undertaken by pupils.

Visitors can be another excellent resource for primary RE and often visitors and visits blend well together. Part of the preparatory work before a visit could involve inviting the leader or a member of a worshipping community to talk to the class. The success of such an activity will depend not only on the message of the speaker but also on his or her ability to communicate effectively with children. As with the place of worship, making the right choice is a key factor when inviting a visitor to talk to a class. Any visitor will need to be given clear prior guidance regarding the purpose of his or her visit and its contribution to the children's learning in RE. It is often a good idea to prepare the children beforehand by agreeing on the questions that they will ask the visitor. Visits by leaders of faith communities can help children to understand that they are involved in a variety of activities in addition to officiating in services and religious ceremonies. These can include visiting the

sick, ensuring that the place of worship is maintained in good order and providing support where needed.

Visitors do not have to be confined to leaders of faith communities. It also makes sense to invite members of the worshipping community to talk to the children. This can be an effective way of helping children to understand that people's religious beliefs can have a direct influence on the way they live their lives. Visits from members of charitable organisations can also contribute to effective learning in RE. Learning about what they do and why they do it, particularly if their work is guided by religious belief can help children to understand that faith can often influence the way people live their lives.

A third way of giving pupils first hand experience of religion is to provide them with opportunities to explore religious artefacts. By now most schools have a collection of artefacts that are used for this purpose. A religious artefact is basically an object that is used in religion. Every major religious tradition has a range of such objects that could be put to good educational use in primary school RE. For example, a lesson about Sikhism could be enhanced allowing pupils to explore the 5Ks (the five sacred Sikh symbols: Kesh – uncut hair; Kangha – the comb; Kara – the steel bracelet; Kachh – the shorts; and, Kirpan – the sword). The use of a baptismal candle and a christening gown could add to the interest level in a lesson about Christian christening. The use of a *Qu'ran* with its cover and stand could help to enhance understanding about the respect shown by Muslims to their holy book. A *tallit*, *tefillin* and skullcap can be used to create interest in Jewish clothes and worship. Exploring the *AUM* sign, the lotus flower and the swastika would help when teaching about Hindu symbolism. Similarly, prayer flags could add to the interest level when exploring Buddhist worship. Since artefacts play such a significant part in the lives of religious believers it is important to make full use of them in the classroom. Their use as part of a balanced RE programme is seen as an appropriate way of making religion

alive to children, particularly those who may otherwise have little experience of religion.

Again concern about their own limited knowledge is likely to be one of the most significant factors in preventing teachers making full use of artefacts where they are available. Several excellent publications such as *Religious Artefacts in the Classroom* by Gateshill and Thompson (1992) provide helpful guidance on the background and use of these artefacts. The University of Strathclyde has also produced a useful website that provides photographs and line drawings of the most commonly used artefacts in the classroom today. Furthermore, these are supported with notes which give background information about the significance and use of each artefact (www.strath.ac.uk/Departments/SocialStudies/RE/Database/Graphics/Images.html).

The messages which are transmitted when handling artefacts in the classroom are, of course, as important as teaching about the artefacts themselves. When the teacher treats artefacts with respect then pupils will be encouraged to show a similar attitude when using them. One way of developing this idea of respect for artefacts is for the teacher to show the class an object that is dear to him or her and to discuss how he or she would like the object to be treated. Such discussions can lead to an exploration of the objects which the children themselves hold dear and how they in turn would like them to be treated. Most people have artefacts that are of personal value to them and which evoke certain memories and feelings for them. Understanding that artefacts have this power and that religious artefacts are of particular significance to faith communities is an important aspect of primary RE.

There is no one correct way of using artefacts. Useful guidance on different approaches to using artefacts to teach multi-faith RE is given on the Diocese of Ely website: www.ely.anglican.org/education/2003/schools/activere.html. The site suggests that an artefact can be used as a symbol (for example the

Sikh *kara* symbolising the oneness of God and Sikh unity); as a focus (for example, allowing pupils to focus on an artefact in silence as part of a stilling activity); to convey a message (for example, pupils could observe the respect which the teacher shows when handling the *Qur'an*); as part of a simulation of a ceremony; and using the five senses approach. Gent and Gent (1997a and 1997b) recommend a three-fold approach:

The 'puzzling' stage (in which the artefact is investigated and clues to its meaning and use sought), the 'supplementing' stage (in which additional information is supplied) and the 'personalising' stage (in which links with the lives of children are explored).

Desirable though it may be, it is not always possible to give pupils first hand experience of religion. In such cases, there is much to be gained from using resources such as pictures, posters, videos and television programmes. Published RE schemes/books will also prove valuable to hard-pressed teachers in their quest to provide quality RE. A review of some of the resources available for primary RE is found on the Culham College Institute website: culham.info/rtc/index.

No discussion about RE in the primary school would be complete without reference to the use of story. A good, well-chosen, well-told story can make a significant contribution to the three aspects of RE outlined above. Stories from religious traditions, as well as secular stories, can deepen children's understanding of religion, contribute to their awareness of life experiences and help them to explore and respond to both religion and life experiences. The best RE stories can be interpreted at different levels and will raise all kinds of questions that will deepen pupils' understanding. The Old Testament story of Adam and Eve, for example, raises questions about human nature, temptation and our inability always to live up to our ideals. Many excellent secular stories deal with important RE themes such as feelings, fears, relationships, behaviour, possessions, the natural world and death. Shirley Hughes' *Dogger* (1993), for example, deals with many themes such as kindness, sacrifice, possessions and values.

In addition to the above, the RE diet in the primary school should offer pupils ample opportunity to engage in active learning activities. These could include:

- discussion
- art and craft activities
- creative writing
- role play, dressing up and drama activities
- celebrating festivals, including making cards and cooking food
- taking photographs
- researching
- ICT activities, including word processing, using CD-Roms, using design and art packages and using the internet
- stillness and reflection.

Assessment

During the years following the 1988 Education Reform Act there was considerable debate regarding the desirability of assessing religious education. Those who argued against the idea pointed to the private nature of religion, the undesirability of assessing children's spirituality and the demands that such assessment would make on teachers' time. However, the view taken by the majority today is that if RE is to be taken seriously and given equal standing to other subjects then it should be assessed. Furthermore, it is argued that assessment enables 'teachers, governors and parents to know what is being achieved in religious education' and 'promotes professional efficiency, giving clarity to hard-pressed, often non-specialist teachers' (Watson, 1993). There is general agreement that assessment in RE should not involve any evaluation of pupils' private beliefs or their spiritual development.

When assessing we are attempting to gather evidence that will help us establish where the pupils are at in their learning together with the kind of support they will need to develop further. This evidence can and should be shared with the pupils themselves and should be the basis upon which their progress will be reported to their parents. The evidence will also be very useful to schools and individual teachers when evaluating their own delivery in RE.

Assessment in RE should be concerned with what pupils know, what they understand and what they are able to do. It should be based on clear learning objectives. Smith's (1990) remark that 'if a man does not know where he is going, then there is no way of telling whether or not he has arrived' still rings true. For it to be of value, assessment needs to be seen as a vital part of the teaching and learning process and something which should be built in right from the planning stage. The three areas identified in the Welsh agreed syllabuses discussed above (knowledge of religion; awareness of life experiences; and exploration and response) will need to be reflected in the assessment process. The knowledge and understanding to be assessed should reflect the content of the end of key stage statements found in the syllabus. Similarly, the assessment of what the children can do should reflect the skills outlined in the syllabus.

Assessment activities for RE should involve the pupils in using a wide range of skills. Clearly, the wider the range of skills used the better will be our overall picture of their achievement. Where possible, assessment activities should involve the following: oral work such as discussion, debates, asking and answering questions; written work such as answering specific questions, expressing knowledge and ideas through stories, poems, diaries and specific assessment sheets; and expressive outcomes such as role play and drama. RE is a subject in which personal response, opinion and attitude matter as well as knowledge and this should be reflected in the assessment process.

There is an increasing trend for local education authorities to include level descriptions in their agreed syllabuses. The use of these will undoubtedly contribute to raising standards by making assessment in the subject more focused and enabling the next stage in the learning process to be more clearly identified.

The Curriculum Cymreig

It is not uncommon for people to associate the Welsh dimension within RE with Wales' religious past. This is understandable since religion, as we have already acknowledged, has played an important part in the history of the Welsh nation. The existence of places of worship in almost every village in Wales and the fact that there are over five hundred place names in the country which begin with 'Llan' and commemorate Welsh saints, provide ample evidence of this. While the Welsh have every reason to be proud of their religious heritage, we would be doing the *Curriculum Cymreig* within RE a huge injustice if we were to concentrate solely on the past.

Providing for the *Curriculum Cymreig* within RE should mean, in the first instance, exploring Christianity and other world religions as they are practised in Wales today. According to Langtree (1997) a key strand of RE involves helping children to explore the question 'What does it mean to be a Christian, a Sikh, a Muslim, a Jew, a Buddhist, etc?'. Part of what we are seeking to do is to enable pupils to develop pupils' skills of empathy so that they can 'make connections between people's beliefs and their resulting lifestyle' (Langtree, 1997). If we accept this to be true then it could be said that incorporating the Welsh dimension into RE means enabling pupils to develop an understanding of what it means to be a Christian, a Hindu, a Sikh, a Muslim, a Jew, or a Buddhist living *in Wales today*.

A good starting point would be to explore religion as it is practised within the local community. Visiting churches and chapels and finding out about their

differences and similarities could form part of such a programme. Finding out about what it means to be a worshipper within the local Christian community would also be a very suitable activity. Themes such as baptism, weddings, churchgoing and the way that festivals such as Easter and Christmas are celebrated have a place, as would the work of local religious leaders. However, studying religion in the locality need not be confined to Christianity alone. If any of the major world religions are represented in the local area then the children have every right to find out more about them too. In a recent survey conducted by the present author, one small church village school reported on the huge success of its visit to a local Hindu community. The visit, which was supported by both the parents and the local vicar, did much to raise awareness locally of the way of life practised by this small religious group which lived in their midst.

An useful resource for KS2 teachers who are attempting to make provision for the *Curriculum Cymreig* within RE is a series of books called *From Start to Finish* written by Guy, Mizon and Morgan (1999). The series features a book on each of five of the major world religions as well as a teachers' guide. They give details of the lives of children living in Wales who belong to these religions and show how being a member of their religion affects their daily lives.

Beyond this, pupils can explore how religion is conducted in Wales particularly if this involves looking at how living in Wales impacts on religious practices. Clearly, one factor that has an impact on this and which merits study by pupils is the Welsh language. A study of religious customs, celebrations and festivals that are unique to Wales could also contribute to learning in this area. Examples of such celebrations could include the *Plygain* (a traditional church service sung on Christmas morning), Saint David's Day, and *Sul y Blodau* (Sunday of the Flowers – the custom of decorating graves in churchyards with flowers in preparation for Easter). Details about these and

many other Welsh religious customs can be found on the Go Britannia Guide to Wales website: britannia.com/wales/culture2.

While the main emphasis with regard to the *Curriculum Cymreig* within RE should be on what is happening in Wales today, we should not completely abandon making reference to Wales' religious past. Welsh saints, Welsh religious buildings, Welsh monasticism, Welsh Methodism, Welsh revivalism and the translation of the Bible into Welsh, all have a potential contribution to make to primary RE in Wales. Furthermore, the traditional stories that have been told in Welsh schools for many years like Mary Jones and her Bible and the life of Saint David still have a role to play in twenty-first century RE in Welsh schools. After all, the lives of these two people illustrate perfectly how religious beliefs can influence the way people live their lives, an area covered by all agreed syllabuses in Wales today.

Church Schools

As we have seen, the first schools in this country were founded by the established Church and, throughout the centuries, the Church has been a major player in the field of education. The major education acts of 1870, 1902, 1944 and 1988 all made provision for the continued existence of Church schools. More recently, the 1998 School Standards and Framework Act established four statuses of school: voluntary aided, voluntary controlled, foundation and community schools. All four types are found in Wales.

The churches regard their provision of schools as part of their commitment to the nation. They believe that parents should be given every opportunity to choose a Church school education for their children. Nearly a quarter of pupils in this country attend a Church school at some time in their education.

In voluntary controlled schools and foundation schools with a religious character, religious education will normally (unless otherwise requested by parents) be taught in accordance with the LEA agreed syllabus. In voluntary aided schools, however, religious education must be taught in accordance

with the school's trust deed. In practical terms this means that an aided school will normally use a syllabus which reflects the religious character of the school. The vast majority of aided schools in Wales are either Roman Catholic or Church in Wales.

Roman Catholic Schools use their own nationally approved programme for religious education. Since September 2001, voluntary aided schools in the six Church in Wales dioceses have been using the new *Religious Education Syllabus for Church in Wales Schools*. The new syllabus has six separate strands: the Bible, Jesus, the church, Christian life and values, other faiths, and festivals. Included in the syllabus as well is a useful section on aspects of the history of Welsh Christianity. The intention is that this will be subsumed into the teaching of the six sections.

Despite being denominational, there is no suggestion that RE in aided schools is confessional in nature. Aided schools like all other types of schools respect the integrity of individuals. For those pupils who come from Christian homes, aided school RE will certainly help to nurture them in their own faith. For the pupils who come from non-Christian homes, aided school RE should enable them to gain a good understanding of Christianity, to have a positive experience of the religion and help them to acquire some of the values which have underpinned the Christian tradition through the centuries.

The future

During the second half of the twentieth century, religious education went through a period of unprecedented change. In a modern, open, technological society which had witnessed the virtual disappearance of subjects such as Latin and Greek (which also had a long history spanning centuries) from the curriculum, religious education had to change or find itself disappearing too. It is to the credit of the subject and the many teachers and educationalists who were associated with it during this time that it did indeed change, ensuring that it remained as essential a part of children's education as it had always been.

In his analysis of references to RE in HMI reports from 1985 to 1991, Orchard (1991,1994) noted that:

The over-riding impression having studied these reports is that religious education was well taught in a minority of schools... religious education tended to move too far into the moral area at the expense of the specifically religious; more rigorous planning and schemes of work for religious education were needed in most schools. (Orchard, 1994)

Typical of the negative comments found in reports were: 'need a more coherent programme', 'there is repetition and lack of progression', 'good practice needs extending', 'religious education needs to be more challenging'. Reports referred frequently to poor teaching and unbalanced content but, according to Orchard, it was 'the status of the subject' which was at the heart of the problem.

Since then there has been a steady improvement in standards in both England and Wales. Estyn reports that, in 2000, standards in schools were satisfactory or better in 97% of KS1 classes (compared to 80% seven years previously) and in 95% of KS2 classes (compared to 50% seven years previously) (Estyn, 2000). Good or very good standards were now being achieved in 48% of classes in KS1 and 43% of classes in KS2. The report claims that an important reason for this improvement is that, 'where it is required, all schools now plan on the basis of the locally agreed syllabus'.

Clearly, standards have improved in RE since the period reported by Orchard. The production of the new agreed syllabuses and their subsequent revision every five years has had a significant impact on this. The fact that most schools now produce detailed long, medium and short term plans in RE to ensure adequate balance and progression in the provision has also had a very positive impact. Gone are the days when primary RE was planned almost entirely around themes such as 'Water', 'Animals' and 'Colour' which sometimes resulted in pupils hearing some stories (like the story of Noah

which seemed to fit into almost every theme) over and over again while other important aspects of the subject were left out. There has been an increasing emphasis on multi-faith RE and on giving pupils first hand experience of religion, both of which have added to the interest level amongst pupils. The fact that RE is regularly inspected has also had a positive impact on standards. Not only is RE reported upon as part of this process but also schools are now encouraged to evaluate critically their own performance. Such an exercise, when taken seriously, has a positive impact on standards in the subject.

What does the future hold for RE in Wales? Despite having been a part of education for a very long time, RE is still an important part of the school curriculum and will continue to be so. This is because it helps to develop a range of concepts, skills and attitudes that are necessary to prepare pupils for adult life and to promote their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. Today, as much as at any time in the past, pupils need to be equipped to explore, reflect and think for themselves and to be able to make informed judgements about religious beliefs and practices.

The goodwill is there. In a recent survey (Davies, 2000), 95.6% of headteachers claimed that RE is an essential part of the school curriculum. The same survey also revealed that the main problems faced by teachers when teaching the subject were a lack of personal knowledge, particularly about world religions and insufficient time to cover every aspect of the subject. These are two problems that will need to be addressed if standards are to continue to improve.

A guidance document (ACCAC, 2001) for the twenty-two LEAs in Wales provides exemplar programmes of study and national level descriptions for RE and encourages LEAs to use the common format of the National Curriculum orders when revising their RE syllabus. If the advice given in this document is heeded then there will be greater uniformity with regard to the content and

presentation of Welsh syllabuses in the future. Since the agreed syllabuses already have much in common and are likely to be even more similar in the future an argument has been made for the development of an all-Wales syllabus for religious education. Supporters of this argument claim that such a syllabus existed in Wales in the past and that a similar development in the future would prevent unnecessary duplication and cost. Whether or not such a syllabus will ever come into existence remains to be seen. What is clear is that closer co-operation between LEAs with regard to religious education is not only desirable but also inevitable.

Finally, many of the events which have made the headlines in recent years have drawn attention to the importance of the development of personal values and the need for greater understanding between cultures. Religious education, with its emphasis on promoting understanding and the development of skills and attitudes undoubtedly has a major role to play in preparing our children for life in our future society.

Questions for discussion

1. How you teach religious education will often depend on the way you view the purpose of the subject. List the main objectives of the subject as you see them.
2. How do you think that a teacher's personal beliefs (or lack of them) can influence the way he or she teaches the subject?
3. Although RE is an educational rather than a confessional subject do you think that children should be taught:
 - that there is a God
 - that the Bible is true
 - that they should pray
 - to sing Christian hymns
 - to say the Lord's Prayer?

4. The law does not stipulate what percentage of time should be allocated to Christianity and world religions within a primary school RE programme. Which of the following would you consider to be most acceptable:
 - Christianity 50% and other religions 50%
 - Christianity more than 50% and other religions less than 50%
 - An equal amount of time to the six major religions?
5. Many teachers would claim that teaching RE in the primary school is a challenging experience. Two of the biggest difficulties that teachers claim to encounter are not having enough time to cover every aspect of the subject and a lack of personal knowledge about world religions. What would you say are the biggest challenges for you? How can these difficulties be overcome?
6. Parents have the right to withdraw their children from RE lessons. This made a lot of sense when RE was a confessional subject. Today, however, every agreed syllabus has educational aims. Do you think that withdrawal rights should be revoked?
7. What do you think are the main differences between RE and worship in the primary school?
8. How would you say that RE could contribute to children's spiritual development? In what ways can other subjects contribute to this important area?

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