

Relevance of Religious Education in Students' Development

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Abstract

The goal of this research paper was to examine the relevance of Religious Education in students' development. The research methodology involved conceptual analyses of grey literature, relevant websites and journal publications. Results show that several reasons have been stated to justify the need for Religious Education including that it is for moral education as well as for the promotion of understanding and respecting of other religions and beliefs. Religious Education as a school subject in many parts of the world seems to have three major strands which include assisting students to develop knowledge and understanding of religious beliefs and practices, contributing to students' spiritual development, and equipping students with positive attitudes and skills for exploring and responding to religion. Evidence from literature also suggests that Religious Education is an essential component of a broad and balanced education whose focal point in the curriculum is to promote students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development and values. Therefore, when developing a Religious Education curriculum, schools should consider national and regional disparities in cultural and religious experiences.

Keywords: Religious Education, Religious Organizations, Students' Develo

I. Introduction

Religious Education is concerned with the deep meaning that individuals and groups make of their experiences and how this helps them give purpose to their lives¹. Several reasons have been stated to justify the need for Religious Education including that it is for moral education as well as for the promotion of understanding and respecting of other religions and beliefs^{2,3}. Religious Education could be broadly understood under two basic concepts, namely, education in religion and education about religion⁴. The former is called *Type A Religious Education*, whereas the latter is known as *Type B Religious Education*⁴.

Type A Religious Education is designed to groom young people in a specific faith to preserve such faith from one generation to another. *Type A Religious Education* could be received formally or informally in that it takes place either at home, worship places, religious institutions, public schools, denominational schools, or faith communities. *Type A Religious Education* focuses on the development of faith by transmitting the teachings of a given religion or denomination to people. *Type A Religious Education* also puts into consideration the

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interests of the child by providing emotional stability and continuity with the beliefs of the child's significant others and encouraging the child to engage with and be transformed by the truths of the faith⁴.

Type B Religious Education is designed to develop young people's knowledge and understanding of religion whilst granting them the freedom to choose their own path in life. *Type B* Religious Education includes teaching people about religion and several diverse religions without anticipating that they will eventually develop their own personal religious commitments. The *Type B* Religious Education aims to produce individuals who are considered to be "religiously educated" or "religiously literate," because they would be embodied with the understanding of diverse religious belief systems and have the ability to make a proficient reflection about an array of religious issues⁴.

Religious Education as a school subject in many parts of the world seems to have three major strands. First, Religious Education aims to assist students to develop a knowledge and understanding of religious beliefs and practices and learn what it is like to be an adherent of a religion practised in the world today⁵. Second, Religious Education contributes to students' spiritual development by enabling them to develop personal beliefs and appreciating the beliefs of others. Whilst other areas of the curriculum can contribute to students' spiritual development, Religious Education is regarded as a key contributor⁵. Third, Religious Education equips students with positive attitudes and skills for exploring and responding to religion. Key skills 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 enquiry⁵. A programme of Religious Education comprising these strands can contribute positively to students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. Such an educational programme can also help to prepare them for life. Given the above expositions, the main objective of this paper was to examine the relevance of Religious Education in students' overall development. The research methodology adopted involved conceptual analyses of grey literature, relevant websites and journal publications.

II. Relevance of Religious Education in Students' Development

Evidence from the literature suggests that Religious Education is an essential component of a broad and balanced education whose focal point in the curriculum is a spiritual, moral, social and cultural development and values^{1,6}. Religious Education enables the growth of religious literacy, essential for life in modern society and the wider world.¹

Religious Education' place in the curriculum is underpinned by values and purposes in that it aims to provide opportunities for all students to learn and to achieve and to prepare all students for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of the present and the future. The following purpose statements underpin the syllabus for Religious Education:^{1,7-9}:

(a) Religious Education contributes dynamically to children and young people's education in schools by provoking challenging questions about meaning and purpose in life, beliefs about God, ultimate reality, issues of right and wrong and what it means to be human.

(b) In Religious Education, students learn about religions and beliefs in local, national and global contexts, to discover, explore and consider different answers to these questions.

(c) Students learn to weigh up the value of wisdom from different sources, develop and express their insights in response, and agree or disagree respectfully.

(d) Religious Education teaching therefore should equip pupils with systematic knowledge and understanding of a range of religions and beliefs, enabling them to develop their ideas, values and identities.

(e) It should develop in students an aptitude for dialogue so that they can develop religious literacy and participate positively in our society, with its diverse religions and beliefs.

(f) Students should gain and deploy the skills needed to understand, interpret and evaluate texts, sources of wisdom and authority and other evidence. They should learn to articulate clearly and coherently their personal beliefs, ideals, values and experiences while respecting the right of others to differ.

Literature also indicates that Religious Education provides opportunities for students to explore, make and respond to the meanings of those experiences in relation to the beliefs and experiences of others as well as to one's own experiences¹. Learning about religion and learning from religion are important for all students, as Religious Education enable students to develop an understanding of themselves and others⁶. Religious Education offers students with learning difficulties opportunities to develop their self-confidence and awareness; understand the world they live in as individuals and as members of groups; bring their own experiences and understanding of life into the classroom; develop positive attitudes towards others, respecting their beliefs and experience; reflect on and consider their own values and those of others; and deal with issues that form the basis for personal choices and behaviour⁶. In response to these opportunities, students can make progress in Religious Education by moving from a personal to a wider perspective, increasing their knowledge of religious beliefs, practices and experiences, developing an understanding of the meaning of stories, symbols, events and pictures, and developing and communicating their individual responses to a range of views.

In view of the relevance of Religious Education, the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority⁶ stated that Religious Education teachers can make the curriculum more accessible to students by focusing on the senses. The teachers can improve students' access by (a) using sensory materials and resources through sight, touch, sound, taste or smell, for example, music, tactile artefacts, plants in a sensory garden, (b) giving students first-hand experiences, for example, visitors to school, visits to religious buildings, involvement in festivals, (c) organising a range of activities to give personal experiences, for example, dance, drama, visits to a range of environments (d) helping students to understand and appreciate their world and its diversity, (e) using a range of resources, for example, interactive/sensory stimuli, information and communication technology (ICT), to increase students' knowledge of religions and the elements in them, (f) using specialist aids and equipment, (g) providing support from adults or other students when necessary, while allowing students the space, time and freedom to develop skills for themselves, (h) adapting tasks or environments and providing alternative activities where necessary, for example, tactile story books, puppets, role play, presenting work as a painting instead of writing, (i) being aware of the pace at which students work and of the physical and mental effort required, and (j) balancing consistency and challenge, according to individual needs.

In view of how schools can make Religious Education more relevant, Moran^{10,11} pointed out two discrete but complementary aspects that should be integrated into Religious Education and they are educational and faith formation dimensions as illustrated in Figure 1.

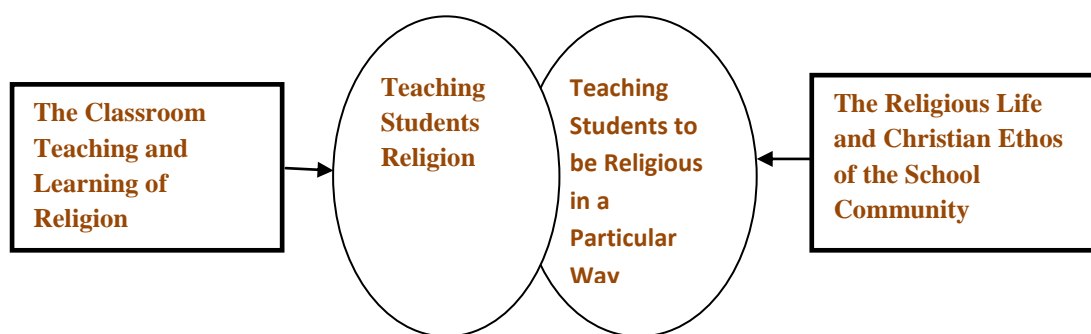


Figure 1: Adapted from Moran's Model of Religious Education

Many religious schools offer an integrated curriculum model where students have a rigorous general studies schedule as well as time or classes for religious instruction and prayer¹². In schools offering Religious Education, the vision is holistically developed through an understanding of Jesus' mission and the schools strive to educate all students in their faith journey. Such schools challenge students to live the gospel of Jesus Christ as successful, creative, active and informed learners who are empowered and equipped to enrich and serve the world while listening with the ear of the heart. Such schools also strive to have respect for the sacred and honour our liturgical traditions that sanctify time and place. They are often committed to a purposeful and challenging curriculum that enables a transforming, reflective, inclusive, challenging and engaging learning community.

The Religious Education curriculum for basic school students enables students to learn about various ways in which humans understand and express the mystery of God or 'the Other', including insights from the major world religions. Students develop their understanding of the experience of sin throughout human history, some ways in which the Church has responded to the presence of good and evil, and the various sources that guide the Church's action in the world. They learn about various sources of inspiration, strength and guidance for believers today and ways in which believers live their Christian vocation¹³.

The Religious Education curriculum for students in secondary schools enables students to develop a deeper understanding of the Christian tradition and an empathetic understanding of the major world religions, as well as a grasp of the impact of religious teachings on the lives of believers. The approach taken helps to respects learners and promote critical thinking, opening up the possibility for a richer appreciation of self and others¹³.

The structure of Religious Education¹⁴ has been grouped into four interrelated parts, namely, Sacred Texts, Beliefs, Church and Christian Life. Planning for classroom learning and teaching of Religious Education balances and integrates all four parts as demonstrated in Figure 2.

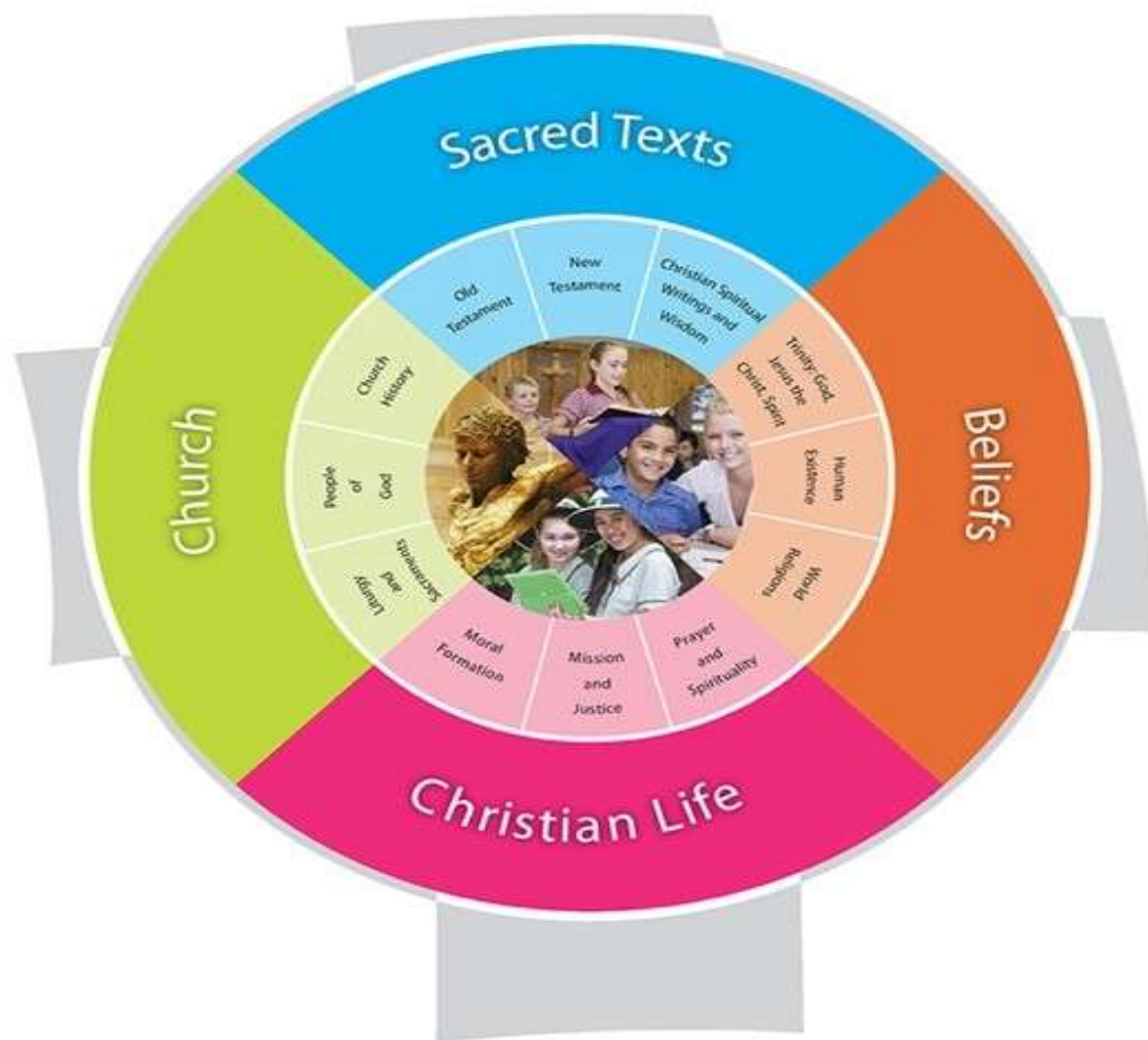


Figure 2: Structure of Religious Education

According to the Holy Family Catholic Community¹⁵, extensive research done by social scientists and educators shows that children who are given a strong foundation in faith development gain several advantages including a higher overall sense of happiness, security and connectivity to a community, ability to make friends more easily, development of better coping skills during times of stress and illness, the capacity to hold more positive societal values and make better overall decisions, lower rates of depression and anxiety, fewer problems with alcohol and drug abuse, sexual promiscuity and delinquency, and the tendency to have more successful marriages and a greater appreciation of family values and tradition. Even in faith schools, which promote the tenets and values of a particular religion, students are encouraged to question rather than to accept passively any given creed. The majority of faith schools does not teach from one single faith perspective but incorporate an element of comparison between religions. Far from being self-regarding, segregated institutions that deepen division, faith schools encourage openness to others, emphasizing that the thing we all have in common is our humanity, which is of infinite value. Without Religious Education, students cannot acquire knowledge of religion which plays a central part in cultural heritage. As education becomes increasingly utilitarian, viewed often as a means merely of contributing to a skills-based economy, Religious Education can encourage students to think and to develop their own sense of identity¹⁶. Finally, if students are encouraged to recognize their own

uniqueness and value, they will flourish both as individuals and as citizens in a pluralistic society and global community.

III. Conclusion

Religious Education is an indispensable aspect of a broad and balanced education whose main objective in the curriculum is to promote students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development and values. To this end, when developing the Religious Education curriculum, schools should consider national and regional variations in cultural and religious experiences.

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