Teaching Religious Education: Defining the Ideal and Describing the Reality

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In this paper, I outline the experience, and reflection on it, that have led me to undertake research on teachers’ understandings of the purposes of Religious Education in South Australian Catholic secondary schools.

I believe teachers set out to do a good job. Teachers set out with an ideal – an ultimate aim, a construction of the state of affairs that should exist to bring about the best outcomes in the particular subject being taught in this case Religious Education.

In this statement lies the first constraint for the Religious Education program in South Australian Catholic schools. What is the aim or purpose of the religious education class around which teachers can build this ‘ideal’? Faculty meetings are always extremely lively whenever this question is inadvertently raised. I use the term inadvertently because everyone knows in advance that bringing up the question is like adding fat to a fire. What are our aims? Are we teaching to convert students to the Catholic tradition; to enhance the elements of the tradition that already exist in their lives; to pass on the truths, doctrines, dogmas, and decrees? Or is it to provide students with knowledge and understanding of the place of religion in our world – a taste of the diversities of religion, the cultural influence of religion, the specific language of religion and the impact of religion on our world? Teachers are divided on the purposes of Religious Education, often influenced in their decisions by their experience and possibly confused by what is presented in the literature as to where we should be directing our efforts.

Views from the literature

In a recent publication, Strategies for teaching Religious Education, Liddy and Welbourne (1999) present five distinct purposes as defined by highly respected academics in the field of religious education.


Each of these purposes can be discussed further, but that is not the intention of this paper. I include them because they indicate the diversity of opinion about the purposes of Religious Education. I suggest that teachers can also add that some clergy and parents believe that the Religious Education exists in the school to tell students what they need to know in order to become good practising Catholics, who attend Mass and take the Sacraments regularly. Teachers need to decide where they ‘fit’ into these models and even if there are not some elements of all the purposes that can combine into one ultimate aim. Groome (1998) stresses that ‘in choosing what to teach it is imperative to keep purpose in mind’.
Preliminary discussions and research with teachers have shown that teachers construct their ‘ideal’ on their personal experiences, whether they are considered positive or negative, of how they were taught and what their experience of religion has been in the workplace.

In religion more than in any other subject, teachers seemed concerned about what other people thought about their input. They felt – whether it was justified or not – that they were accountable in a moral way to the school administration, to the parent body, to the church, and to the students for what they said, how they said it, what might be implied or what was expected. The religious dimension of education in a Catholic school (p84) states that ‘the effectiveness of religious instruction is closely tied to the personal witness given by the teacher’. Even if teachers have never read this statement, and my experience indicates very few have, teachers feel that their ‘personal witness’ is ‘on trial’ in a Religious Education classroom. Teachers are concerned about saying the ‘wrong thing’. The element of guilt in teachers’ work is particularly strong in religious education and it can strain any student-teacher relationship as well as staff relationships. Often teachers plan lessons to avoid entering into discussions with students.

Another major constraint operating within religious education programs is what Richert (1992) calls "ecclesiological schizophrenia". Many teachers develop their ‘ideal’ around a Vatican II model of Church and Christian education, while some clergy, parents, and even some teachers function in a pre-Vatican II style when a magisterial model of religious education was prevalent, church authority was to be accepted without discussion or question. A catechism or similar material was the learning tool.

Teachers who are committed to the task of teaching Religious Education are often frustrated because lessons are regularly lost for administrative purposes, completing SACE forms, and co-curricular activities such as driver or career education.

As Ros and Liz Keane (1997) suggest "[t]eachers are struggling with changing views and unclear directions". Practitioners in all professional areas, not just teaching or Religious Education are "frequently embroiled in conflicts of values, goals, purposes and interests" (Schon 1991:18) but this does not mean we simply accept the status quo without attempting to improve the situation. In the conflict, contradiction, and lack of consensus some voices are silenced and marginalised. In Religious Education power relations between and among teachers and learners are such that they involve parents, clergy, teachers and students over issues of knowledge: What is valid knowledge, what knowledge is produced, whose knowledge? In religious Education all voices should be heard and involved in the creation of an acceptable and workable ‘ideal’.

Recent experience within the system

On the professional level, preliminary discussions with a small group of teachers has indicated that some teachers are not enthusiastic about taking on the task of teaching religion but accept it as a necessary part of their employment. It is significant that the few who said they enjoyed teaching religious education had completed or were in the process of completing tertiary studies in religion or religious education. Some teachers suggested that teaching religion was a form of initiation which saw either recent graduates or teachers new to the school being asked to take on the task until they prove themselves.

A number of teachers considered attending workshops as down-time from their (other) academic teaching subjects and the number of secondary teachers at workshops and seminars conducted by the Catholic Education Office has been notably small compared to the response from primary school teachers.
However, there are many positive experiences to report. Some teachers have indicated that they enjoy teaching Religious Education. They participate in professional development activities, and many have undertaken graduate study and have completed or are progressing through the Religion Teachers’ Certificate through the Catholic Education Office.

But for many, church documents, Catholic Education Office statements, guidelines, and curriculum and professional journals are buried deep in the too hard basket if they ever reach the top of the desk at all. At the same time teachers consider themselves lacking in their knowledge of church teachings and current church views on social issues and consequently are reluctant and uncomfortable entering into discussion on topics such as contraception, euthanasia, divorce or sometimes even the Bible.

Rarely is time or money spent by individual teachers on personal resources for Religious Education even though teachers often willingly contribute to their personal library in their main subject areas.

In South Australia there is no requirement for a Religious Education teacher to be qualified in any way in the area in order to teach Religious Education. Nor is there a requirement for the teachers involved in teaching Religious Education to be a Catholic or even a Christian. Job advertisements often include the phrase "a willingness to teach RE an advantage" and very commonly "support the Catholic ethos of the school" is a requirement. Most teachers especially those who are concerned about job prospects are "willing" but many feel inadequate and threatened by the task they are agreeing to take on. A couple of the teachers I spoke to were not of the Roman Catholic tradition and dreaded entering the Religious Education classroom. They were of the Ukrainian Orthodox tradition and were both embarrassed and felt guilty when they were uncertain about making the sign of the cross or about when to respond at liturgical events. Though these teachers are immersed in the culture of the school, they feel alienated from the culture of Roman Catholicism – the beliefs, values, habits and assumed ways of doing things – which they are being asked to inculcate. Even those who are committed to the task of Religious Education "often find that the mood of the student body, the parent body, the curriculum and the priorities of the school, make their task almost impossible" (Hurley 1997: 5).

Conclusion

My discussion today implies that there are a number of negatives operating in the teaching of Religious Education. There are also significant positive elements found within schools. The experience of some of you here today will be quite different from my own and it is also possible, since my study to date has been on an informal basis, that I have been particularly attentive to the voices that have been more attuned to my own experiences. I believe that professional practice, and teachers are professionals, "has at least as much to do with finding, recognising and admitting to problems as with solving any problems found" (Schon 1991:18). Many teachers according to Graham (1997 ) report that "their concerns are relegated to the trivial because the dominating discourse has no place for their experience."

Any school that places a high priority on reflective practice encourages "decentralised responsibility for judgement and action and pay[s] attention to conflicting values and purposes." However the tensions that are inherent in the bureaucratisation of professional work tend to increase when professionals become reflective about their work. They begin to question the task given to them and the theories that are brought to the task. I suggest that we need to listen to these reflective practitioners, to understand teachers’ views, and their calls for change or for conservation. If we are open to these contributions we will get valuable insights from the chalkface about how change can be made most effectively, as
well as what we should consider changing and what we should preserve. Getting close to teachers in this way does not necessarily mean that we endorse or celebrate everything that teachers think, say and do, but it does mean taking their perceptions and views seriously (Hargreaves, 1994:4).

For the progression and promotion of quality Religious Education programs we need to advocate open critical reflection and discussion with and among teachers in "a spirit full of hope for the future" (Brookfield 1995:xv). But we must also alert teachers to the dangers, the struggles, the conflict, possible rejection, and even professional isolation when their reflection or research exposes what those in the hierarchies of power want undisclosed (Brookfield 1995).

The threat of research is that it may expose that which is bad: The promise of research is that the bad will be made good.
References


