

# **Religious and Moral Education**

## **- a portrait of current practice in Scottish secondary schools**

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## 1. Introduction

*Religious and moral education – a portrait of current practice* is one in a series of portraits by HMIE, depicting current practice in key aspects of the Scottish curriculum. The portrait series is a recent initiative by HMIE, flowing from the *Improving Scottish Education* (ISE) report<sup>1</sup>. It is intended to promote improvements in Scottish education through illustrating effective practice, raising current issues and stimulating reflection and debate. This portrait explores religious and moral education in the context of the secondary school curriculum as a key sector within the delivery of the 3 to 18 curriculum. It will be updated periodically to reflect case studies of effective practice.

An important purpose of the portrait series is to relate existing pedagogy and curricular provision to the aspirations of *Curriculum for Excellence (CfE)*<sup>2</sup>. By stimulating debate about teaching for effective learning, the portraits will challenge us all to review the extent to which current practice is successfully promoting the four capacities in all young learners.

This portrait is based on evidence obtained from HMIE visits to secondary schools during the period 2002 to 2007. These visits included both general inspections and other visits to examine effective practice. Inspectors evaluated the quality of learning, teaching and meeting needs and achievement.

## 2. Improving Scottish Education

*Improving Scottish Education* (ISE) was published by HMIE in March 2006. This report highlights the need to build on the strengths in Scottish Education to meet the needs of learners for the challenges of a global society. The ISE report also stresses the need to improve learners' achievement. These aspects are explored in greater depth in this portrait on religious and moral education.

**To help develop key aspects of citizenship**, teachers of religious and moral education recognise the value of pupils developing mature and respectful attitudes to religious and cultural diversity. Scottish society currently embraces an exciting range of beliefs, values and traditions. This is reflected within our school communities. Whilst many of our young people remain committed to Christianity as the faith into which they were born, others are either followers of other faiths or have other stances for living. As Scotland becomes an ever more diverse society, religious and moral education can provide a solid foundation of knowledge and understanding about the variety of religions and cultures which our young people are likely to encounter.

**Encouraging young people to engage in a process of personal search for meaning and purpose in life** is a key objective of religious and moral education. The subject aims to help our young people reflect upon and develop their own framework of beliefs and values so that they might live positive and fulfilling lives. For those attending denominational schools, this personal search will be supported by the teachings and values demonstrated within the

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<sup>1</sup> Improving Scottish Education. HM Inspectors of Education 2006

<sup>2</sup> Curriculum for Excellence, the four capacities: Successful Learners; Confident Individuals; Responsible Citizens; Effective Contributors.

faith community. For others the shared values and principles of a diverse religious and secular community may be the foundation for learning.

**To increase the self-confidence of pupils and their ability to collaborate with each other,** many teachers of religious and moral education provide learning opportunities that require pupils, individually and in groups, to reflect honestly on crucial moral and religious issues. Religious and moral education creates opportunities for dialogue, reflection and debate about some of the most significant aspects of our shared humanity and challenges all our learners to think deeply about their own beliefs, attitudes and moral values.

In some schools the curriculum does not include sufficient provision for religious and moral education. Many schools do not provide a continuing element of religious and moral education for pupils in S5/S6. Education authorities and teachers now need to further improve the provision of religious and moral education in many of our secondary schools. This portrait is also intended to help by providing a range of examples drawn from good practice and questions against which teachers can consider how well they promote high achievement in the areas of the four capacities for all pupils. The HMIE resources associated with *The Journey to Excellence*<sup>3</sup>, which include self-evaluation guidance and exemplification of effective practice, will be of particular help in so doing ([journeytoexcellence.org.uk](http://journeytoexcellence.org.uk)).

### **3. A portrait of current practice in effective learning**

Teachers of religious and moral education understand that *Curriculum for Excellence (CfE)* provides a unique and valuable opportunity for Scotland's young people. Engaging with the beliefs, values and traditions of the world's religions and philosophies can challenge young people to think more deeply about their own beliefs and values. There is much scope for schools to link themes within religious and moral education to other areas of the curriculum such as science, the expressive arts, health and wellbeing and across the social subjects, for example through the study of ethical, social and moral issues. Religious and moral education departments have traditionally made a strong contribution to wider aspects of school life and created opportunities for pupils to achieve through active participation in projects which make a difference to the lives of others. This is an aspect of learning which can be further developed through *CfE*. Effective teaching in religious and moral education provides a wide range of learning experiences which promote links with the home and family life, the faith community to which a child may belong, and the local community more broadly.

Teachers of religious and moral education are already considering what needs to be done in order to ensure that the purposes and principles of *CfE* are securely embedded in their lessons. This section of the portrait highlights the contribution religious and moral education can make and includes some signposts intended to help teachers consider how they can help pupils develop the four capacities<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> The Journey to Excellence Part 3 How Good Is Our School

<sup>4</sup> [www.curriculumforexcellencescotland.gov.uk](http://www.curriculumforexcellencescotland.gov.uk)

## Successful Learners

### What do we do well in religious and moral education to develop successful learners?

Many effective teachers offer pupils a variety of activities, including very good use of information and communications technology. Pupils are encouraged to think for themselves and reflect on their own experience and that of the religions of the world as they develop their own beliefs, values and spirituality. Some approaches which are currently working well include the following.

- Pupils access a variety of interesting and stimulating resources including religious artefacts, multi-media material, visiting speakers and make links with local faith communities to help them gain knowledge and understanding of religious beliefs and practices.
- Pupils share what they have learned through discussion and presentations using ICT and consider the implications for their own beliefs and values.
- Pupils take account of differing religious, moral and philosophical viewpoints when expressing their own opinions on issues of belief and morality.
- Teachers use a variety of questioning techniques to encourage deeper levels of thinking, including thinking about abstract concepts and increasingly complex moral dilemmas such as medical ethics and sustainable development.
- Pupils encounter new ideas and encourage them to apply previous learning to new situations, for example visits to places of worship or participation in a cross curricular environmental project.
- Teachers and pupils regularly engage in discussion about their work and help each other understand how to improve.

#### *Signpost to successful learners.*

*Successful learners in religious and moral education often display the following characteristics.*

- *They are enthusiastic and motivated by the insights and challenge which learning about religion and morality can bring.*
- *They can analyse and reflect on their own beliefs and values in relation to their learning about others.*
- *They can engage with new ideas and apply what they have learned to situations and circumstances within their own personal experience.*
- *They can develop informed personal opinions which they are able to support with valid reasons.*

### How might religious and moral education contribute more to successful learning?

As we continue to consider our approaches and look for ways to improve our contribution to developing successful learners, teachers of religious and moral education may find it helpful to reflect on the following.

- Do we help learners to recognise the skills they are developing along with knowledge and understanding?

- Do we encourage pupils to set high standards in debate and discussion?
- Do we set tasks which require challenging research or methods of enquiry?
- Do we do enough to help learners to reflect on their learning, their successes and their next steps?

## Confident Individuals

### What do we do well in religious and moral education to develop confident individuals?

In seeking to develop confident individuals, many effective teachers place a strong emphasis on the planned progression of thinking skills and critical analysis. Their pupils are able to discuss and reflect on the questions religions and society ask and the answers which religions give. Pupils are confident about expressing their views. Religious and moral education encourages pupils to embark on their personal search with the confidence to respond to issues which may cast doubt and uncertainty upon their own beliefs and values. Some of the approaches currently helping pupils to become increasingly confident include the following.

- Teachers set challenging tasks which encourage mature attitudes and collaborative working, for example interviewing members of different faith communities and producing news articles about their views on a range of religious and moral issues.
- Teachers help pupils to develop secure values and beliefs by encouraging discussion and debate about controversial issues within an atmosphere of mutual support and respect.
- Pupils participate in learning experiences which challenge their perceptions of self and others, for example by forming partnerships with communities in different parts of the world.
- Pupils demonstrate commitment to their beliefs and values, for example, through enterprise projects to raise awareness of environmental issues or poverty.
- Teachers promote pupils' confidence by praising their efforts and by celebrating their achievements within and beyond the classroom.

#### *Signpost to confident individuals*

*Confident individuals often display the following characteristics:*

- *They have a high level of self-esteem, respect for themselves and respect for others.*
- *They have secure beliefs and values and are not afraid of ideas which might challenge their own..*
- *They can discuss and express ideas about a wide range of religious, moral and philosophical issues.*
- *They are resilient, able to cope with significant change and can respond positively to a variety of situations.*
- *They make informed decisions and accept the consequences for themselves and others.*

## **How might religious and moral education contribute more to developing confident individuals?**

Teachers who create a learning environment where pupils can engage in their own personal search and share their views, and support others in doing so, go a long way towards developing confident individuals within religious and moral education. As we continue to consider ways of doing this, it may be useful to reflect on the following questions.

- Do we plan programmes of work which ensure all pupils have regular opportunities to contribute to the class and thereby gain confidence?
- Are pupils confident that if they are creative in their thinking their work will be valued?
- Do we create sufficient opportunities for pupils to gain confidence through taking responsibility for their own learning in, for example, personal research projects?
- In our classrooms, are pupils confident that they can explore sensitive religious and moral issues, discuss the challenges which others' beliefs can bring, and share personal reflections, without being criticised?
- Do we make the most of our links with organisations and individuals in the wider school community to help us develop pupil confidence in learning outside the classroom?

## **Responsible Citizens**

### **What do we do well in religious and moral education to develop responsible citizens?**

Religious and moral education can make a particularly strong contribution to the development of responsible citizens. Responsible citizens are aware of their own worth as human beings and value the contributions of others to their lives. They demonstrate respect for self and treat others with dignity. They behave responsibly in response to concerns for the environment. Their ability to understand the nature and value of diversity helps them to contribute to the development of local, national and global justice. Some of the approaches currently helping pupils to become responsible citizens include the following.

- Teachers encourage pupils to recognise the importance of diversity and equality through developing an understanding of the beliefs and values of religions and other stances for living.
- Pupils engage in learning experiences which promote equality and fairness, for example, by organising an anti-bullying campaign.

#### ***Signpost to responsible citizens***

*Responsible citizens often display the following characteristics.*

- *They encourage respect for all citizens in society regardless of race, gender, religion or disability.*
- *They are eager to develop a high level of awareness of important global issues affecting humanity.*
- *They play an active role within their community.*

- Teachers help pupils to develop an awareness of global citizenship through involvement in aid charities and debates about moral issues such as war, poverty, aid, biotechnology and the environment.
- Pupils are consistently encouraged to recognise the needs of others and to accept responsibility in school and in their community.
- Pupils work in partnership with organisations and individuals who contribute positively to their communities for example by caring for the elderly or sick.
- Teachers and pupils participate in activities which demonstrate responsible attitudes to humanity and the environment for example, through recycling of school resources or promoting fair trade products in the school tuck shop.

**How might religious and moral education contribute more to developing responsible citizens?**

Religious and moral education plays a major role in developing our young people's understanding of citizenship. Active participation in the life of their school and local community, through religious and moral education courses, can enable them to experience a sense of personal responsibility for themselves and others. As we continue to consider ways of encouraging this, it may be useful to reflect on the following questions.

- Do pupils have access to a wide range of up-to-date information and viewpoints when studying and reaching conclusions about religious and moral issues?
- Do pupils engage with faith groups and voluntary organisations in their local community?
- Do pupils participate in projects which help them to develop responsible attitudes to self and others?
- Do we communicate to pupils our belief in their ability to take responsibility for aspects of school and community life?
- Do we help pupils to develop an understanding of the contemporary world and their place in it?
- Do we ensure that pupils develop and reflect on their own beliefs and values?
- Do we enable pupils to develop the skills required to engage in discussion and debate which might challenge the beliefs and values held by themselves and others?

## Effective Contributors

### What do we do well in religious and moral education to develop effective contributors?

Religious and moral education can provide a wide range of contexts in which pupils are encouraged to participate in the society in which they live. Effective contributions to society can take place in a variety of ways, with opportunities for pupils to contribute in class, in the school, in their local community and to experience the difference their contributions can make. Some of the approaches currently helping pupils to become effective contributors include the following.

- Teachers set high expectations for all aspects of pupils' achievements, including their contributions to the work of the class.
- Pupils play an active part in school and community life, for example through involvement in religious festivals and celebrations.
- Teachers help pupils to develop the skills of active listening and understand ways of contributing, for example by working with visitors from outside agencies.
- Pupils work collaboratively and consider how to improve society, for example by creating an audio-visual presentation about sectarianism.
- Teachers ensure that all pupils are developing a range of communication skills, so that they can contribute effectively to debates about religious and moral issues.
- Teachers and pupils regularly discuss and evaluate their contributions to learning experiences and reflect on the impact they may have had on others.

### How might religious and moral education contribute more to developing effective contributors?

Religious and moral education can play a major role in developing our young people's abilities to contribute to society. As we continue to consider ways of encouraging this, it may be useful to reflect on the following questions.

- Do we extend pupils' learning into the wider life of the school for example through festivals and celebrations?

#### *Signpost to effective contributors*

*Effective contributors often display the following characteristics.*

- *They make a positive contribution to the lives of others and are aware of the difference they can make.*
- *They strive to reach their fullest potential in all aspects of learning.*
- *They are interested in others in their community and recognise the value of sharing ideas and working together.*
- *They are creative thinkers who apply their learning to new situations.*
- *They are solution focused.*

- Do we encourage pupils to make positive contributions to their school and community, for example through links with primary schools or voluntary work?
- Do pupils engage in problem solving and collaborative tasks?
- Do we challenge and support pupils' opinions and ideas and help them to develop the characteristics of resilience and self-reliance?

#### 4. Conclusion

Religious and moral education has an important role to play within *Curriculum for Excellence*. It enables our young people to understand the importance of physical, social, emotional and spiritual wellbeing. It helps them to develop skills to make progress in their individual lives and to make a positive contribution to global society. In particular it helps them to:

- develop a knowledge and understanding of the world's religions and viewpoints;
- be aware of the ways that religion might help to answer deep questions about significant aspects of human experience;
- understand that religious beliefs and moral attitudes are often shaped through our responses to human emotions and personal experiences;
- explore a variety of viewpoints, including their own, on moral values such as justice, compassion and integrity;
- consider the ways in which our experiences of family life and cultural identity impact on our beliefs, values and traditions;
- develop the skills of reflection, debate, discernment, critical thinking and reaching conclusions about issues of belief and morality; and
- understand how they might make a positive difference to the world by putting their beliefs and values into action.

Teaching for effective learning in religious and moral education has many strengths. To build further on these, in addition to the issues raised throughout this portrait, teachers of religious and moral education will wish to take account of the underlying principles of *Curriculum for Excellence*. Consideration of the following questions may help with this.

- Are the learning experiences and outcomes stimulating, challenging, varied and relevant to learners' lives, emotions and personal experiences?
- Do tasks and activities extend pupils' own personal search and deepen their knowledge and understanding of Christianity and other world religions?

- Do we take sufficient account of pupils' earlier achievements in and beyond the classroom when planning for progression?
- Do we communicate effectively with pupils about the purposes of their learning and encourage them to make links with all aspects of their learning?
- Are pupils able to exercise choice in what they learn and how to learn?
- Do we create an environment where pupils can engage openly in a process of personal reflection and appreciate the contribution which religious and moral education can make to their personal development?