Review of religious education in four primary schools in Glasgow

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Religious education (RE) in the denominational school is of prime importance. However, religious education is more than the learning achieved in the classroom, as children are formed in faith throughout the Catholic school, in partnership with parents “the first educators” and the parish.

The child’s intelligence develops gradually. Catechesis must be adapted to this mental development. The child seeks to understand the religious life of adults. Accordingly, the genuine Christian life of the adult community helps very much toward giving the children a solid formation, and it does this in a truly instructive way when it explains the religious life of adults and the activities of the People of God suitably in the light of salvation history.  

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INTRODUCTION

This report, commissioned by Glasgow City Council Education Services in partnership with the Scottish Catholic Education Service (SCES), is intended to promote improvements in religious education in denominational schools through stimulating reflection on aspects of effective practice illustrated within a few case studies. The aim was to highlight effective practice which could be shared with schools across Glasgow City Council, and through SCES, with schools across the country.

The report is based on evidence of effective practice obtained from visits to four primary schools in Glasgow City during November 2008. Each of the schools agreed to take part and were given time to prepare for the visits. The review team included headteachers from other Catholic schools, led by a former inspector of schools and a primary Principal Teacher involved in designing Curriculum for Excellence outcomes for religious education in Catholic schools. Each visit lasted a full day and the team visited classes, talked to staff and children and discussed the nature of the school with the headteacher.

The team considered:

- achievement
- attainment
- the curriculum
- the quality of learning and teaching
- meeting learning needs
- assessment
- school ethos
- opportunities for staff development
- the leadership of RE.
The schools involved

**St Bartholomew’s Primary School**
serves part of the community in the Castlemilk and Croftfoot areas in the south east area of the City. The school is part of the parish community of St Bartholomew. It is in the St Margaret Mary’s Learning Community.

**St Catherine’s Primary School**
serves the community in the Barmulloch area in the north of the City. The school is served by the two local parishes of St Catherine’s and All Saints. It is in the All Saints’ Learning Community.

**St Clare’s Primary School**
serves the community of Drumchapel in the north west of the city. The school is part of the parish community of St. Laurence. It is in the St Thomas Aquinas Learning Community.

**Our Lady of the Rosary Primary School**
serves the areas of South Cardonald, Bellahouston, Mosspark and parts of Dumbreck and Crookston. The school is served by the parishes of Our Lady of Lourdes, Our Lady and St George and St Leo the Great. It is in the Lourdes Learning Community.

The team are indebted to the headteachers and staff of the schools for their professionalism and willingness to showcase their effective practice in religious education.
All four schools used the 5-14 forward planners and the Alive-O resources effectively as the basis for learning and teaching. Children’s knowledge and understanding of the topics they were studying or had studied was very good:

- They knew the formal prayers which they had been taught.
- Children had experiences of meditation and were able to talk about listening to their ‘inner voice’.
- They demonstrated a strong knowledge and understanding of the meaning and purpose of praying for the Dead and the theological language of the term ‘Holy Souls’.
- Children clearly demonstrated a sound knowledge of the aspects of the Catholic faith they had been taught.
  - At P1, children showed care and respect for each other as part of their understanding of belonging. They were able to talk about their own ‘special’ gift as a unique individual.
  - At P4, children had understood well the teachings of Jesus they had studied and were able to relate these to the Sacrament of Confirmation. They also showed knowledge and understanding of Baptism, and of the importance of Ramadan and Eid for Muslims.
  - At P5/P6, children were able to discuss the life of St Margaret and how they could follow her example of being ‘holy’ and what is meant by the Communion of Saints. They were able to explain the symbolism of water, the Paschal candle and the candle lit during the Sacrament of Baptism.
  - At P7, children demonstrated understanding of the story of Adam and Eve, and were able to discuss the consequences of how temptation affects oneself and others. They also showed a knowledge of some key figures in the Bible and were able to explain some signs and symbols used in Judaism.
Children participated effectively in a wide range of activities which assisted considerably in developing their self-confidence and increasing their self-esteem. They were becoming aware of themselves as learners. Children felt that the school helped them to care for people. Some spoke of charity activities, others spoke of being encouraged to help one another in the playground and in classes, and to look after the environment.

Schools involved their children in fund raising for charities. For example, one school was the highest fundraiser for the Scottish Catholic International Aid Fund (SCIAF) in Scotland. Children worked in the community by visiting homes for the elderly, were involved in the local parishes and took part in local and education authority events. These activities developed their awareness of global and local issues.

All of the schools welcomed children from different countries, faith communities and those who held different perspectives on life. This richness of views, traditions and backgrounds helped children to develop skills of citizenship, empathy and tolerance while teachers continued to ensure the faith development of Catholic children. Almost all children were very aware of environmental issues and healthy lifestyles.
All Catholic primary schools in Glasgow City use the Alive-O programme as their principal resource for teaching Religious Education. This resource is approved by the Bishops’ Conference and has been used for 10 years.

They use a comprehensive 5-14 forward planning document (produced by Diocesan R.E. Advisers) which corresponds to the liturgical year and matches the 5-14 strands to the lessons in Alive-O. Forward plans are written for all year groups, and take account of composite classes. The four schools visited made very effective use of Alive-O but did not follow it rigidly and two of the schools used other resources to complement learning and teaching in religious education.

The 5-14 forward planning document includes traditional Catholic prayers which are recommended to be taught at the appropriate stage of development. Forward plans also incorporate health and well-being and recommend the St Mungo Learning Community ‘Relationships and Moral Education’ resource which adapts Alive-O lessons to meet the 5-14 Health strands. The schools used these resources well to engage children in discussing their health and well-being, including relationships and sex education.

At the time of the review, during November, the plans included children learning about praying for the dead. The month of November is the traditional time of year in Catholic practice where believers are asked to pray for those who have died. November 16th is the date when Catholics in Scotland celebrate the feast day of St Margaret, the patroness of Scotland. The team found children to be learning about the life and times of this important saint in the history of our country.

At the time of the review, two of the schools visited were trialling Curriculum for Excellence draft experiences/outcomes for religious education in Catholic schools (RERC). Teachers who were involved in trialling specific experiences/outcomes had begun to change the way in which they taught religious education as suggested in the proposal for RERC. They felt that this new approach had enhanced the learning and teaching in religious education and had made them reflect more on their own practice. These teachers had also begun to incorporate cross curricular links in their religious education lessons.
**Teaching for Effective Learning**

The quality of teaching observed was very good with some excellent practice. Teachers used a wide range of learning approaches. Lessons observed, included the following features:

- Teachers prepared lessons very well and created a first-class environment where they showed respect for children and listened to all contributions whether relevant or not and gently guided children back ‘on track’.
- Teachers revisited what children had learned from previous lessons through effective questioning.
- Teachers shared with children what was going to be learned, why the learning was important and what children needed to demonstrate to show that they had learned.
- Each lesson started with prayer and teachers created a very good atmosphere where children could pray with reverence.
- Teachers used a wide variety of resources, such as ICT, religious artefacts, visiting speakers, interactive whiteboards, task cards, and appropriate music to generate the right mood and stimulate imagination.
- Teachers used a wide variety of techniques adopted from Assessment is for Learning, (such as “thumbs up” to show understanding, timing tasks so that there were no long episodes of the same activity).
- Teachers adopted a wide range of activities to ensure that children were enjoying their learning:
  - discussion and debate
  - effective use of a variety of questioning techniques to encourage critical thinking
  - teacher-role play
  - children questioning the teacher to explore beliefs
  - children taking responsibility for tasks as leaders, participants and giving feedback
  - pupil role-play
  - drama activities
- differentiated tasks
- Think/Pair/Share
- Walk About/Talk About
- reporting back to class
- time for silent reflection
- singing
- November Tree procession.

- Teachers involved children at all stages of the lesson, fully explaining each part of the lesson, his/her role and the children’s participation.
- Teachers provided clear feedback and reinforced the aims and the purpose of the learning.

As teachers continue to improve learning and teaching, they should consider promoting the following:

- helping children to recognise better the skills they are developing
- setting more challenging tasks which can include extended writing, research or other methods of enquiry
- encouraging children to set themselves high standards in debate and discussion
- encouraging children to develop a higher awareness of local and global issues through their fund-raising for charities.
Learning Experiences

Children’s learning, in the lessons observed, was very good. In all the schools, they responded well in class, were enthusiastic and motivated. They co-operated effectively when they worked in pairs or groups. Children engaged in extended discussions. They were keen to learn and participated fully and eagerly in lessons. They showed reverence during times of prayer. Children enjoyed lessons and sang with gusto when required. In one class, for example, the children, at their request, left the room to go out to play singing the Latin chants which they had learned. They were clear about what they were expected to learn and were keen to discuss what they had learned. Staff supported learning very effectively. They knew their children well and were sensitive and responsive to their emotional, physical, social and spiritual needs. There were very effective arrangements for children’s care and welfare. Children understood what they had to do if they had anxieties or concerns.

Meeting Learning Needs

Teachers had clear guidance on child protection, equalities legislation, and how to deal with bullying. They implemented these appropriately. Some children who had lost a significant adult were supported through programmes such as ‘Seasons for Growth’.

Class teachers offered a range of suitable activities and used appropriately varied teaching approaches to meet the range of needs. Schools also deployed school chaplains and people from parishes to enhance learning. In one school, the chaplain met regularly with senior managers and teachers to plan liturgies, events and classroom visits. Schools held Sacramental workshops for parents with parents leading workshops, and in one school a catechist group from the parish liaised directly with class teachers to plan the liturgy for the Sacraments. The schools celebrated the First Friday Mass and in one school, children, supported by the school liturgy group, took responsibility for planning the liturgy. Masses were well attended by parents and parishioners. In another school the liturgy group, led by a working party, plan liturgical events and involve children in the planning of events. Parents and parishioners are invited to attend. For example, more than 50 people attended the Rosary club at lunchtime during October, these included staff, parents, parishioners and children. All of these activities had a positive impact on the atmosphere of the schools and helped children to develop as members of the Catholic faith community.
**Assessment**

All schools were involved in assessing RE or were developing approaches to assessment, using Archdiocesan assessment sheets adapted to suit the classes. Teachers in the schools which were already assessing in RE were very confident of their skills and discussed progress with the children. In one school, children were involved in self and peer assessment.

Parents were kept informed of progress and about what their children were learning in RE through question and answer sheets which were highlighted and sent home. Weekly RE homework was given which related to the lessons.

All four schools would benefit from developing further their methods of assessment to ensure that:

- assessment is linked clearly to improving learning
- children are enabled to understand the aims of their learning and how the quality of their learning will be judged
- assessment enables children to show what they can do to be actively engaged in their learning and how they are to be judged
- assessment combines information of different kinds, including children’s self-assessments, to inform decisions about children’s learning and achievements.
All of the schools visited had very welcoming atmospheres as Catholic communities. Staff demonstrated a strong faith commitment and this was evident in their teaching and in their relationships with children. Children were very polite and well behaved at all times. They worked well together and supported one another effectively. Staff stressed the importance of putting values into action. Both they and children demonstrated personal responsibility, compassion and support for others, and actively promoted fairness and justice in their interactions with each other. All schools had a variety of rewards to motivate children.

In one school, the headteacher invited children to a special lunch with her as reward and as a means of listening to their views. Children had high expectations of themselves, as seen in their desire to learn and in their positive response to exercising responsibility. Regular assemblies, classroom prayer and visits to the parish church for liturgies and Mass provided children with valuable opportunities to develop their spiritual life. Assemblies were also used to celebrate success.

All of the schools welcomed children from various religious and cultural backgrounds. Teachers promoted respect for all people and encouraged full participation in the school community.
Staff were given yearly opportunities to attend training in using the Alive-O resource. The positive outcomes of this were evident in their teaching and in the effective use of the Archdiocesan resource.

Staff felt that experiential learning embedded in the Alive-O programme helped children to develop a deeper understanding of their faith. Their training gave them the confidence to adapt the programme to suit the needs of their own children. Some staff acknowledged the initial difficulty in reflecting with the children but felt that this was a real strength now.

In some schools, the headteachers had included activities to support the faith formation of the staff. For example, in one school, staff were invited to participate in a retreat; in another the school year began with a Mass for staff.
There were various factors which led to the effective practice demonstrated in the four schools visited. The most important of these was teachers’ depth of faith which meant that children had good role models to follow. This modelling of faith and professionalism was demonstrated by the headteachers and staff who ensured that religious education was a high priority and that Christian values permeated every aspect of the school’s life.

Staff used the Alive-O resource effectively, planned RE lessons well and used a wide variety of approaches which helped children to have enthusiasm and motivation for learning, a determination to reach high standards of achievement and openness to new thinking and ideas.

Children had self respect, respect for others, secure values and beliefs and a sense of physical, mental and emotional wellbeing. They were able to work in partnership and in teams, to take the initiative and lead, to apply critical thinking in new contexts and to develop informed, ethical views of complex issues. These developing skills are very important for all children in the modern world. Children were also learning about the faith of the Catholic Church and how to pray so that they could continue on their own journey of faith.
Religious Education and Curriculum for Excellence

Curriculum for Excellence provides a great opportunity to reinvigorate and enhance best practice in Catholic religious education. The design principles challenge Catholic teachers to accompany children on their faith journey as they seek to respond to God in faith.

The outcomes and school experience in Catholic religious education are written in such a way that outcomes and experiences are inextricably linked, ensuring that the learning experiences are both faithful to God and faithful to the life experience of children. This relies on a child centred approach where children are provided with opportunities to experience encounters with God, build around their learning about key aspects of the Catholic faith.

The content of the outcomes is organised within eight Strands of Faith which contain core aspects of Catholic belief:

- Mystery of God
- In the Image of God
- Revealed Truth of God
- Son of God
- Signs of God
- Word of God
- Hours of God
- Reign of God

Children will also learn about important aspects of other Christian denominations and other world faiths.
Teachers in all Catholic schools should consider the following questions as they review their religious education programmes in the light of Curriculum for Excellence:

- How are we planning to refresh our courses using the outcomes and experiences of *Curriculum for Excellence*?

- In what way do our programmes and courses help children to develop informed opinions which they are able to support with valid reasons?

- How successfully do they balance the progressive development of knowledge and skills?

- To what extent do our programmes develop the skills of debate, reflection, discernment and critical thinking?

- How effectively do we offer planned opportunities for personalisation, choice and tasks which meet the needs of all children?

- In what way does our curriculum cater for the needs of all children, including those with additional support needs?

- To what extent do our programmes include learning about other faiths and stances for living to ensure that children can understand others’ beliefs and values?

- Do our programmes allow children to analyse and reflect on their own beliefs and values in relation to their learning about others, without being afraid of ideas which may challenge their own?
Lesson: St Margaret of Scotland

The teacher introduced the lesson by telling the class that they were going to learn about Saint Margaret of Scotland, who is part of the Community of Saints they had been learning about (feast day 16th November).

She led a discussion about the previous lessons on Saints, using a variety of questioning techniques to involve all children in the lesson.

She told them that at the end of the lesson they would know five things about Saint Margaret.

The teacher gave a short historical description of when Saint Margaret lived, where she lived and who she lived with.

The teacher then told the class that, through their imaginations, she would become Saint Margaret.

She told them that when she dressed as Saint Margaret she would become Saint Margaret, she would become the queen.

When she put the crown on she would no longer be Mrs Teacher; she would be the queen of Scotland.

The teacher told the class that she was going to play some regal-sounding music whilst she dressed and when the music stopped she would be the queen.

By this time, the children were totally engrossed by what was happening. They watched her intently as she dressed.

She put on her crown and sat in front of the children who were gathered around her feet.

When the music stopped she paused for a few seconds and then began to speak in character, as the queen.

She began to address them as “my subjects” and spoke to them of her life as queen, her family, her work with them and her devotion to God, the influence she had on the country.

“Look at my example. Be good followers and try to bring souls to God”
This presentation went on for about 10 minutes. She invited the class to question her about what she had said and any other questions that they may have.
The children asked some very good thoughtful questions……not just yes/no answers.
In their imagination they were talking to a queen.
At the end of the session the queen informed her subjects that she must leave.
She started the music again. She disrobed and when the music finished she was Mrs Teacher again.

The teacher proceeded with the follow up activity: evaluation.
She asked the children to “Think, Pair, and Share” in pairs at first, then to share in groups of four. She then brought them together as a class group to share with each other the facts that they remembered about Saint Margaret.
To complete the lesson the teacher led the children in prayer.
The children asked if they could sing some of the hymns/chants they had been learning.
The words for these appeared very quickly on the SMART board.
A short discussion ensued about the subject of the first hymn, Saint Andrew.
Children sang enthusiastically.
The playtime bell rang and the children asked if they could sing another chant leaving the room.
(The words for this were on the class whiteboard.)

Good Practice

- children were totally involved throughout the lesson
- the teacher prepared the lesson well
- the teacher demonstrated courage and imagination in taking on the role play
- very good use of music and ICT to support and enhance the lesson
- effective use of Alive-O resources as well as using other resources
- the teacher’s faith commitment was very evident
- learning was personalised for the class, ensuring a real and an emotional experience for all in the room.
Lesson : Month of November

The lesson started with a procession to the altar with the Bible and a special candle, a daily ritual which was clearly a ceremony which all children took part in with great respect and reverence throughout.

The teacher told the children what they would be learning and what was required to show what they had learned. He stated that they would learn about different people who care for us and that they would be expected to describe the ways in which they help us.

He led a discussion, using effective questions, connecting with previous learning. He clearly focused discussion on November as the month of the Holy Souls, when we remember and pray for those who have died.

This was followed by a reading from the Bible about Jesus. He discussed with the class the life of Jesus and compared it to the children’s lives in terms of who cares for us and who we care for.

This was followed by a period of meditation, reflection and prayer. Pupil behaviour throughout was impeccable and it was clearly due to such high expectations set by the teacher and the consistency of this approach in R.E lessons.

The lesson continued with a collaborative activity where children discussed who cares for us in the home, school, and community with an active feedback session which involved all groups.

A plenary followed which reviewed the points of the lesson and was used as a source for planning of next steps in the children’s journey of faith.

Good Practice

- lesson was well planned
- it incorporated a wide range of formative assessment strategies which clearly enriched the learning experience for all children
- effective planning of daily rituals unique to the R.E. lesson
- very effective use resources adapted from Alive-O workbook and Teachers’ Notes
- effective classroom atmosphere generated by reverence shown by teacher and children.