

Catholic schools understand that religious education is not just a subject; it is a way of being



When GCSE students across the country nervously awaited the results of their examinations a few weeks ago, I sat and bit my nails too. The general picture reflected the recent move to provide a more rigorous and perhaps traditional approach, with grade inflation being discouraged. There was a decline in the prevalence of top grades, with the proportion of A and A* results dropping from 7.3 per cent of entries in 2012 to 6.6 per cent of the total in 2015.

This comes as no great surprise for students and teachers as, over the past few years, they have seen the demands of their courses change rapidly and variously. The response to this barrage of initiatives in most schools and colleges has been to work tirelessly to better equip the students to meet the requirements set by the examination boards, which in turn are enduring an uphill struggle to satisfy the whims of the Department for Education (DfE) and the needs of the schools, which are ultimately customers who must be won over. If this picture sounds bleak, that is certainly not the intention. It is simply a statement of the reality of education in UK schools today.

In religious studies, students can either undertake a full course or a short course. The top results for full-course entries were slightly below the overall average, with 6 per cent achieving A or A* grades. In the short course, 8 per cent of students achieved an A or A*. To give an idea of the standard required, most examination boards require 80 per cent for an A grade and 90 per cent for an A*. The short course results in particular should be a cause for celebration.

However, the DfE does not allow these grades to be counted when producing performance tables. This means that schools that must concern themselves with the impact of these tables on their sheer survival opt not to offer the short course to their students. The effect of this is that in some schools, particularly those with no religious character, tens of

thousands of students are not pursuing any form of religious education at all during their GCSE years.

In a world where intolerance, hatred, mistrust and even radicalisation are growing, the decline of the subject in a

young person's formative years should be a real cause for concern. Having little understanding of what it means to be a person of faith puts anyone who wishes to participate in any aspect of society in a very difficult position. Having little understanding of one's own faith or lack of it is arguably even more isolating.

Politics and education seem to be, for the foreseeable future at least, rather unfortunate and likely bedfellows.

Happily though, most Catholic schools understand that religious education is not just a subject; it is a way of being.

Good Catholic schools imbue all that they do with an organic and holistic approach to religious education. They teach

philosophy during PE, they explore morality in history, they think existentially in maths, they learn about the Beatitudes in the corridors, they discuss the Gospel values in geography – because they live the faith, rather than

disseminating it via past papers.

This is why religious education is important. Knowing that young people have had time to really consider their faith is something that is immeasurably valuable. These are not the words of a teacher spouting niceties in defence of terrible results; 40 per cent of our students achieved A and A* grades in full course RE, and every student in the year group had to take the course. These are the thoughts of someone concerned about students not in such places; those with no religious education at all.

Maybe the real cause for jubilation this summer should be the gifts that this subject brings to young people, rather than the statistical results that seem the natural focus for praise. If only all schools could see the impact that it has on students and, in turn, on society and the world. I am not suggesting that a lack of formal religious education causes a lack of morality, but I am certain that the opportunities created by it allow young people to deeply consider their place in the world.

Religious education does something other subjects do not. It offers a chance to question, debate, offend, be offended, consider, philosophise, dispel, object, meditate and pray. The opportunities that it provides are so valuable that I cannot see how any educator could withhold it from their students, no matter the impact on their data.

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