Religion as a Source of Well-being: Implications for Second-Level School Programmes in Ireland and Beyond

Abstract: Internationally, student well-being is emerging as a core concern in the field of education. This paper examines the relationship between religion and well-being as advanced by three recent international studies. It highlights the relationship between religion and spiritual development (as a dimension of well-being). The second part of the paper provides a brief outline of second level education in the Republic of Ireland before turning to the potential of Religious Education to address the well-being concern at the heart of the new Irish Junior Cycle. With recourse to this practical illustration, it proposes Religious Education as a resource for student well-being

Keywords: well-being, spirituality, students, Religious Education, Irish Junior Cycle

Introduction

Growing up in today's world can be difficult for young people as they try to chart the social, behavioural, and developmental challenges of life. Multiple risk behaviours, such as smoking, anti-social behaviour, hazardous alcohol consumption and unprotected sexual intercourse, cluster in adolescence, making it a particularly anxious time. These behaviours are associated with increased risk of poor educational attainment, future morbidity and premature mortality (cf Kipping et al, 2012; Weare, 2015). A religious upbringing can profoundly help young people navigate the challenges of these years. It also contributes to a wide range of health and well-being outcomes later in life. So say Ying Chen and Tyler Vander Weele, co-authors of a recent study published out of Harvard's Chan School of Public Health and Human Flourishing Program (2018). Their study followed a large sample of over 5,000 adolescents for more than eight years, controlling many other variables to try to isolate the effect of religious upbringing. It found that children who were raised in a religious or spiritual environment were subsequently better protected from the pitfalls of adolescence.

This paper argues that as a legitimate source of well-being, religion in the form of Religious Education with sound content and pedagogy, can be an integral part of second level school well-being programmes. It does this by

a) articulating an interdisciplinary perspective on well-being and providing a working definition of 'well-being' (see below);

b) demonstrating the strong positive correlation between religion and well-being. 'Religion' and 'well-being' are complex terms holding multiple meanings. This paper lifts up some dominant understandings of religion and of well-being prevalent in recent research; these are explored in a later section.

c) highlighting the relationship between religion and spiritual development (as a dimension of well-being), where 'spiritual' indicates

> a sense of relatedness to something bigger than the self. For some, this may be in relation to their understanding of the Divine. For others the relationship is with a power or presence. All religions seek to foster a spiritual life, although spiritual can also refer to something other than religious affiliation. It refers to a quality beyond the material and the mundane that strives for inspiration, reverence, awe, meaning and purpose (National Council of Curriculum and Assessment, Ireland (NCCA, 2019, 21).

d) offering a practical illustration of how Religious Education (RE) can contribute to student well-being by employing the new Junior Cycle[1] in Ireland as example. In this context Religious Education includes both 'the religious and non-religious response to human experience' (NCCA), 2019, 4). It is understood as the 'critical encounter' between religion and education:

> The use of the word critical indicates that this encounter is intentional and draws on both religious and educational principles to create the possibility of a critically reflective dialogue between the learner and religion(s) for the purpose of understanding both the content and expression of religious beliefs (NCCA, 2017b, 6).

A 'critical encounter' also allows room for students to engage with the adverse influences of religions and how religion can be manipulated and misunderstood.

Concepts of Well-being

Well-being is felt when people perceive that their lives are going well. It is a positive outcome that is meaningful for people and for many sectors of society (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 2018). Good living conditions such as housing and employment are the basis of well-being. However, living conditions at this level fail to measure what people think and feel about their lives, such as the quality of their relationships, their emotions and resilience, the realisation of their potential, and their general satisfaction

[1]Second-level education in Ireland generally lasts six years: the first stage is a three-year Junior Cycle for students typically aged 12-15.

with life (Diener & Seligman, 2004; Diener, 2009). Disciplines such as philosophy, theology and psychology can help uncover these deeper, more complex dimensions.

Human flourishing (living well, being well), what it means to be truly happy and the pursuit of this happiness are questions that have compelled thinkers since ancient times. Well-being is not a 21st century notion! The universal desire for human flourishing has a long history in the fields of philosophy and religion, not least in the Judeo-Christian tradition over 4000 years. While greatly diverse in form and worldview, these ancient realms of inquiry try to provide some kind of understanding and prescription for how humans should live.

Religious and philosophical traditions differ profoundly in how they refer to human flourishing and especially how to attain it. The different responses provide insight into the beliefs and practices of various religious and non-religious world views. Responses vary widely, including the beliefs that human flourishing is found

- in standing apart from the world,
- in resisting false beliefs that a god exists,
- in focusing on positive thinking,
- in living a life of serenity through achieving levels of greater consciousness and self-enlightenment.

In the Judeo-Christian tradition, historically the most influential religious tradition in the Western world, human flourishing is a key theme woven through the entire canon. The Hebrew and Christian Scriptures of the Bible constitute accounts of how individuals and communities explored and explained human flourishing. The Bible, across the sweep of both Hebrew and Christian Scriptures, testifies to the God of Israel revealed in Jesus Christ, who promises eternal and abundant life. Positive relationship with this God is the biblical answer

to the foundational human question of how to flourish and thrive (Pennington, 2015). Different responses reveal what various religions or philosophies have to offer and become a discursive source when we talk about student well-being or plan well-being programmes for schools.

The definition of student well-being for the purposes of this paper is taken from that offered by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) of Ireland.

> Student well-being is present when students realise their abilities, take care of their physical well-being, can cope with the normal stresses of life, and have a sense of purpose and belonging to a wider community (NCCA, 2017a, 17).

Reflecting primarily an educational paradigm, this definition takes account of the spiritual life of the student (although not explicit in the definition) (NCCA, 2017a, 17).

Religion and well-being

Chen and VanderWeele's Outcome-Wide Analysis (2018) outlined above examined the associations of religious involvement in adolescence (including religious service attendance and prayer or meditation) with a wide array of psychological well-being, mental health, health behaviour, physical health, and character strength outcomes in young adulthood. Results were conclusive. For instance, compared with no attendance, at least weekly attendance of religious services was associated with greater life satisfaction and positive affect, a number of character strengths, and lower probabilities of drug use. Those who attended religious services regularly were 12% less likely to have high depressive symptoms and 33% less likely to use illicit drugs.

Further, a religious upbringing contributed towards to a number of positive outcomes such as greater happiness, more volunteering in the community, a greater sense of mission and purpose, and higher levels of forgiveness. For example, those who attended religious services were subsequently 18% more likely to report high levels of happiness and 87% more

likely to have high levels of forgiveness. Analyses of prayer or meditation yielded similar results. Those who prayed or meditated frequently were subsequently 38% more likely to volunteer in their community and 47% more likely to have a high sense of mission and purpose. These are relatively large effects across a variety of health and well-being outcomes. The study shows that religious practice and prayer or meditation can be important resources for adolescents navigating the challenges of life. Echoing these findings, a recent Pew Research Center analysis across 26 countries showed that people who are active in religious congregations tend to be happier and more civically engaged than either religiously unaffiliated adults or inactive members of religious groups. Religiously active people also tend to smoke and drink less. However, they are not healthier in terms of exercise frequency and rates of obesity (PEW, 2019, 5).

The authors of the Harvard study acknowledge the concern expressed in various settings about whether being raised religiously might be harmful. The sexual abuse scandals in the Catholic Church for instance have led some to question whether students should be present in such settings at all. Their study indicates that, overall, the effects of a religious community are profoundly positive. This does not in any way excuse the incidents of harm by religious individuals or institutions, but it does highlight "the substantial benefits of religious practice. Ceasing those practices will, on average, likely lead to worse health and well-being outcomes" (VanderWeele, 2018).

Chen and VanderWeele's findings corroborate another recent study *Religion and Well-being: Assessing the Evidence* which evaluates the evidence from 139 academic studies examining the relationship between religion and well-being (Spencer et al, 2016). This study systematises, categorises and analyses the intricate, multifarious relationship between religion and well-being from over thirty years of academic literature. Findings in this case also reveal a marked positive correlation between religion and well-being.

Overall, the data from this study indicate that religion is good for well-being, with certain aspects of religion better correlated with certain aspects of well-being. It appears that the more genuinely held and practically-evidenced a religious commitment is, then the greater the positive impact it is likely to have on well-being.

Social participation[2] had the strongest positive correlation with well-being. The overwhelming consensus among the studies analysed was that this type of religious participation had contributed to all conceptions of well-being. "Regular, frequent religious service attendance seemed to have the biggest impact on well-being, though lower levels of attendance and other types of participation, such as volunteering, also has some effect" (Spencer et al, 2016, 13). Religious personal participation[3] also showed a strong positive correlation. In short, participation across the board whether social or private, demonstrated a strong positive correlation with well-being, most notably in the area of mental health.

Religious belief[4] was found to have a largely positive, but more varied, impact on the different measures of well-being. It showed a strong positive correlation with subjective well-being[5]; this was less pronounced in relation to mental health. Significantly weaker correlations were found with physical health and health supporting behaviours[6].

Religious affiliation[7] was shown to have the weakest effect on well-being, with the evidence suggesting neither strong positive nor strong negative effects of religious affiliation

[2] *Social religious participation*: the active (and regular) participation in communal religious worship services, although some studies include other forms of religious social participation, such as volunteering.
[3] *Religious personal participation*: engaging in acts of private devotion such as prayer, scripture reading, or listening to religious music.
[4] *Religious belief*: personal belief in God or a higher power, and assent to tenets or doctrines of a religious group, for example, belief in an afterlife.
[5] *Subjective well-being*: measures of self-reported happiness, including life satisfaction, personal evaluation of progress towards life goals, and having a sense of meaning in life
[6] *Health supporting behaviours*: those activities that tend to have a positive effect on physical health, such as by preventing substance abuse or addiction, or by encouraging exercise or healthy eating.
[7] *Religious affiliation*: the extent to which an individual identifies with religion, ranging from a cultural affinity to full community participation (Spencer et al, 2016).

on well-being (16). The Pew study also found comparatively little evidence that religious affiliation, by itself, is associated with a greater likelihood of personal happiness or civic involvement (PEW, 2019). Of the measures of well-being, subjective well-being seems to be the most sensitive to the effects of the different types of religious belief and practice.

Some Caveats

Many factors impinge on well-being and the relationship between these is complex. The Harvard team of Chen and VanderWeele acknowledge the difficulty of proving causality in an observational study but argue that their evidence is reliable because of the controls set and monitored throughout.

> Although it is difficult to prove "causality," with the sort of observational data we used, the evidence for the effects of a religious upbringing on some of the health and well-being outcomes is, in fact, here quite strong (VanderWeele, 2018)

While different aspects of religion correlate with different dimensions of well-being, correlation is not causation. There is no guarantee for instance that participation in religious services will improve one's mental health. In fact, there is some evidence that group participation for extrinsic rather than intrinsic reasons – seeing participation as a means to another end (for example, recognition or advancement) rather than an end in itself – can counteract the positive benefits of such participation, and even be associated with negative benefits (Spencer et al, 17). In other words, engagement with religion needs to be authentic.

Second, none of it proves that 'religion' is true. The three studies referred to cover a range of different religions, which differ in terms of both practice and belief. What it does suggest is that religious belief and practice are complex phenomena deeply connected and generally positively correlated with human well-being.

A third note of caution pertains to the adverse effects associated with a negative experience of religion. For instance, when O'Brien (2008) lifted up the religious and spiritual

as significant to understandings of well-being, she purposely declined to explore this question in relation to adolescence and schooling. Writing in the Irish context, she pointed out that the traditional structures and institutional power of the Catholic Church have not always been a force for good. O'Brien's' decision to omit religion from the discussion on well-being in schools was on the grounds that "the magnitude of the 'religious' issue requires an inclusive public debate" (O'Brien, 2008, 28).

Finally, we must be cautious about the implications for Religious Education (discussed in a later section): to lift up religious engagement as a well from whence well-being can be drawn is not to endorse a situation where any religion or form of Religious Education is foisted on students or their families.

Spirituality and Well-being

In his book *Spirituality and Education*, Andrew Wright notes that the field of education is "faced with a host of contrasting and conflicting spiritual options which continue to be the subject of fierce debate . . . One of the consequences of such uncertainty is that spiritual education will inevitable be a controversial issue in schools" (Wright, 2000, 7). The spiritual is linked with that which is elusive and mysterious, dynamic and life-giving. It is not exclusively associated with religious traditions. In fact, Hay contends that the term 'spiritual' can sometimes be used to conceal strong antagonisms about the validity and importance of religious belief (Hay, 2006, 21).

Writers like Wright (2000) and Hay (2006) tend towards three connotations of 'spiritual': the cultivation of self-awareness; being aesthetically or ethically (sensitive to the needs of others) aware; and the quest for what is sacred. Wright qualifies this last connotation with the acknowledgement that 'the rise of atheism has, for many, transformed the religious quest from a search for God to a search for meaning within an immanent or godless universe'

(9). In spite of their differences, all these connotations refer to a heightening of awareness and/or attentiveness. All three have the potential to make us more deeply aware of ourselves and our relationships with all that is not ourselves. This multi-layered notion of spirituality, according to Hay (2006), is acceptable in societies with increasingly secular norms, yet it leaves room for a religious dimension. Both secular and religious dimensions of spirituality are important; issues of purpose, meaning and identity can be richly present in non-religious perspectives. For instance, in his work *Religion for Atheists*, Alain de Botton (2012) identifies areas of well-being to which religion has traditionally contributed and advocates for new ways of resourcing these.

The understanding of spiritual articulated earlier refers to "a sense of relatedness to something bigger than the self. . . a quality beyond the material and the mundane that strives for inspiration, reverence, awe, meaning and purpose" (NCCA, 2019, 21). It resonates both with the multi-layered notion of spirituality articulated by Hay and Wright and the spatial metaphor for well-being proposed by O'Brien and O'Shea (2017). In their framework for orientating education and schools in the space of well-being, O'Brien and O'Shea propose a metaphor of space which makes room for the search for meaning, motivating sources of meaning and ultimate meaning. It attempts to create the conditions whereby each person is enabled to place him or herself on the continuum of well-being and gain orientation in a "space of concern" which includes the moral and spiritual (27). They argue for a model of well-being that makes room for possibilities of human existence beyond a strict life span approach, for the search for meaning, motivating sources of meaning and ultimate meaning, and for a well-being approach where questions that address "the needs of the soul" are actively facilitated (28).

Numerous second level subjects, activities and experiences can support a model of well-being which honours the spiritual, including Religious Education. According to Wright,

education becomes spiritual, regardless of the subject being taught, whenever learning moves below the surface and begins to grapple with issues surrounding ultimate meaning and the purpose of life – issues that constitute the "very marrow of our humanity" (Wright, 2000, 11). He describes Religious Education as well suited to facilitating this, particularly when it moves beyond an objective study to an exploration of the inner landscape, a wrestling with existential questions, a search for spiritual identity, and encounter with mystery and transcendence. This potential is reflected in the new Junior Cycle Religious Education Specification in Ireland (NCCA, 2019), discussed in the final section.

Spirituality and Religion

Theological scholar, Sandra Schneiders, proposes that rather than strangers or rivals, spirituality and religion should be related as partners. Religion that is estranged from lived spirituality is dead and often deadly, while "spirituality that lacks the structural and functional resources of religious tradition is rootless and often fruitless both for the individual and for society" (2000, 19). This is the type of spirituality with no past and no future "deprived of the riches of an organic tradition that has developed over centuries in confrontation with historical challenges of all kinds" (16).

The difficulty understanding the partnership arises when religious tradition is conflated with its institutions, so that the failings of these institutions seems to discredit the tradition itself. Schneiders argues that religion as tradition is the best (but not the only) context for the development of a healthy positive spirituality that is fruitful both for the person and society. Further, only the rootedness of religious tradition can equip us for the kind of inter-religious participation so badly needed for the unity of the human family. Thus religion is a key context in which to meet an educational obligation to spiritual development as a dimension of well-being.

Well-being and Education: A Philosophical Shift

The Canadian province of Ontario provides a good illustration of the philosophical shift in education towards well-being. Ontario is an established global leader in educational change, with proven results on learning success and equity on international large-scale assessments (Campbell et al, 2017). Only Finland exceeds Canada in terms of equal opportunity and positive outcomes for low-income students (Parkin, 2015). Over the past 15 years, Ontario's publicly funded and high-achieving educational system has evolved to mirror a philosophical transition from the Age of Achievement and Effort to the Age of Learning, Well-being and Identity (Council of Ontario Directors of Education (CODE), 2018, 4).

The Age of Achievement and Effort

The Council of Ontario Directors of Education (CODE) Report of 2018 outlines how internationally, educational reform in the Age of Achievement and Effort was driven by four compelling questions.

1) How are we doing?
2) How do we know?
3) How can we improve?
4) How can this benefit everyone?

These questions led educators to focus on performance, measurement, improvement, and equity. It was an era of raised expectations and performance measures. But the emphasis on effort and achievement also brought problems: "Its data-driven approach led educators to concentrate more on students' deficits than their assets. Teachers felt constrained by policy pressures in a rapidly changing environment" (CODE, 2018, 5). This mindset of precise learning outcomes and academic performance data, can also smother attention to the spiritual

life of students: “Spiritual development can appear too obscure and hard to pin down in a world where hard data rules” (Casson, Cooling, and Francis 2017, viii).

The Age of Learning, Well-being and Identity

While these compelling questions of achievement and opportunity need to stay with us as we continue to seek excellence and equity, the Age of Learning, Well-being and Identity throws up deeper, more profound questions for societies and schools. Such questions cut to the very core of who we are, for instance:

1) “Who are we?
2) What will become of us?
3) Who will decide?” (CODE, 2018, 5)

The concept of education needs to adapt to this Age of Learning, Well-being and Identity. Educators need to take seriously the task of developing the whole person and their overall well-being so they will become physically healthy, emotionally strong, and spiritually fulfilled. Identity, including religious identity, is integral to all human development; conversations with students highlight identities as central to well-being (CODE, 2018). However, some identities receive greater attention than others. This can lead to “the inadvertent exclusion of other identities in schools and communities, and the associated risks that occur when groups feel unacknowledged” (131). Yet it is important that young people see themselves in the curriculum and community of their schools (CODE, 2018). This suggests the inclusion of Religious Education in the curriculum, so that religious identity is not denied.

Well-being and Second Level Education in Ireland

In recent years, well-being both as concept and lived reality has gained increasing prominence in Irish education policy. For instance, the *Well-being Policy Statement and Framework for Practice 2018–2023* of the Department of Education and Skills sets out to ensure that by 2023 the promotion of well-being will be at the core of every school (Department of Education and Skills (DES), 2018a). It is a concern taken seriously by that Department in its recent reform of second level Junior Cycle education (Department of Education and Skills (DES), 2015). Wellbeing as a concern in the new Irish Junior Cycle and the potential of Religious Education to address that concern is the focus of the latter part of this paper.

Well-being and Irish Second Level Education: An Outline

In Ireland, second level (also known as post-primary) schooling, usually takes five or six years. On completing primary education at around the age of twelve, students transfer to second-level education. They join the Junior Cycle, which lasts 3 years (Department of Education and Skills, n.d., 13). At the end of this cycle students receive a Junior Cycle Profile of Achievement (JCPA), reflecting in-school achievements and the results of a terminal state examination. Students then continue onto the Senior Cycle, which lasts two or three years (depending on uptake of an optional Transition Year) and leads to students presenting for the state Leaving Certificate Examination.

The *Framework for Junior Cycle* (Framework), which sets out the requirements of the new Irish Junior Cycle, makes provision for well-being both as a principle and a curricular subject (DES, 2015). Our earlier definition, taken from the accompanying *Guidelines for Well-being* (Guidelines), suggests

> student well-being is present when students realise their abilities, take care of their physical well-being, can cope with the normal stresses of life, and have a sense of purpose and belonging to a wider community (NCCA, 2017a, 17).

Thus the principle of well-being weaves through all aspects of a school's Junior Cycle programme. From September 2020, schools are obliged to provide a minimum 400 hours of timetabled well-being for students over the course of the 3 year programme. These hours will include

> learning opportunities to enhance the physical, mental, emotional and social well-being of students [and] enable students to build life skills and develop a strong sense of connectedness to their school and to their community (8).

"Main pillars" for building a well-being programme include the curricular areas of Civic, Social and Political Education (CSPE), Physical Education (PE), Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE), and guidance-related learning, with the possibility of including elements of subjects such as Religious Education (NCCA, 2017a, 50).[8]

Well-being, Religious Education and the new Junior Cycle

Religious Education (RE) across Europe is the subject of much debate. Many approaches to RE exist, shaped by national and regional contexts: However, whereas the role and appropriateness of different approaches to Religious Education is contested, the vast majority of European countries accept the necessity of Religious Education in schools (Schreiner, 2013). For instance, Ofsted, the inspectorate for England and Wales, considers Religious Education, at its best, to be intellectually challenging and personally enriching. It helps young people develop beliefs and values, and promotes respect and empathy, which are important in our diverse society. It fosters civilised debate and reasoned argument, and helps students to understand the place of religion and belief in the modern world (Ofsted, 2013). Findings from a number of research projects across Europe show that young people value the place of

[8] It is not the argument of this paper that Religious Education as an entire subject should be incorporated into Well-being. The *Guidelines* (NCCA, 2017a) allow that elements of subjects such as Religious Education can be included in the curricular provision for Well-being. This approach is supported by historical partners in Religious Education such as the Irish Catholic Episcopal Conference (2017, 13) and by this author.

Religious Education and want a safe space to learn and talk about their own and others' religions, beliefs and truth claims in schools (NCCA, 2017b).

Religious Education has been a constant feature of the Irish education curriculum; it was taught in second level schools before the state was founded in 1922 (Hyland, 2001, 68). However, state examinations in Religious Education were prohibited by the 1878 Intermediate Education Act. The 1998 Education Act amended Section 5 of the 1878 Act to allow for the examination of Religious Education (Education Act 1998, 35.1; Byrne 2019). This paved the way for the introduction of the non-mandatory state syllabus at Junior Cycle in 2000 and the Senior Cycle syllabus in 2003 (McGrady 2014, Meehan 2019).

The Irish State remains committed that all children, in accordance with their abilities should have "formative experiences in moral, religious and spiritual education" (Government of Ireland, 1992, 50), while maintaining due regard for the rights of the student and their parents to freedom of religion. This holistic approach to education allows for the inclusion of Religious Education as a legitimate activity of the State.

In 2019, the specification for Junior Cycle Religious Education (NCCA 2019) replaced the syllabus of 2000. Like its predecessor, this specification was formulated by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) for the Minister for Education and Skills. It is non-denominational (i.e. non-confessional), intended for all students, whatever their religious faith or worldview. Religious Education in this regard is intended to ensure that students are exposed to a broad range of religious traditions and to the non-religious interpretation of life. It does not "provide religious instruction in any particular religious or faith tradition" (DES, 2018b, 2). As a state-certified subject, it follows the outline and approach of the *Framework for Junior Cycle* (DES, 2015).

The *Framework for Junior Cycle* (*2015)* and Religious Education

The Irish National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) has taken an integrated approach towards the new Junior Cycle. Traditionally, learning was centred on a series of independent subjects with their own aims and course objectives. The Framework is based on a set of 8 principles, 24 statements of learning (SOLs) and 8 key skills, describing what all Junior Cycle students should learn (NCCA, 2015). Whatever Junior Cycle curriculum a school provides must honour the 8 principles, meet all 24 statements of learning, and cultivate the 8 key skills in a way that honours its characteristic spirit and meets the learning needs and interests of its students (DES, 2016). This implies lots of flexibility for individual schools.

For many, Religious Education has a significant role to play in the provision of a Junior Cycle programme. The Religion Teachers' Association of Ireland (RTAI, 2018) contends that **"**it is hard to see how some of the twenty-four statements of learning identified in the Framework for Junior Cycle, can be achieved without appropriate time being given to Religious Education", for instance

- The student has an awareness of personal values and an understanding of the process of moral decision making (SOL 5)
- The student takes action to safeguard and promote her/his well-being and that of others (SOL 11) (NCCA, 2017a, 22; NCCA, 2019, 8).

Religious Education as a Source of Well-being in Junior Cycle

The rationale for RE articulated by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) of Ireland (NCCA, 2019) resonates both with the theological notion of human flourishing and the philosophical questions at the heart of the Age of Learning, Well-being and Identity. It sees Religious Education as integral to any programme that promotes the holistic development of the person because it facilitates the intellectual, social, emotional,

spiritual and moral development of students. The Religion Teachers' Association of Ireland (RTAI) concurs, employing the expertise and experience of its members to set out its view and vision of Junior Cycle Religious Education (RTAI, 2018). Taken together, the NCCA and RTAI articulate three ways in which RE can contribute to the promise of well-being as a principle and curricular area in the new Junior Cycle.

1) Critical engagement with deep questions

Religious Education allows students to engage with deep questions relating to meaning and purpose, life and relationships (Meehan, 2018). "It helps students to reflect, question, interpret, encounter, imagine and find insight for their lives. The students' own experience and continuing search for meaning is encouraged and supported" (NCCA, 2019, 4). Teachers report that Religious Education provides students with time and space for spiritual reflection, religious development and consideration of the religious interpretation as a legitimate way of reading and responding to the world (RTAI, 2018).

The *Background Paper and Brief for the Review of Junior Cycle Religious Education* (NCCA, 2017b) describes how Religious Education provides "a space like no other" for pupils to discuss questions of depth and meaning and to come to know themselves and each other.

> RE offers a space like no other: for encounter, explanation, and empathy; for expression, interpretation, and imagination; for interrogation, questioning, and reflection. . . It gives an opportunity for students to experience and to bring into dialogue with one another both insider and outsider perspectives with regard to religious issues. It prompts pupils to think about similarities and differences between people and, in so doing, to reflect upon their own uniqueness and forms of belonging (Sullivan, 2017, 7).

Here is exactly the kind of space needed for the questions thrown up by the Age of Learning, Well-being and Identity - deeply profound questions which "cut to the very core of who we are" (CODE, 2018, 5).

2) Encounter with a variety of belief systems and moral codes

Religious Education provides opportunities for students to encounter and engage with a variety of religious beliefs and other interpretations of life. It encourages respect and understanding of different beliefs, perspectives and ways of living, including the non-religious response to human experience. Further, in Religious Education, students are encouraged to engage critically with a variety of moral codes as part of religious traditions, and principles of moral behaviour, to help them reach a thoughtful ethical stance that will serve as a foundation for decisions in their lives (NCCA, 2019). The RTAI (2018) describes how Religious Education has developed in such a way that it can be open to all participants, contributing to their spiritual and moral development, whatever their belief system.

Personal reflection, ecumenical engagement, interreligious and intercultural dialogue, and ecological education are all dimensions of RE. In this way, RE promotes social cohesion, affording students the opportunity to engage with traditions and worldviews apart from their own, allowing them to develop the skills and attitudes they need to engage positively, respectfully and constructively in a pluralist society (NCCA, 2019).

3) The relationship between religion, history and society

Across cultures and traditions, religion and history have always been intertwined. Religious Education develops students' historical consciousness and gives them a framework for understanding the past and present within their contexts. It helps them to understand religions as dynamic, internally diverse and evolving over time. Religious Education offers students an opportunity to develop an understanding of how different religions have contributed to the society in which they live. Finally, Religious Education as part of the Irish state curriculum is grounded in values of freedom, dignity, inclusion, justice and equality. As such it can contribute to building a more socially interconnected society (NCCA, 2017b).

What Type of Religious Education?

While substantial Religious Education well-taught can support well-being, RE is not a panacea to ill-being associated with religiosity. In fact, Religious Education, poorly taught, can exacerbate the matter (Ipgrave, 2012). For instance, Moulin (2016) reports that the combined impact of both peers' and Religious Education teachers' questioning of the rationality of belief in God could be overwhelming for some young practising Christians, with students feeling torn between their God and their peers (231).

The longitudinal studies referred to earlier of Spencer et al (2017) and Chen and VanerWeele (2018) found that participation (both social and personal) were the most strongly correlated with student well-being. This suggests that RE can best support spiritual development and contribute positively to the holistic education of students when participative learning experiences are amalgamated with academic study. For instance, RE can provide opportunities for students to participate in various forms of prayer such as meditation, mindfulness, liturgical music/singing and keeping a spiritual diary, and to experience different types of religious service. However, this approach is not always possible or even desirable. In Ireland as elsewhere, different schools have different ethos, and the wishes of parents are always paramount. The parent as primary educator is enshrined both in the Irish Constitution and in Canon Law (the law of the majority church ie the Roman Catholic Church).

The new Junior Cycle RE specification reflects RE as a nationally certified examination subject. It represents the effort to facilitate people of a variety of religious faiths and those who embrace a non-religious interpretation of life. It does not comment on what is appropriate or necessary for formation within a particular faith community or worldview. As such, it is very cautious about the experiential dimension of RE, reflecting the tension

between RE as an academic subject and the importance of participation for student well-being.

Conclusion

With the emerging emphasis on student well-being internationally, it is timely to explore all its potential reserves. Religion is an important proven resource for the well-being of both adults and students. Religious Education as the critical encounter between religion and education can make religion as a source of well-being available to students and school communities. One does not have to identify or belong to any faith tradition in order to engage with religion or explore its connections with for example spiritual and moral development, history and society, and the search for meaning and purpose that is part of the human condition. Well taught Religious Education, with sound content and pedagogy that accurately and respectfully represents religious traditions, puts religion at the service of spiritual development, academic learning and holistic identity. It can be an integral part of well-being programmes for students.

Disclosure statement

No personal financial interest or benefit is associated with this research.

Funding details

No external funding received.

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