

Syllabus

Schooling is distinguished from other forms of education by having a *planned* curriculum as distinct from whatever learning may come from the occasions and experiences that life happens to bring. Planning implies purpose and a degree of organisation with respect to what one does and how one does it. In addition, education is a *reflective* activity that not only requires clarity of purpose but also is committed to testing the fitness for purpose of what is done.

In general, a syllabus is a compendium of headings or an outline of the topics and subject matter under consideration. This is a rather narrow view. Literally the word means, 'taken together'. The syllabus should provide an overview of what is to be done. The 'doing' is often more than that to which one refers in a list of topics. A music teacher might set the study of a Mozart piano sonata as a topic but her purpose may not be solely to acquaint the pupil with Mozart. Her agenda may be to teach the pupil to develop his ability to read music scores, to improve his playing ability, to widen his musical interests, to deepen the musicality of his playing. All of which might be achieved even if the pupil forgot who Mozart was. Perhaps in learning to play Mozart's music well but had forgotten who it was who wrote the music the pupil knows Mozart better than if he had merely learned a list of all of Mozart's musical compositions. Educationalists sometimes speak of the 'hidden curriculum' as that which is communicated *indirectly* in what is done. Thus one could have as a topic for study in RE a particular surah of the Qur'an, but the way in which one handles the Qur'an or the tone of voice with which one speaks of the chapter may communicate more [e.g. respect or lack of respect] to pupils than the words or the subject matter itself. The concept of 'hidden curriculum' is not meant to be understood as something devious – though it might be that – but simply to acknowledge the multi-dimensional nature of teaching and learning. Any overview of teaching and learning should give a fuller picture of the activity or intended activity than a list of topics can provide.

Apart from the subject matter, the communication between teacher and pupil will turn on the teacher's purpose(s), the pupil's expectation(s), the social context, the wider learning environment, the linguistic and other media, teaching resources, methodology and style, innate capacities, previous experiences, to name but some. In

this context the syllabus in giving an overview will need to indicate the main features without being exhaustive. Much will have to be left to the professional judgment of teachers who will have a more detailed knowledge of the background and capacities of pupils, of the whole school learning environment but at the same time there will need to be sufficient direction in the syllabus to be of real support in the classroom.

One of the great problems in this regard is a lack of specificity. To say to teachers that one of the objectives of the syllabus is 'the exploration of human experience' is in my view not very helpful. What does it leave out? It ignores the animal world but that is all; it fails to differentiate and one is left to guess at the intentions of the ASC in suggesting it. It is only when more detail is given that one begins to appreciate their meaning. On the other hand, too much specificity stifles creativity and spontaneity, undermining education as a living encounter between teacher and pupil. The transmission of culture is not for the purpose of repetition but for enabling pupils to go on with it and to contribute to it as a living, developing reality.

What constitutes a syllabus is therefore a matter of judgment. Where much of what surrounds teaching is fixed or where it can be taken for granted, it might suffice to provide a list of topics. It is reputed that the French model prescribes in detail what teachers are to teach and when to do it. One could be bolder and introduce choice as the '75 Bham RE Syllabus does, to give teachers flexibility. However, in a world that is much more diverse, where there is less agreement on what children should know or be able to do, or where there are developments in the understanding of how children learn, or in the means of communication, we need to give a better view of the whole communicative act that is education.

The planned curriculum presupposes purpose. Purpose may be expressed *temporally*, overarching, long term, mediate, and immediate. There is an implicit *hierarchy* where the immediate is subordinate to the mediate and so on. Purpose may also be expressed relative to the *range* of activity. It may relate to the whole enterprise of education, to a field, a subject, a topic, a lesson. If we want to be clear about teaching and learning we have to be clear about purpose at all levels. This may be easier in some disciplines than others. Religious Education generates some specific difficulties at this point. In dealing with religious life it is not merely a matter of fitting in with the overarching

aims of education since through its conceptions of human beings it seeks to define the purpose and nature of education itself, possibly challenging the prevailing philosophy of liberal education with its focus on the autonomous self.

If there is a problem with hierarchy of purpose there is a similar problem with regard to range of interest. There may be distinctive interests in religious life, e.g. in what is eternal or holy, that would define the field to be studied but for many, religious faith should somehow permeate the whole of life and therefore faith claims a part in all subjects. Further complexity is introduced when the goal of education is more than the transmission of information from a field of study but includes what children can do, i.e. to skills, and because some skills are transferable or not dependent on a particular field one needs to be aware of the interdependence of RE with other subjects. One might learn to play the piano by playing pieces from Chopin as well as from Mozart. One can learn about music by playing different instruments. These various considerations of hierarchy, range, complex concepts of education make the definition of aims of RE difficult. However, a statement of aims cannot be avoided.

Children and their development, their capacity for learning, what we know of how children learn also helps to define the nature and possibilities of communication. Children are not of a piece. They differ by reason of age, aptitude, faith background, cultural experience before they come to school, these and more, and all make their demands on the educator. The syllabus must therefore include some acknowledgment of differentiation and progression.

What the RE syllabus should or should not contain must be decided by the Agreed Syllabus Conference itself within the legal framework. The purpose of this paper is that a syllabus in our society at this point cannot be just a list of topics or an indication of what information children should have mastered by the end of their schooling.

Marius Felderhof
Drafting Secretary