

Religion and Education

01. The Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to present information on the place of religion in education in Northern Ireland and, specifically, the influence of the major Christian denominations on schools' ethos, governance and curriculum delivery. The report draws on a review of literature (including legislation and policy) and academic research – including recent research conducted by Ulster University into the experiences of teachers who have crossed the community divide in education.

02. Background

2.1 Churches and the Governance of Schools

In 1831 the Stanley Letter set out a vision of a system of non-denominational education for all children in Ireland. Pupils would be taught non-spiritual subjects in a network of National Schools which were to be managed jointly by Catholics and Protestants; religious instruction was to take place outside school hours. Church authorities across the board effectively resisted the aspirations both for secular education and the ecumenical management arrangements for schools. Consequently, at the time of partition some 90 years later, the system of education inherited by the Northern Ireland government was almost completely denominationally separated. The Lynn Committee (a commission set-up in 1921) invited church representatives to take part in the process of designing an education system for Northern Ireland. Catholic authorities were, however, suspicious of the motives of the new government and boycotted the proceedings.

The legislation that emerged (the 1923 Education Act) proposed that the existing array of predominantly church-managed schools would be replaced with a single, unified, non-denominational system. The 1923 Act also banned religious instruction during school hours and prohibited school authorities from taking religion into account in the appointing of teachers. Any school that chose to remain outside this new system would still receive state funding according to a sliding scale – the less control the government had over the school the lower the level of funding that would be made available to it.

The legislation was unpopular with churches on both sides of the divide. They were dismayed by the Act's secularism and were troubled by the idea of non-denominational institutions. The Catholic church authorities saw the new education system as a direct attack on the schools that they managed. They considered the funding system to be discriminatory and insisted that a Catholic ethos could only be guaranteed if they were able to keep complete control of their schools. Their schools remained outside the state system but were, nevertheless, maintained from the public purse.

Many grammar schools were also keen to retain a level of autonomy by remaining outside the state system. These voluntary grammar schools included those that had been established by Catholic orders, those schools set up by specific Protestant denominations (such as Friends School Lisburn and Methodist College Belfast), the Royal schools of Portora, Dungannon and Armagh (that were closely associated with Anglicanism) and a number of grammars that had no specific denominational affiliation.

In 1925, certain aspects of the Act were radically amended; all schools in receipt of government funding would henceforth be required to provide “simple Bible instruction”. During the 30s, 40s and 50s, the Church of Ireland, Presbyterian and Methodist authorities relinquished their control of almost all of their schools, transferring school buildings, pupils and staff to the control of the NI state.¹ As compensation these three denominations were assured representation on the Boards of Governors of state Controlled schools and granted permission to use faith as a consideration in the appointment of teachers. The ‘transferors’ were also accorded statutory rights of representation on the administration of education through county boards, the Education and Library Boards which replaced them in the 1970s and, since 2014, the Education Authority.

2.2 Religion and Religious Education in NI Schools

Under the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986, Section 21 all grant-aided schools in NI (Controlled, Maintained and Voluntary) are required to provide a daily act of collective worship. They are also required to include religious education (RE) “based upon the Holy Scriptures” within the range of subjects that they provide for all pupils from Foundation to Key Stage 4. The legislation also stipulates that ministers of religion (and other suitable persons) must be granted “reasonable access” to pupils in order to provide religious education or to inspect or examine the RE provided by the school. In addition, Boards of Governors (BoG) are entitled to make RE a compulsory GCSE subject.²

Article 9 of the European Convention of Human Rights confers a right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. Accordingly, Section 22 of the 1986 Education Order, allows teachers working in Controlled schools to request an exemption from attendance at collective worship or from teaching RE on the grounds of conscience³ (although there is little evidence that this option has been widely used). These teachers have legal protection that they should be neither paid at a lesser rate nor should they be disadvantaged with regards to promotion.⁴ There is no equivalent protection for staff in other types of school.

Since the early 1990s the RE syllabus to be followed by all grant aided schools has been drawn up by a consortium of nominees representing the Catholic church and the three transferor Protestant denominations. This collaboration was hailed, at the time of its introduction, as a significant ecumenical achievement. The responsibility for developing the content of this common syllabus has therefore been delegated to clerics rather than educationalists – accordingly, responsibility for the inspection of RE has also been assigned to clergy. Section 23 of the 1986 Order states that the Department is not to inspect religious instruction unless specifically called upon to do so by a school’s BoG. Out of respect to teachers’ professionalism, however, few clergy actually undertake inspection.⁵ As a consequence, there is no consistent quality-control mechanism for the teaching of RE.

Parents are entitled to request that their children are withdrawn from RE classes and/or collective worship. When such a request is received, schools must provide the pupil with appropriate, alternative work. Schools may not always be transparent about the existence of this option.⁶ Additionally, when pupils are withdrawn from RE, there may be issues with the quality of the alternative work offered.⁷ In 2016 UNCRC recommended that the legislation relating to compulsory attendance at collective worship in publicly funded schools in NI should be repealed and that children should be enabled to exercise the right to withdraw from religion at school independently.⁸

In addition to their statutory duties in respect of religion, many Controlled and non-denominational schools support extra-curricular activities delivered under the auspices of the Scripture Union (SU). SU is an international voluntary organisation that is “committed to teaching basic Christian truths as an essential part of evangelism”.⁹ SU groups (which can only be established with the approval of the school principal) meet at lunchtime or after school in order “to help pupils explore the Bible and live out the Christian faith”. There are SU groups in over one third of Controlled primary schools, over half of Controlled post primaries and 90% of non-denominational voluntary grammars. The organisation is also present in a small number of special schools and integrated schools. No SU groups were identified in the Maintained sector, in any Catholic voluntary grammar or in any Irish medium school.

¹ Although almost all schools under ‘Protestant’ management transferred to Controlled status, three Church of Ireland primary schools have opted to remain outside the new system to this day.

² The Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 1989

³ The request should be made to the Board of Governors and must be solely on the grounds of conscience.

⁴ The Education and Libraries (NI) Order 1986 - Article 22.

⁵ Richardson, N. (2014) *Sharing Religious Education* RE Today Services, Birmingham

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Mawhinney et al (2010) Opting out of religious education QUB <https://www.qub.ac.uk/research-centres/CentreforChildrensRights/filestore/Fileupload,485911,en.pdf>

⁸ UNCRC (2016) Concluding observations on the 5th periodic report of the United Kingdom of GB and NI <http://www.crae.org.uk/publications-resources/un-crc-committees-concluding-observations-2016/>

⁹ Scripture Union NI Website (accessed 14th August 2019) <https://suni.co.uk>

03. Discussion

3.1 The Religious Character of NI Schools

All schools in Northern Ireland are 'faith informed', although the prominence of religion within the various sectors differs. Controlled schools are non-denominational rather than secular (which is exemplified in the French system of state education where all conspicuous religious symbols are banned). While it has been suggested that, for Controlled schools, "the balance is tilted firmly in favour of the secular over the religious",¹⁰ the Controlled Schools Support Council is clear that controlled schools are "church related" and that they work within the ethos of "Christian values and principles". Maintained schools have been described as "faith-based and unapologetically confessional"¹¹ (i.e. they are seen as principally aiming to produce religious commitment to Catholicism) and, in spite of having been largely established in the absence of any official church representation, integrated schools are "essentially Christian in character".¹²

Research undertaken at Ulster University gathered the experiences of thirty teachers who were teaching in a school outside their own tradition. These teachers provide a unique, outsider perspective on the place of religion in an unfamiliar sector.

Protestant cross-over teachers found that the way in which religion (and the ritual of prayer) was embedded into the daily life of Catholic schools was unfamiliar. Religion and routine were identified as going hand-in-hand; twin mechanisms through which discipline could be maintained and an effective teaching environment could be established:

I [was] very surprised that every lesson starts with a prayer... But then I learned actually very quickly (a few of the teachers told me) that it is a great way to get the discipline. So now we are sitting down and doing work. So, I started using the prayer then at the start of the lesson as a tool of being able to keep them under control.

Liturgy remains generally prominent in Catholic schools. However, some interviewees commented on a decline in the religiosity of the home and an increase of a more secular Catholicism. Parents appeared keen that their children should receive a traditional Catholic education yet showed less commitment when it came to regular attendance at mass:

There's a lot of them who would be not practising. Where mummies and daddies have sent them just through tradition... In fact, there's always a lot of dental appointments, eye appointments, doctors' appointments whenever there are school masses.

There was a suggestion that this decline may serve to reinforce the Catholic church authorities' commitment to ensuring that faith is fostered through formal education:

Now that family faith is less prevalent, the Catholic church recognises that the way to promote the faith... is to do it through the schools.

One Protestant teacher spoke about her own deep, Christian faith; she found the centrality of religion in Catholic schools compatible with her own intense spirituality:

The faith thing is different – but that impresses me... For me being a Christian I'm going, "Wow! Imagine state schools being able to do that!"

By way of contrast, another Protestant teacher who was working in a Catholic grammar had over-estimated the religious presence that he would encounter on entering the sector:

My expectations were maybe like in the movies, you know, swinging incense burners, the sound of nuns in the background... [I told] one of the teachers [and he] said, "Oh my God! We must be slipping!" {LAUGHTER}.

¹⁰ Armstrong, D. (2009) Religious education and the law in Northern Ireland's Controlled Schools *Irish Educational Studies*, 28:3, 297–313. <https://www.etini.gov.uk/sites/etini.gov.uk/files/publications/shared-education-signature-project-evaluation-report.pdf>

¹¹ *Ibid*

¹² Wardlow, M. (2013) *Essentially Christian in Character: Ethos in Integrated Schools* (PhD Dissertation) https://www.academia.edu/5854050/Essentially_Christian_in_character_Ethos_in_Integrated_Schools

One Catholic primary school teacher who held a secular outlook on education found the relative absence of religion in Controlled schools to be a virtue:

In the Controlled sector... I was only spending one half-hour lesson a week teaching a Bible story; we spoke about it first then did a worksheet and that was it done and dusted.

Whilst, for another Catholic teacher, the lack of familiar religious ritual in a non-Catholic school assembly was unusual and, to an extent, disconcerting:

Maybe you might have a morning prayer in assembly, and then nobody blesses themselves and I found that strange... Their worship was more diluted, and I didn't really like that.

Although Controlled schools and non-denominational grammars lack the dominant religious character that is provided by the exclusive presence of one perspective on faith they are nevertheless informed by religion. All schools are subject to the same requirements in respect of compulsory worship and RE provision. The 1986 Order ensures that 4 out of 9 members on Controlled primary schools' Boards of Governors are transferor representatives – there are currently approximately 1,900 nominees of the Church of Ireland, the Presbyterian Church and the Methodist Church serving as school governors in NI:

Each of the main churches that were represented in the [Controlled primary] school had a minister on the Board of Governors... Ministers came in and took assemblies in rotation so that they would all be represented.

Integrated schools have their own perspective on religion. The teaching of religion in an integrated setting arguably necessitates more careful consideration of the differences between faiths than might be expected in a school with a specific denominational ethos or where the bulk of the pupils can be assumed to share a common religious identity:

Teaching RE in a Protestant school or a Catholic school... is just looking at 'you' whereas we [in an integrated school] are dealing with 'everybody'.

3.2 A Christian Syllabus

The RE syllabus was amended in 2007 in line with the introduction of the Revised Curriculum that was to be followed by all grant-aided schools in NI. The study of “any two world religions” was introduced at Key Stage 3 (age 11-14) in order that pupils might “develop knowledge of and sensitivity towards... other religions”. Elsewhere in the Key Stage 3 RE syllabus, it is stated that, “Pupils should develop an awareness, knowledge, understanding and appreciation of the key Christian teachings... and develop an ability to interpret and relate the Bible to life”. In marked contrast to the multi-faith, non-confessional approach that has been adopted in England, Scotland and Wales, the direct connection between RE and the Christian faith remains evident in NI.

In 2016, Rule 68 which prioritised the teaching of RE in primary schools in the Republic of Ireland (RoI) was rescinded by the Minister for Education, Jan O'Sullivan, in order to pave the way for a curriculum that would “give every child a shared knowledge of the religions and beliefs held by people in Ireland and across the world... [and] an ethical understanding of relationships between people, and how we connect to our world.”¹³ Over 90% of primary schools in RoI have a Catholic ethos and there has been resistance to recent legislation heralding a further relaxation of the religious influence on education by prohibiting schools to use religious faith in their enrolment policies.¹⁴

Prominent educationalists argue that the most effective way to teach RE is to acknowledge the beliefs which pupils bring to class as a starting point for developing religious understanding and of encouraging meaningful inter-cultural and inter-religious dialogue.¹⁵ Notably, the exploration of differences in theology and religious ritual between Catholic and Protestant faiths is only introduced into the NI RE syllabus at Key Stage 4. The syllabus, as currently constructed, enshrines separated educational practice rather than encouraging greater sharing – research has shown that this separation may be compounded by the inclination of many teachers to avoid discussion of contentious issues, choosing instead to deal with difference by minimising it or avoiding interactions that would draw attention to it.¹⁶

¹³ Aine McMahon, 28th Jan 2016, The Irish Times <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/education/rule-prioritising-religion-classes-in-primary-schools-abolished-1.2514202>

¹⁴ Marie O'Halloran, 1st August 2019, The Irish Times <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/education/catholic-schools-can-still-ask-questions-on-religion-despite-new-law-1.3974648>

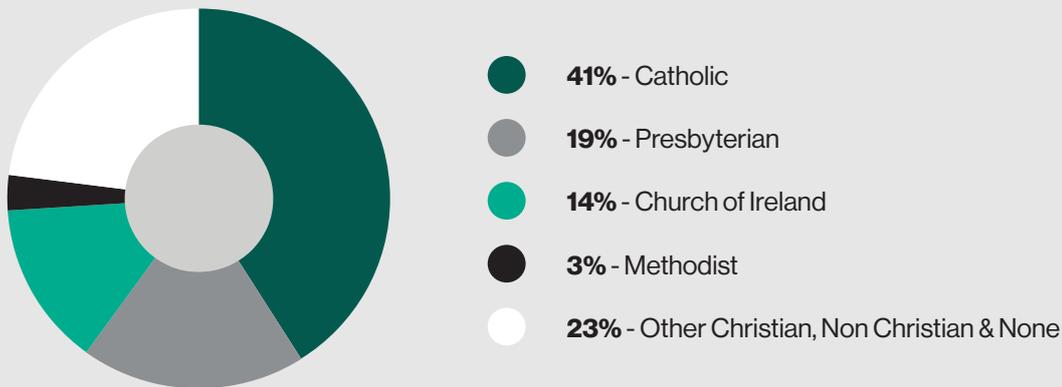
¹⁵ Richardson, N. (2014) *Sharing Religious Education* RE Today Services, Birmingham

¹⁶ Loader, R. & Hughes, J. (2017) Joining together or pushing apart? Building relations and exploring difference through shared education in Northern Ireland. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 47:1, 117-134.

3.3 Christianity and Changing Demographics

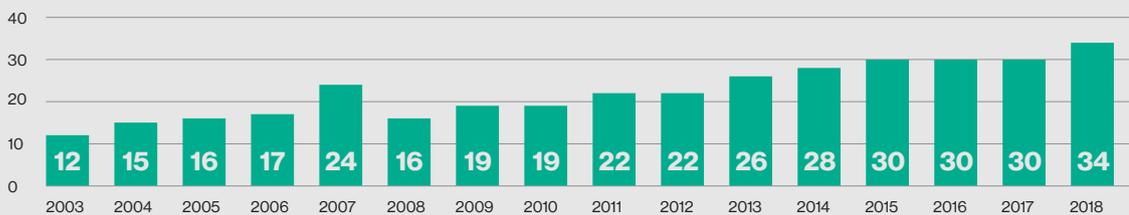
In 2011 the NI census recorded that 41% of the population were Catholic, 19% Presbyterian, 14% Church of Ireland and 4% Methodist. Nearly a quarter of the NI population (23.5%) were not connected to any of the four Christian churches that draw up the compulsory RE syllabus.

Religion in Northern Ireland (Census 2011)



There is also evidence that church attendance and affiliation have declined significantly in both communities over recent years.¹⁷ The annual Young Life and Times survey (of a statistically representative sample of 16 year olds in NI) has reported a steady year-on-year increase in the numbers of young people identifying as having no religion – in 2018 this figure exceeded one third of those surveyed.

Q. Do you regard yourself as belonging to any religion? A. No religion (YLT, 2003-2015)



Notes

¹⁷ McCartney, M. & Glass, D.H. (2015) A three-state dynamical model for religious affiliation, *Physica A*, 419, 145-152.

Northern Ireland also has a small and growing population who profess a non-Christian faith. The 2011 census recorded that Islam was the largest of these with 3,832 followers, double the number recorded in 2001. Recent estimates suggest that this number has increased to something between 5,000¹⁸ and 10,000¹⁹ - this larger figure includes transient residents (e.g. university students). Although, even at this higher estimate, Muslims make up less than 0.6% of NI population, this community is not evenly distributed throughout NI but are disproportionately located in south Belfast where the Islamic centre is located.²⁰ This centre provides a place to worship, a community hub and classes in Arabic and Islam.

There are currently 27 state funded Muslim schools in England, one is in the pipeline in Glasgow and there are two in Dublin. Christianity pervades Northern Irish education and schools have been shown to have difficulty in accommodating those of other faiths and none who choose not to participate in RE and collective worship in school. In the light of the prerogative of parental choice that underpins other educational policies (e.g. Shared Education) it is reasonable to consider that the Islamic community here may soon wish to establish their own school. In order to gain state funding such a school would be required to include an act of daily worship and to teach RE in line with the curriculum, following the current syllabus with its inherent Christian bias.

¹⁸ BBC (2016) <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-36301548>

¹⁹ Belfast Islamic Centre Website (accessed 14th August 2019) <http://belfastislamiccentre.org.uk/index.php/history/>

²⁰ *The Economist* 14th June 2014 (accessed 14th August 2019) <https://www.economist.com/britain/2014/06/14/on-the-other-foot>

04. Summary & Considerations

NI schools may not be wholly defined by their relationship with the four major Christian denominations, but their enduring influence is woven throughout the fabric of the education system. The influence of a Christian-centric perspective pervades not only the daily routine (act of worship) and timetable (the content of the RE syllabus) but also the operational day-to-day and strategic management of schools and, to some extent, the entire education system. Places are reserved for clergy (or their nominees) on Boards of Governors, and church representatives sit on the boards of Education Authority, Controlled Schools Support Council and the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools. The demographic and societal changes documented above raise a fundamental question:

• Is the current relationship between education and the churches still appropriate?

Notwithstanding the considerable progress made since 1998, Northern Ireland remains deeply divided. This division is arguably most enduring in the structure of an education system where 93% of pupils attend schools that are to some extent defined by the Catholic/Protestant schism. The current syllabus leaves engagement with the theological components of the division until Key Stage 4 (and it is optional) and provides no guidance on the place of RE within Shared Education programmes and initiatives. This raises a further question:

• What kind of religious education is appropriate for post-conflict Northern Ireland?

Is religious education about promulgating a particular faith or version of Christianity or is its purpose to engage pupils in a metaphysical exploration of their understanding of right and wrong in a complex world? Is it about instruction into a particular pattern of religiosity or about developing a general morality?

• What should the purpose of RE in schools be?

The demographic profile of NI has changed and continues to change – but educational provision has been slow to respond. Whilst multi-faith approaches have been adopted in GB and the Republic of Ireland, the pre-eminence of Christian teaching in NI schools has been retained at a level where it may be reasonable to ask whether the NI RE syllabus is about ‘education’ or ‘Bible instruction’. It is not inconceivable that minority religious groups may wish to form their own schools at some stage over the next few years.

• If there is to be compulsory RE who should determine the content of the RE syllabus?

For many pupils RE is an examination subject but, unlike any other subject, there is no formal, statutory mechanism for ensuring quality teaching and learning in RE. Candidates deserve to have the quality of their education provision inspected. Under the current system candidates may be prepared very poorly or be subject to inadequate or partial teaching with impunity: there are no mechanisms to prevent teachers from delivering material which is biased or divisive.

• How should RE be inspected?

If education in NI is to be transformed to fit the needs of a diverse society and support the embedding of peace, the centrality of the churches in education needs to be reviewed. In an increasingly unreligious and multi-faith society is it still appropriate, 100 years after transfer, for the transferor churches and the Catholic Church to wield the influence that they do?

Notes



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