



Centre for Research in Education Inclusion and Diversity

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# RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN A MULTICULTURAL SOCIETY: Scotland National Report

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## Introduction

The Religious Education in a Multicultural Society (REMC) project aimed to investigate the way in which religion and belief are understood by different institutions and actors in particular contexts. The study formed part of a larger EU 7th framework funded project which included five European countries (Scotland, Ireland, Flanders, Germany and Malta). The study was small scale and qualitative, exploring children's, parents' and teachers' views of RME in five case study schools in two Central Belt local authorities. The study included a literature review and a brief overview of religious education in Scottish schools as well as an analysis of statistics on religious affiliation in the population. Interviews were also carried out with key informants selected to reflect a range of influential positions in relation to religious and moral education in Scotland.

## Summary of findings

- In non-denominational schools religious and moral education (RME) teaching promoted inclusiveness and the study of world religion and was, to different degrees, based in Christianity. However, any links with external religious organisations was normally with the Church of Scotland and services at Christmas usually took place in the local Church of Scotland church.
- In denominational schools the curriculum conforms to guidelines provided by the Roman Catholic Church and religious observance took the form of worship. Preparation for rites of passage such as confirmation was part of the school curriculum and children of other or no faith normally participated in these preparations.
- Parents were broadly content with the school's approach to religious education, although in each school a minority wanted some degree of change, although the suggestions made were often incompatible with each other (see below).
- Parents of pupils of minority ethno-religious backgrounds welcomed teaching of world religion, although their identity was strongly rooted in their own religion. According to headteachers, parents from minority ethnic groups were more likely to withdraw their children from sex education than religious and moral education.
- The social ethos in all schools was to promote a harmonious and inclusive environment. Non-denominational schools emphasised respect for others and tolerance with limited reference to religion, whereas in denominational schools this was underpinned by religion and a belief in God.
- The schools had, to different degrees, accommodated the needs of parents and children of minority backgrounds or no faith.
- In non-denominational schools, a small number of parents wanted more emphasis on the specificity of different religions. A minority view was also expressed that the school taught unacceptably permissive values, e.g. in relation to homosexuality. Other parents felt that there was too much emphasis on Christianity, and that all religions should be taught as social and cultural phenomena. An opposite minority view was that Christianity should be given a higher status and there should be less emphasis

on other world religions. As noted above, it is difficult to reconcile these competing views.

- In Catholic schools there was a tension between parents who felt that children should engage more critically with religious ideas and others who felt that religious education was not sufficiently strict.
- Parents described their own religious identity as shifting over the years and women appeared to be more religious than men. Children expected to choose for themselves whether to belong to a particular religion or not, but not until they were older.

## **Theoretical Context**

Categorical understandings of religion and belief view identity as stable and shaped by an individual's position within wider economic and social structures. Categorical labels are commonly used in Scottish society, for instance, by schools on admissions forms, by the Scottish Government in allocating a particular status to a school and by churches.

The Scottish Census in 2001 invited individuals to self-identify with regard to religion of upbringing and current religion of belonging, thus implicitly recognising that an individual's religion may shift over time. Clearly, categorical data are useful but do not explain the subjective meaning of religious labels, which may signify a set of personal beliefs or a cultural allegiance.

This study adopted an interpretive approach, exploring the way in which identity, with regard to religion and belief, is constructed and negotiated with significant others over time, not least in relation to choice of school. When parents were asked to discuss their choice of school and their feelings about its approach to RME, many described their own journey in relation to religion and belief, with the strength of identification waxing and waning over the life course. All schools have to recognise that there is great diversity in parents' and children's identification with particular systems of religion and belief.

## **The Scottish Context**

In the 2001 Scottish Census, 42% of the Scottish population self-identified as members of the Church of Scotland, 16% as Roman Catholic, 7% as 'other Christian' and 1% as having other faiths. Twenty seven per cent said they had no religion. All of the Christian churches have experienced a decline in membership, particularly the Church of Scotland. The proportion of those with no religion has been growing rapidly, increasing by 50% between 1975 and 2000.

There are ongoing debates about the extent to which Scottish Catholics are systematically disadvantaged in Scotland. Most Scottish Catholics can trace their roots back to Irish immigration into Scotland in the nineteenth and early twentieth century and many were initially employed in lowskilled areas of the labour market. Quantitative sociologists suggest that over time the gap between Catholics and Protestants in Scotland in educational and employment outcomes has narrowed and on present trend is likely to disappear. However, some qualitative research has suggested that people may still believe that discrimination in employment persists, even if they do not have hard evidence to support this view.

The religious profile of Scottish schools (majority non-denominational, minority denominational, almost all of which are Roman Catholic) is attributable to the historical conditions under which independent religious schools entered the state system. Church of Scotland schools were transferred to local authority control under the terms of the Education (Scotland) Act 1872 and from this time became non-denominational, although the Church of Scotland retained a role in their management. Roman Catholic schools moved into local authority management as a result of the Education (Scotland) Act 1918 and retained their original terms of reference, in particular the right to provide denominational guidance and observation. As a result, all appointments in Catholic schools are approved by the Bishop, and there have been some challenges to employment practices under equalities legislation.

## Religion and Belief in Primary Schools

Under the terms of SOED circular 6/91, children must spend a minimum of 10% of their time in primary school on religious and moral education, from which they may be withdrawn by their parents. Both Roman Catholic and non-denominational schools observed the 5-14 guidelines, now being replaced by the Curriculum for Excellence. The 5-14 guidelines stated that the curriculum for religious education 'is firmly based on the experience of Christianity' (Learning and Teaching Scotland, 2000). In Catholic schools, the content of the syllabus is approved by the Roman Catholic bishops, and about 15% of class time is spent on religious education. Religious observance is a legal requirement. In non-denominational schools it is of broadly Christian character, a challenge for many head teachers with a diverse student body. Religious observance in denominational schools takes the form of worship.

## Methods

The study adopted a qualitative approach based on key informant interviews and case studies of denominational (Roman Catholic) and non-denominational primary schools and families within them. Additional data were gathered from secondary sources such as school policies, official statistics and information. The tables below summarise sources of data, characteristics of the schools and religious affiliation of the families.

### Table 1: Details of methods used

- Phase 1
  - Literature Review including the conceptual framework
  - Country Report providing contextual information about religion in Scottish society and teaching of religious and moral education in state primary schools
- Phase 2
  - Interviews with 11 key informants selected to reflect a range of influential positions in relation to religious and moral education in Scotland
- Phase 3
  - Semi-structured interviews with head teachers (5), class teachers responsible for religious education (4), parents (23) and children (20) in the 5 primary schools reflecting a range of religious faiths including no faith
  - Observations of R(M)E classes (2) and one school assembly

**Table 2: Characteristics of schools and catchment/ward area**

School <sup>1</sup>	Pupil no.s	% FSME <sup>2</sup>	Religious composition of ward – current religion <sup>3</sup>	Key elements of school ethos <sup>4</sup>	Relationship with church
<b>Greenhill</b> (ND) 6 <sup>th</sup> decile <sup>5</sup>	170 (incl nursery); large immigrant population	Nearly 30%	No faith 42%; Church of Scotland 21%; Catholic 13%; Other Christian 10%; Other religions 5%; Muslim 3%	Inclusion and multiculturalism, dedicated places for children with additional support needs	Church of Scotland mainly. Visits to other places of worship
<b>North Winterton</b> (ND) 1 <sup>st</sup> decile	650 (incl nursery)	Less than 1%	Church of Scotland 38%; No faith 36%; Other Christians 11%; Catholic 9%; Other religions 1%	Inclusion. Key values: fairness, equality, respect, enjoyment and achievement	Church of Scotland only. Visits to other religious places of worship
<b>St Helen’s</b> (D) 7 <sup>th</sup> decile	200 (incl nursery)	12%	Church of Scotland 40%; No faith 32%; Catholic 13%; Other Christians 7%; Other religions 4%	Promoted the Catholic faith. Emphasis on care and respect	Close relationship with local Roman Catholic church
<b>Meadowview</b> (ND) 4 <sup>th</sup> decile	320 (plus 60 in nursery); 10% immigrants		Church of Scotland 35%; Catholic 27%; No faith 25%; Other Christian faith 5%; Other faiths 3%	Inclusion, care and respect	Protestant clergy. Visits to other religious places of worship
<b>St Patricks</b> (D) 7 <sup>th</sup> decile	266	16%	Catholic 80%; No faith 8%; Church of Scotland 6%; Other Christian 1%; Other religions 1%	Respect for others and respect for others’ faiths; discipline based on Catholic faith values	Very close relationship with local Roman Catholic church 1 ND

**Table 3: Religious affiliation of case study parents by school**

	Greenhill (ND)	North Winterton (ND)	St Helen’s (D) <sup>6</sup>	Meadowview <sup>7</sup> (ND)	St Patrick’s (D)	Total
<b>Religion of parent</b>						
Church of Scotland		2		1		3
Roman Catholic	1		4		2	7
Episcopalian		1	2			3
Other Christian				1		1
Muslim/Jewish/Other		1 (Jewish)		2 (Muslim)		2
None	3	2	1	1		7
Total	4	6	7	5	2	24

## Reasons for School Choice

Most parents had chosen to send their children to the neighbourhood primary school, on the grounds that they wanted their children to be strongly rooted in the local community. However, religion was one of a number of factors influencing parents’ choice of school, and was particularly salient for those who had opted into a faith school. It was evident that children had been only

<sup>1</sup> ND = Non-denominational; D = denominational

<sup>2</sup> %FSME = free school meal estimate, national average 16%

<sup>3</sup> Percentages do not add up as non responses are not included; these amounted to around 5% in each ward

<sup>4</sup> School ethos based on school staff’s description of ethos

<sup>5</sup> Deprivation decile 1 = least deprived and 2 = most deprived

<sup>6</sup> ND = Non-denominational; D = Denominational

<sup>7</sup> Three interviews were with both parents; two in St Helen’s and one in Meadowview

minimally involved in choice of primary school, but were likely to be more closely involved in secondary school choice.

## **The Social Construction of Personal Identity**

Parents were asked about the importance and nature of their religious identity and many described how this had shifted over the years. Very few husbands and wives had similar outlooks in relation to religion. On the whole the women appeared to be more devout, although one Catholic mother stated that having children had made her husband become more devout. These findings echo Scottish Census data and reveal strong association between gender and religion of belonging.

A small number of parents, in particular one Jewish and one Episcopalian parent, described the centrality of religion in their social and cultural life. By way of contrast, several parents who sent their children to Catholic schools said that religion was not a central part of their life, and they hoped that the school would take a major role in transmitting religious values and culture to their children. For the Muslim parents, one of whom was an academic, integrating into Scottish society was more important than making links with other Muslims. For some parents, unhappy childhood experiences were seen as contributing to the decision to reject religion and, in some cases, to seek alternative belief systems such as humanism.

In all schools it was evident that what happened within the home was instrumental in transmitting beliefs to children. Some families routinely discussed a whole range of topics, including religion. Children at times challenged parent' beliefs, values and actions and it was rare for parents to be authoritarian in insisting on certain types of religious observance. Religious beliefs were often transmitted informally through family practices or choice of after school activities.

Children appeared to have a firm understanding of religious identity, and, like their parents, this was extremely varied. Children's religious identity often reflected that of their parents. However, discussions with children indicated that they were well aware of having to make decisions about religion. In the two Catholic schools there was a strong sense of cultural heritage associated with religion and some children expressed a fear that abandoning a parent's religion would lead to isolation from the community. Teachers said that children were more likely to adopt a questioning approach as they got older and in the Catholic schools a discussion of secular beliefs systems was considered more appropriate in secondary school. Children whose parents were atheist or agnostic were more likely to reflect these beliefs.

## **School Ethos and Teaching of Religion**

Both denominational and non-denominational schools aimed to create a harmonious and inclusive environment in which all pupils and staff were valued. In Catholic schools, messages about morality were underpinned by religion. In non-denominational schools, discipline tended to be based on encouraging children to respect and empathise with others.

Inclusion and multiculturalism have been strongly emphasised in Scottish primary schools for at least fifteen years, and it was evident that most teachers made efforts to incorporate pluralist principles into their teaching approaches. Efforts were made to accommodate the cultural and religious requirements for minority groups, e.g. agree on a common colour of head scarf for Muslim girls or arrange a separate room for Muslims during Ramadan. Parents were broadly content with the approach to RE in Catholic and RME in non-denominational schools. In Catholic schools it was emphasised to parents at enrolment that the teaching of Religious Education would focus mainly on the Catholic faith. They were advised to enrol their children elsewhere if this might constitute a problem. In the non-denominational schools, parents of secular and minority religious beliefs were at times concerned when they felt that the school was promoting a particular religion. In both

Catholic and non-denominational schools, a small minority expressed resentment about the focus on world religions other than Christianity. Most parents, however, were very keen for their children to learn about different religions and belief systems, since they hoped this would promote a more tolerant and peaceful society.

## **Home-School Interaction and Potential Tensions**

Parents differed in their views of the congruence of home and school values. In non-denominational schools, parents who were secular or of a liberal Protestant religious disposition felt confident that the school would broadly reflect their position. In the Catholic schools, there were differences between parents who wished their children to engage critically with religious ideas, and others who felt that religious teaching in Catholic schools was no longer sufficiently strict and traditional.

## **Conclusion**

The study showed that case study parents occupied a wide range of positions in relation to religion and belief, with some identifying strongly with a particular religious tradition, whilst others were strongly secular. Children generally reflected their parents' views, especially those of the mother, but expected to be allowed to make choices in relation to religion and belief when they were older.

Although locality was the main reason for primary school choice, religion was a factor for a number of parents choosing a faith school. On the whole, they were satisfied with the way that religious and moral education was taught in the school, although there were also some criticisms, for example, in relation to the lack of differentiation between religions or an over-emphasis on Christianity. Teachers expressed some uncertainty about how to teach RME, given parents' and pupils' very diverse backgrounds and belief systems, particularly in non-denominational schools. Whereas a small number of parents and teachers appeared to favour a return to a view of the world in which the Church of Scotland was accorded privileged status, the majority appeared to be happy with the treatment of religions as social and cultural phenomena.

Funding of faith schools in Scotland is the result of historical compromises and it has been argued by some that it is likely to lead to an unwelcome fragmentation and a diversion of resources. Nonetheless, these two types of schools appear to co-exist harmoniously, and Catholic schools are increasingly adopting a multi-cultural approach as part of their core provision.

## **References**

- Scottish Office Education Department. (1991). Circular 6/91: *Provision of Religious Education and Religious Observance in Primary and Secondary Schools*. Edinburgh.
- LTScotland. (2000). *The structure and balance of the Curriculum 5-14 Guidelines*. Glasgow: LTScotland.

## Further information

Further information about the project is available from Professor Sheila Riddell, CREID, Moray House School of Education, University of Edinburgh, Holyrood Road, Edinburgh EH8 8AQ, [sheila.riddell@ed.ac.uk](mailto:sheila.riddell@ed.ac.uk). All publications and information about this project are available at <http://www.ed.ac.uk/education/rke/centres-groups/creid/projects/religious-education>

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