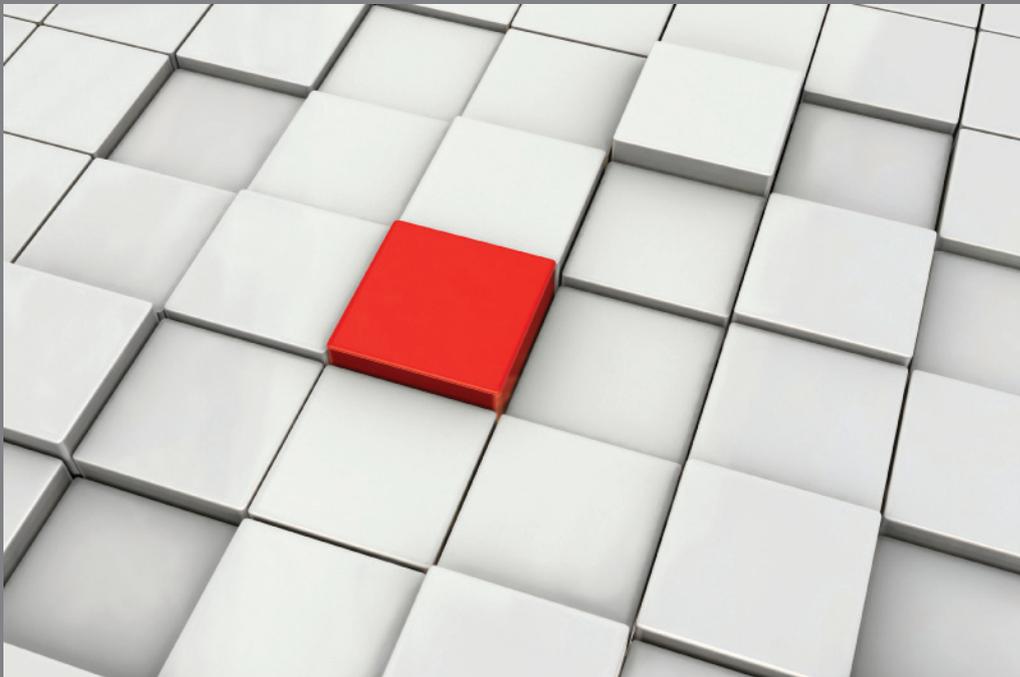


Opting Out of Religious Education: The Views of Young People from Minority Belief Backgrounds

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Arts & Humanities
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Executive Summary

Background

International human rights law permits the teaching of doctrinal (i.e. confessional) religious instruction in schools and holds that opt-out clauses are a sufficient means to protect and respect the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion of those who do not wish to participate in it. While conscience clauses in domestic law may predate this standard, current domestic law and policy is informed and legitimatised by this international human rights norm.

Aim and objectives

The research explored the issues surrounding the workings of the opt-out clause in schools. Its core aim was to examine the opt-out clause through the perspective of young people (13 -18 years) of minority belief and to assess its suitability as a mechanism to protect religious liberty in a diverse society. For the purposes of the research project the term 'minority belief' was understood to encompass adherents of minority religious communities as well as those whose beliefs could be described as secular, Humanist or personal.

The objectives of the project were as follows:

- To gather information regarding how far young people from minority belief backgrounds believe the opt-out respects and protects their right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion.
- To identify to what extent these young people believe that the process of opting out is a negative or positive experience which may impact on their sense of belonging to their school and religious community.
- To gather the views of parents and communities regarding the extent to which opt-out clauses protect religious identity and freedom in schools.
- To evaluate the adequacy of the current status of opt-outs and religious liberty in schools in order to identify key policy drivers which should inform international human rights standards and domestic policy in the area.
- To draw up evidence-based recommendations for policy and educational practice.

Research context

The research took place in Northern Ireland, a society with a high level of religious participation and traditionally low numbers of ethnic/religious minorities, although these have increased significantly in recent years.

The Northern Ireland school system is predominantly public, with very few private, independent schools. Except for independent schools, all categories of school receive state funding to various degrees. There are no faith schools serving religions other than Christianity.

Every state-funded school must include provision for religious education according to the Northern Ireland Core Syllabus for Religious Education (RE) and must hold a daily act of collective worship. The Core Syllabus is drawn up by the four largest Christian denominations in Northern Ireland – the Catholic Church in Ireland, the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, the Church of Ireland (Anglican) and the Methodist Church in Ireland. Domestic law permits parents to opt their children out of religious education and collective worship; there is no right for students of any age to take the decision to opt-out.

Methodology

The research design was based on a general fundamental principle of the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child,

namely that young people should be consulted on all matters which directly affect them. A qualitative research approach was selected to maximise the opportunity to develop an understanding of the complexity of this issue from the perspectives of those most likely to be affected by it.

Interviews were conducted with twenty-six young people (aged 13-18) who come from minority belief backgrounds. Given that the right to opt out of religious is a parental one, twenty-four minority belief parents with a child aged 13-18 were also interviewed. Representatives of religious and Humanist organisations were interviewed in order to elicit their views about the effectiveness of current opt-out legislation in respecting their members' right to freedom of religion or belief and their community's identity.

It should be noted that the research does not provide a representative analysis of minority belief communities' views on religious education and opt-outs, and that results cannot be generalised. However, the flexible approach to this qualitative research with regard to the sampling strategy and data collection enabled the in-depth exploration of key issues raised by young people from minority belief communities. Data triangulation based on the interviews with parents and community leaders corroborated the findings from the research with young people and provided validation of the findings.

Conclusions

1. Young people from minority belief backgrounds are not necessarily aware of opt-out rights in relation to religious education and, in particular, to other religious occasions in school.

2. The decision to opt out of RE was influenced by perceptions of RE lessons as being doctrinal in content, too narrowly focused on Christianity with little attention paid to other belief systems, strained relationships with RE teachers or peers, academic considerations and, in very few instances, the belief that RE in any form should not be taught in schools.

3. For those that knew of the opt-out provision and remained in RE lessons, the decision to do so was based on an individual's interest in learning about a range of religions, inclusive approaches taken by the school to Religious Education in terms of content and pedagogy, a fear of appearing different, positive relationships with the RE teacher and classmates and academic considerations.

4. In general students recognised and accepted the underlying rationale for the right to opt-out of religious education. However, the existence of this right – whether used or not – did not necessarily lead them to feel that their religion or beliefs were acknowledged and respected

in the school. While many felt supported by their peers and, at times, by their teachers, the lack of attention given to their beliefs in the RE curriculum caused them to feel that these beliefs were not valued or respected by the school, nor indeed more widely by the education system.

5. The lack of accessible and transparent policies and procedures dealing with opt-outs as well as the lack of consultation relating to alternative arrangements for opted-out students led to a sense amongst many minority belief students that their beliefs were not of interest or concern to their school. In order for pupils to feel respected and protected in their right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, young people expected schools to move beyond merely offering a poorly executed opt-out clause. However, some students felt that the opt-out clause had been effectively implemented in their school and as a result did not feel that their beliefs had been marginalised or ignored by the school management.

6. Pupils' experiences of opt-out provision varied widely between schools and within schools, depending on the teacher's approach and attitude. Pupils felt more content with opt-out provision if they had a sense of inclusion in the school community and experienced positive relationships with school staff, flexibility in alternative provision and the option of

continued inclusion in the RE class if requested. The research also suggested that pupils' satisfaction with opt-out provision was based on their age, self-esteem and confidence in their own beliefs as well as the presence of other pupils opting out of religious education in the class or school. Pupils' perception of academic advancement through alternative educational provision was important to promote a sense of purpose to opt-out experiences.

7. The present findings did not reveal any conflict between young people and parents in relation to opt-out decisions. In fact, opt-out decisions appeared often to have been left to the young people or were discussed with them. Indeed, there was clear support from both parents and students that the students themselves should be legally allowed to exercise the right to opt out at a given age. For young people this was often seen to be around the age of 13 to 15 years; for parents the age range was typically 14 to 16 years. Even where it was felt that the right should always remain a parental one, it was suggested that students should be more formally involved in the decision-making process as well as in discussions around the kind of alternative provision that should be offered during the opting-out period.

The lack of tension in the findings between parents and pupils may be partly due to the research design. As parental consent was

required for young people's participation in the research and all participants were recruited through community networks, the sampling strategy may have precluded parents and pupils to come forward who adhered to different beliefs or who did experience tensions in relation to opt-out decisions.

8. Interviews with parents and community representatives revealed that many parents were unaware of the right to opt their children out of religious education and that the degree of awareness among parents significantly varied across different faith and belief communities. The majority of parents reported that schools did not inform them of this right. In fact, interviews revealed that minority belief families often requested an opt-out without knowledge of their legal entitlement.

9. Many parents acknowledged that they knew little of the RE curriculum taught in their children's schools and expressed a desire that schools provided information on both the curriculum's content and the manner in which it was taught.

10. For those parents who did withdraw their children from RE, the decision was related to the curricular content which they felt conflicted with their own belief system. This occurred most frequently when the teaching focused on doctrinal Christianity and was unsympathetic to other beliefs. Often the decision was reached after the

child had been attending the class for some time and had become uncomfortable with what was being taught. Most parents who were faced with an opt-out decision spoke of the fear that their child would 'stand out' and feel excluded. For parents not originally from Northern Ireland this was a particular concern.

11. The decision not to opt a child out of RE was based on the wish for the child to learn more about other religions, including Christianity, and the belief that religious education as taught in their school was not doctrinal or that the child would be immune to potential indoctrination because of the exposure to their own or other faith in the home and community environment.

12. While opt-out clauses were seen as sufficient by some, several parents and community representative expressed dissatisfaction with the overall concept that the opt-out clause could protect and respect minority beliefs in schools, preferring a system where parents would choose to opt their children *into* RE, rather than out, in order to remove the pressure from minority belief parents. Additionally, it was suggested that the right to opt-out was not so much a protection mechanism for minority belief individuals but an 'exclusion clause' and that it was damaging to a child's self esteem if her or his beliefs were not recognized within the school and the curriculum.

13. A strong and consistent view to emerge from the study concerns the nature and approach of Religious Education in all kinds of schools in Northern Ireland. On the part of people of minority religion and belief there is significant dissatisfaction with the content of RE and with the way it is taught. Some of the parents and pupils interviewed appear to have learned to tolerate this situation and to try to make the best of it and have therefore made positive choices about how they participate in RE; in a few cases our respondents have noted good practice of which they very much approve. Almost all, however, have expressed a desire for an approach to RE that is more broadly-based rather than narrowly-focused on Christianity, non-doctrinal, non-confessional, open and inclusive in tone and style and committed to the development of critical thought.

14. In addition to the clear lack of knowledge on the part of parents and students regarding the existence and use of opt-outs, the research revealed that many teachers, including senior management, appear to have little awareness of the legal situation. In some cases, teachers reacted in an emotional and negative way when parents raised the question of opt-outs. In some instances, parents were provided with inaccurate information and advice.

15. While the situation in relation to primary schools was not the concern of this research programme, the experience and

dilemma of opting out young children of primary school age was expressed by a number of respondents. It was clear that while the decision to withdraw a child of any age is rarely an easy or straightforward one, it is particularly difficult for parents of young children who fear that their children will be too young to understand and to cope with being separated from their peers during the school day. This finding raises a particular question over the use of opt-outs in primary schools and its usefulness in protecting the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion in this context.

Recommendations

While this research project was carried out in Northern Ireland many of the emerging recommendations are relevant to wider national and international situations. We have therefore distinguished here between those recommendations that are applicable generally and those that are specific to Northern Ireland.

Legal Issues

1. International human rights bodies should recognise that the legislative existence of a right to opt out of religious education and collective worship is at times insufficient to protect the beliefs of minority belief individuals. These bodies must be ready to consider, *inter alia*, the age of the student, the religious composition of the school and the society, the nature of the Religious Education

curriculum and the quality of the alternatives offered to the student, in order to determine whether an opt-out provision is the appropriate mechanism for protecting the right to freedom of religion in a particular instance.

2. International human rights bodies should recognise that while opt-outs may formally protect against unwanted indoctrination, opting children out of religious education does not constitute respect for the beliefs of those children. States should be encouraged to view their obligations of respecting and fulfilling the right to freedom of religion as ones that include the teaching of a range of belief systems within the RE curriculum and the wider school curriculum.

3. When doctrinal or confessional religious education is permitted to be taught in schools, international human rights bodies should consider protecting the right to freedom of religion of minority belief individuals by requesting states to operate an opt-in rather than an opt-out mechanism. This approach would remove many of the dilemmas and difficulties typically encountered by minority belief individuals when considering whether to exercise their right to opt-out of religious education.

4. International human rights bodies should be prepared to examine complaints to do with religious liberty in schools under

the child's independent right to freedom of religion rather than under a parental right. Such an approach would accord with the principles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Furthermore, it would indicate to Member States that relevant domestic legislation must acknowledge the right of the child in the decision-making process and that the right should transfer to the child in accordance with age and maturity.

Awareness of opt-outs

5. Education authorities (at national, regional or local government level as appropriate) should issue information to clarify that the right to opt out of religious education and collective worship is applicable to *all* schools. Standardised guidelines should be issued on appropriate practice for schools with regard to the notification of the right to opt out and the procedures to accommodate those wishing to exercise the right.

6. Schools should explain the right to opt out to parents and students through various avenues, including at open days, parent/teacher meetings, in school literature and via the school website.

7. To assist parents in making an opt-out decision, parents should be made aware of the content of the RE curriculum and assemblies for collective worship. The teaching of confessional or doctrinal religious instruction should be clearly notified to parents.

8. School managements should ensure all teachers are aware of the right to opt out and the process that should be followed if approached by a parent.

Procedural issues

9. Schools should have a well publicised set of clear and straightforward procedures setting out how parents can exercise their right to opt-out their child. Such policies and procedure should be reviewed by the school management on a regular basis.

Alternative provision

10. Where opt-outs are requested, schools should make every effort to provide alternative activities that are educational. Students and parents should be consulted in deciding on alternative provision. In order to avoid feelings of marginalisation or exclusion, schools should treat the issue as a pastoral matter and ensure that staff with responsibility for pastoral care are properly informed and involved in the process.

11. Schools should regularly review the situation of pupils who have opted out.

Curriculum implications

12. Schools should issue clear information to parents about the aims and purposes of their RE teaching. In particular they should clarify if their intentions are to promote a particular faith position or alternatively to teach inclusively about

religion in a balanced manner that is acceptable to people of all faiths and those of no religion.

13. All schools should review the content and approach of their Religious Education curriculum and periods of collective worship with the aim of making each more inclusive and welcoming of diversity in order to minimise the need for parents to withdraw their children. In this regard we commend the principles and practices indicated in the *Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching about Religions and Beliefs in Public Schools* (OSCE/ODIHR, 2007) and also the *Recommendation CM/Rec(2008)12 of the Committee of Ministers to member states on the dimension of religions and non-religious convictions within intercultural education* (Council of Europe, 2008).

14. Schools should deploy properly trained teachers for RE as for any other subject; the use of RE as a timetable-filler is unacceptable. Teachers should be made aware of their responsibilities in relation to people of minority belief, including the importance of using inclusive language and creating an ethos of inclusion.

15. The training of teachers specialising in RE should reflect the recommendations above. Particular attention should be given to the continuing professional development of RE teachers, especially any who have not

taken courses on world religions during their initial teacher education.

Recommendations specific to Northern Ireland

16. Given that all schools in Northern Ireland tend to follow a Christian ethos to a greater or lesser extent, the Department of Education for Northern Ireland should require all school types, irrespective of what domestic law permits them to teach in confessional or denominational RE, to ensure that some or all of their RE is non-confessional and inclusive and that parents and pupils are made fully aware of this. The increased provision of inclusive RE within the Northern Ireland education system would provide an option for minority belief students who wish to study RE and would also considerably reduce the need of many to opt out.

17. To enhance respect for the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion of minority belief students, RE in all school types should focus on the development of awareness, mutual respect and critical thought. World religions and non-religious life-stances should be included throughout the Key Stages of the Northern Ireland Curriculum, and particularly at Key Stages 2, 3 and 4, as appropriate to the ages and abilities of the pupils. To this end the Northern Ireland Core Syllabus for Religious Education should be reconsidered and re-drafted by a group that is much more representative of

the religions and beliefs of Northern Ireland than is presently the case.

18. The current uneven system of inspection of Religious Education in Northern Ireland, whereby many schools receive no external quality control on their provision, should be replaced by regular inspection from the Department of Education's Education and Training Inspectorate on the same basis as all other curriculum subjects. The Inspectorate should take particular account of the needs of pupils of minority religion and belief and of the functioning of opt-out mechanisms.

19. Schools should review the options available at public examination level (GCSE and A-level) in order to reflect greater religious diversity. Considerations should be given to revising the regulations for GCSE in order to stipulate the inclusion of at least one unit on world religions to be taken by each candidate, or by the inclusion of a broader range of religions within other modules, particularly those dealing with religious approaches to moral issues.

20. Domestic legislation should guarantee a child of sufficient maturity the right to withdraw from religious activities. In line with the recommendation of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child that 'States parties should consult children at the local and national levels on all aspects of education policy', the Northern Ireland Department of Education should involve young people when consulting on the

necessary legislative development and in determining the appropriate age at which the right should transfer from the parent to the child.

Introduction

The way in which young people experience school life can substantially influence their sense of self and their sense of belonging to the school and to the wider community. The right to opt out of religious education – a right mandated by international human rights law to protect religious freedom in schools – sets students from a minority belief background apart from their peers during the school day. This division has the potential to shape young people’s relationship with their school and community as well as their religious understanding. It can also impact on how minority belief young people see their place and that of their belief system in wider contemporary society.

This research explores the issues surrounding the workings of the opt-out clause in schools. Its core aim is to examine the opt-out clause through the perspective of young people (13 -18 years) of minority belief and assesses its suitability as a mechanism to protect religious liberty in a diverse society. For the purposes of the research project the term ‘minority belief’ is understood to encompass adherents of minority religious communities as well as those whose beliefs could be described as secular, Humanist or personal.

Legal Context

International human rights law permits the teaching of doctrinal (i.e. confessional) religious instruction in schools and holds that opt-out clauses are a sufficient means to protect and respect the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion of those who do not wish to participate in it.¹ While conscience clauses in domestic law may predate this standard, current domestic law and policy is informed and legitimatised by this international human rights norm.

The beliefs deemed worthy of protection under human rights law are broadly construed. The United Nations Human Rights Committee has held that Article 18 protects theistic, non-theistic and atheistic beliefs, as well as the right not to profess any religion and belief. Likewise, the European Court of Human Rights has repeatedly stated that Article 9 of the Convention recognises the rights not only of theistic believers, but also those of atheists, agnostics, sceptics and the unconcerned. Together, the case law of these bodies provides that a school may include a confessional religious class in its curriculum. However, if it does so, provision

¹ See, for example, *Hartikainen v Finland*, Comm No 40/1978, Doc A/36/40; *Kjeldsen, Busk Madsen and Pedersen v Denmark* (1979-80) 1 EHRR 711.

must be made for non-discriminatory exemptions or alternatives for pupils whose parents wish to withdraw their children from such classes and, according to UN standards, such exemptions or alternatives must satisfy or accommodate the wishes of parents.

The fundamental premise that opt-out clauses can protect the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion of young people in schools has been subject to limited scrutiny by international human rights bodies, educationalists and academics. The assumptions behind it have not been assessed from the perspective of the minority belief young person, and the socialisation impact of separating students in this manner has not been explored.

This narrow approach is most clearly witnessed in the jurisprudence of the European Court of Human Rights and the European Commission of Human Rights.² The Strasbourg organs have been content merely to establish whether an opt-out provision exists in legislation but have not considered the quality or operation of opt-

² The European Court of Human Rights is an organ of the Council of Europe and sits in Strasbourg. It monitors the implementation of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), which is incorporated into UK law by way of the Human Rights Act 1998. Prior to 1998 the European Commission of Human Rights was also responsible for overseeing the implementation of Convention rights. In 1998 the Commission was abolished when a full time court was established in Strasbourg.

out clauses, or how far the right of withdrawal from religious classes is sufficient to constitute 'respect' for religious liberty.³

The United Nations Human Rights Committee has also been satisfied to rely on the mere existence of opt-out clauses.⁴ It is noteworthy, however, that in a recent decision it showed a willingness to examine the operation of the particular clause in question. It also expressed concern with the impact on children and parents of using, or not using, the opt-out provision, referring to 'loyalty conflicts experienced by children' as illustrative of such problems.⁵

In contrast to the position taken by international human rights bodies, Hamilton and Watt have questioned whether the right to opt out of religious

³ See, for example, *CJ, JJ and EJ v Poland* (Application no 23380/94) (1996) D&R 46; *Saniewski V Poland* (Application No 40319/98 (unreported) 26 June 2001.

⁴ The UN Human Rights Committee supervises the implementation of the UN International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).

⁵ *Leirvag v Norway*, CCPR/C/82/D/1155/2003. Decision of 23 November 2004. In this case a report was presented by an expert in minority psychology who had been engaged by the Norwegian Humanist Association 'to investigate how children react to conflicting life stance-related upbringing and education both in school and at home. He concluded that both children, parents and possibly the school experience conflicts of loyalty, pressure to conform and acquiesce to the norm, and for some of the children, bullying and a feeling of helplessness', para. 2.5.

activities, such as collective worship, is sufficient to constitute 'respect' for the religious and philosophical convictions of minority belief individuals and have noted that it poses a real dilemma for families.⁶ Richardson's study of the views of minority belief parents in Northern Ireland suggests that in many schools the right to opt-out is not explained, that in some cases pressure is put on parents not to exercise this right, and that many teachers did not seem to know what to do in such situations.⁷ Recent research by Mawhinney on the operation of opt-out clauses in primary schools in the Republic of Ireland attempts to address the lack of empirical evidence regarding opt-outs. Her findings – based on interviews with parents and teachers – highlight the dangers of relying on the opt-out mechanism to protect religious liberty in schools: parents may be reluctant to exercise this right for fear of isolating their child; opt-out provisions may not satisfy parental wishes and may simply mean that the child sits at the back of the class; and children who opt out may suffer stigmatisation.⁸

⁶ Hamilton, C. and Watt, B. 1996. A discriminating education - collective worship in schools, *Child and Family Law Quarterly*, Vol. 8, No. 1, p. 33.

⁷ Richardson, N. 2003. *Curricular, Faith and Pastoral Needs of Minority Faith Children in Northern Ireland Schools: The Views of their Parents*, Belfast: Stranmillis University College.

⁸ Mawhinney, A. 2006. The opt-out clause: imperfect protection for the right to freedom of religion in schools, *Education Law Journal*, Vol. 7, No. 2, pp. 102-115.

Parental right

The concept and use of opt-outs to protect religious liberty raises the question of who should exercise the right to opt out of religious activities – the parent or the child? Under international human rights law the issue of protecting religious freedom in educational contexts is most frequently considered in articles dealing with the right of the parent with respect to the education of their children. The aim of this parental right is to ensure that the education of children is in conformity with, or respects the convictions of, their parents or guardians.⁹ This approach to dealing with religious liberty in schools ignores the notion of the independent right of a young person (under the age of 18) to freedom of thought, conscience and religion.¹⁰ Furthermore, it sits uneasily with the substance of Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child which requires states to consider children's and young people's views on matters that affect them.

⁹ See, for example, the right to education article of the ECHR, Article 2 Protocol 1: 'No person shall be denied the right to education. In the exercise of any functions which it assumes in relation to education and teaching, the state shall respect the rights of parents to ensure such education and teaching in conformity with their own religious and philosophical convictions'.

¹⁰ For example, Article 9 of the ECHR; Article 18 of the UN ICCPR.

Education context

Significant attention in recent years has been focused on the importance of religious awareness as a dimension of education in values and intercultural understanding, encouraged by international consultations and recommendations by the United Nations¹¹, the Council of Europe¹² and the Oslo Coalition on Freedom of Religion and Belief.¹³ These documents make it clear that the purpose of such teaching is *not* to instruct pupils in a particular faith but to promote knowledge, understanding and mutual respect in a fair and open manner. A range of related literature has focused on pedagogical approaches designed to achieve such ends.¹⁴ For the lay person,

¹¹ For example, the report on the UN Consultative Conference: *School Education in relation with Freedom of Religion or Belief, Tolerance or Non-Discrimination* (Madrid 2001)

¹² See *Recommendation CM/Rec(2008)12 of the Committee of Ministers to member states on the dimension of religions and non-religious convictions within intercultural education*

(Adopted by the Committee of Ministers on 10 December 2008 at the 1044th meeting of the Ministers' Deputies). See also: *The Religious Dimension of Intercultural Education* (Oslo conference Proceedings, 2004); Keast, J. (ed): *Religious diversity and intercultural Education: A Reference Book for Schools* (2007)

¹³ www.oslocoalition.org

¹⁴ See, for example, Jackson, R. 2004. *Rethinking Religious Education and Plurality*, Routledge Falmer; Jackson, R. and McKenna, U.(eds) 2005: *Intercultural Education and Religious Plurality*, Oslo Coalition on Freedom of Religion and Belief; Lähnemann, J. and Schreiner, P. (eds) 2008. *Interreligious and Values Education in*

however, such educational purposes are often ambiguous and unclear. The widely welcomed *Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching about Religions and Beliefs in Public Schools* emphasises that for inclusive religious education teaching relevant programmes should be balanced, impartial and adopt an ethos based on human rights and civic values. However, it is also acknowledged that this is not always possible and that recognising opt-out rights may be satisfactory for parents and pupils, so long as they are offered sensitively and in a non-discriminatory manner.¹⁵

Project context

The research took place in Northern Ireland, a society with a high level of religious participation and traditionally low numbers of ethnic/religious minorities, although these have increased significantly in recent years. Numbers for religious and non religious minorities are difficult to establish with certainty and the 2001 Census figures are now well out of date.¹⁶

Europe, Peace Education Standing Commission of Religions for Peace / Comenius institute.

¹⁵ The Toledo Guiding Principles were developed on an international basis and published by ODIHR/OSCE in 2007.

¹⁶ According to the 2001 Northern Ireland Census the numbers for various communities at that time were: Islam 1,943; Hinduism (including Hare Krishna) 878; Judaism 365; the Bahá'í Faith 254; Humanism 40; Paganism 148; Atheism 106; Agnosticism 66; 'No religion or religion not stated' 233,853; Jehovah's Witness 1993; Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints 1414.

School system

The Northern Ireland school system is predominantly public, with very few private schools. Post-primary schools can be classified into the following types: (1) controlled, (2) Catholic maintained, (3) voluntary, (4) integrated¹⁷ and (5) independent.¹⁸ Except for independent schools, all categories of school receive state funding to various degrees.¹⁹ Controlled, Catholic maintained and integrated schools all receive full state funding; voluntary schools receive partial state funding (all such schools are termed 'grant-aided').

To a greater or lesser extent all schools in Northern Ireland tend to follow a Christian ethos, although there are denominational differences that are intertwined with ethno-political ideologies.²⁰ It is worth noting that

¹⁷ An integrated school in Northern Ireland refers to a school that aims to take approximately similar numbers of Catholic and Protestant pupils as well as accommodating pupils from 'other' backgrounds, on an ideal ratio of 40:40:20.

¹⁸ http://www.deni.gov.uk/index/85-schools/10-types_of_schools/pg.htm

¹⁹ Most independent schools are associated with the Free Presbyterian Church according to Dunn, S. 2000. Northern Ireland: Education in a divided society in D. Philips (ed) *The Education Systems of the United Kingdom*, Oxford Studies in Comparative Education, Oxford: Symposium Books, p. 88. These schools receive no funding from Department of Education and are funded by parents and charities.

²⁰ Smith, A. 2001. Religious segregation and the emergence of integrated schools in Northern

Northern Ireland, unlike other parts of the United Kingdom, has no faith schools serving religions other than Christianity. This context is significant given the lack of alternative schooling for minority belief families and the challenges of making opt-out decisions in a mono-religious context.

Religious education

Every grant-aided school must include provision for Religious Education²¹ according to the Northern Ireland Core Syllabus for RE (see the following section) and must hold a daily act of collective worship²². Schools are permitted to teach material that is not included in the Core Syllabus. In a controlled school the RE provided must be non-denominational²³: 'that is to say, education based upon the Holy Scriptures according to some authoritative version or versions thereof but excluding education as to any tenet distinctive of any particular religious denomination'.²⁴ The collective worship in

Ireland, *Oxford Review of Education*, Vol. 27, No. 4, pp. 559-575.

²¹ The Education (Northern Ireland) Order 2006, Article 5.

²² The Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1986, Article 21(1).

²³ This does not, however, apply to controlled integrated schools (or to grant-maintained integrated schools), where some denominational RE may be provided, for example in relation to sacramental preparation for Catholic pupils.

²⁴ The Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1986, Article 21(2).

such schools 'shall not be distinctive of any particular religious denomination'.²⁵

RE must be provided for all registered pupils, including those who do not take a GCSE (the official state exam normally taken at age 16) in the subject. Many schools also include non-examination RE for 6th form students (aged 16-18) even though such students are present beyond the official school-leaving age.

The Board of Governors is responsible for any inspection arrangements for RE in their schools. While schools may request inspection of RE by the Department of Education inspectorate, in practice very few of them do so.²⁶ The task of inspection, therefore, remains mainly the responsibility of the Churches.

In all grant-aided schools, including controlled schools, 'Ministers of religion and other suitable persons... to whom the parents do not object' are permitted to give religious education to pupils. This education may include the teaching of 'tenets distinctive of a particular religious denomination'.²⁷

Core syllabus for RE

In 1989 provision was made for the Department of Education to specify a core syllabus for the teaching of religious education in grant-aided schools.²⁸ This core syllabus does not prevent the teaching of 'any other matter' during the period of Religious Education.²⁹ The legislation specified that the core syllabus is to be 'prepared by a group of persons ('the drafting group') appearing to the Department to be persons having an interest in the teaching of religious education in grant-aided schools'.³⁰

In practice the government offered the preparation of the core syllabus to the four largest Christian denominations – the Catholic Church in Ireland, the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, the Church of Ireland (Anglican) and the Methodist Church in Ireland. The Core Syllabus that emerged was mainly focused on Biblical material, with some aspects of Christian history and a Christian approach to morality. Only one member of the early 1990s drafting group argued for the inclusion of non-Christian religions in the Core Syllabus, and this point of view was not accepted by the group as a whole. As a consequence, the first Core Syllabus for Religious Education, which became official in 1993, was 'criticised for

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ The Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1996, Article 33(7).

²⁷ The Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1986, Article 21(7).

²⁸ The Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1989, Article 13(1).

²⁹ *Ibid.*, Article 13(1)(a).

³⁰ *Ibid.*, Article 13(4)(a).

being exclusively Christian and confessional in tone'.³¹

That the four churches primarily drafted the Core Syllabus signified their continuous influence on RE in schools and the lack of engagement with other religious and non-religious groups. Nonetheless, some argued that the development of the Core Syllabus also represented a major achievement: for example, the Core Syllabus was welcomed in some circles as a significant movement of inter-church (Catholic-Protestant) cooperation. The Core Syllabus also provided controlled schools with a structure for RE which had previously not existed. In contrast, Catholic schools regarded the requirements of the Core Syllabus as similar to what they had been teaching already and therefore continued to use their previous materials.³²

The Revised Core Syllabus for Religious Education was drafted in 2002-3 and included a modest section on world religions at Key Stage 3 (ages 11 – 14).³³ An Equality Impact Assessment (EQIA) on the

proposed Revised Core Syllabus was conducted in 2006, involving public consultation on the document. The result³⁴ revealed that the teaching of world religions as proposed was considered insufficient by many minority belief people who suggested that world religions should also be taught at Key Stages 2 (ages 8-11) and 4 (ages 14-16).³⁵ The Department of Education rejected this suggestion arguing that children learn to respect other faiths and cultures in other learning areas at Key Stage 2 and that schools are free to teach more world religions beyond the Core Syllabus if they so wish. The Revised Core Syllabus, described by its authors as 'essentially Christian'³⁶, came into effect in August 2007.

The Revised Core Syllabus includes three Learning Objectives – *the Revelation of God, the Christian Church, and Morality* – at each of the five stages (namely, Foundation Stage and Key Stages 1, 2, 3 and 4). The fourth learning objective – *World Religions,*

³¹ Smith, A., *op. cit.*, p. 573.

³² Richardson, N. 2008. *The Development of Religious Education in Northern Ireland: Protestant and Catholic Perspectives on Education in a Divided Society*, Belfast: Stranmillis University College.

³³ In the original introduction to the first draft of the Revised Core Syllabus that was published in 2003, the Churches' Working Party commented that the teaching of world faiths 'will require only a modest amount of teaching time in each year of key stage 3'.

³⁴ The result was published by the Department of Education as *The Result of the Equality Impact Assessment of the Proposal for the Revised Core Syllabus*.

³⁵ Department of Education. 2006. *The Result of the Equality Impact Assessment of the Proposal for the Revised Core Syllabus*. http://www.deni.gov.uk/results_doc_eqia-6.pdf.

³⁶ *Proposals for a Revised Core Syllabus in RE in Grant-Aided Schools in Northern Ireland*, Belfast: The Churches' Religious Education Core Syllabus Working Party (2003).

at Key Stage 3 only³⁷ – is designed to introduce pupils to two religions other than Christianity ‘in order to develop knowledge and sensitivity towards, the religious beliefs, practices and lifestyles of people from other religions in Northern Ireland’.³⁸ Here, students are expected to learn about the selected ‘two world religions other than Christianity’ in terms of their ‘Origins’, ‘Beliefs’, ‘Sacred writings and symbols’, ‘Worship and prayer’, ‘Feasts and festivals’, ‘Family life’ and ‘Ceremonies: birth and death’.³⁹ Whether non-religious beliefs can be chosen here is not mentioned in the Syllabus. Given the outline prescribed for the study of world religions, however, it would appear to exclude them.

Right to opt out

Domestic law permits parents to opt their children out of religious education and collective worship. Article 21(5) of the Education and Libraries Order (NI) 1986 provides that:

If the parent of any pupil requests that the pupil should be wholly or partly excused from attendance at religious

³⁷ Although the Core Syllabus does not prescribe the study of world religions at Key Stage 4, a world religions option has now been restored to the Northern Ireland GCSE exam in Religious Studies (normally taken at age 16). The first cohorts of pupils taking this option will sit the exam in 2010 and 2011.

³⁸ *Revised Core Syllabus for Religious Education*, p. 29.

http://www.deni.gov.uk/re_core_syllabus_pdf.pdf

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

instruction or collective worship or from both, then, until the request is withdrawn, the pupil shall be excused from such attendance in accordance with the request.

The opt-out provision makes no reference to the right of the student to make the decision to opt-out. This can be contrasted with other jurisdictions where the right to opt out is transferred to the child at a set age. For example, in Switzerland the age is 16 and in some German states it is 14.⁴⁰ In England sixth-form pupils at mainstream schools and maintained special schools have the right to withdraw themselves from collective worship, without the need for a parent’s permission. This pupil right to withdraw does not extend to RE classes.⁴¹

The legislation provides no instruction as to the alternative arrangements to be offered to pupils who are opted out of religious activities, nor does it stipulate the grounds

⁴⁰ Kuyk, E. *et al.* (eds) 2007. *Religious Education in Europe - Situation and Current Trends in Schools*, Oslo: IKO/ICCS.

⁴¹ Joint Committee on Human Rights, Nineteenth Report, Session 2007-08, HL 107/HC 553, para 1.45. The Joint Committee on Human Rights has recommended to the Government that the legislation is amended to replace ‘sixth form pupil’ with ‘competent pupil’ which should be defined as a pupil with sufficient maturity, understanding and intelligence to make an informed decision about whether to withdraw themselves from Collective Worship. It also argues that this opt-out should be extended to Religious Education in order to be compliant with the rights of a child to freedom of thought, conscience and belief under Article 9 ECHR and to Article 12 of the UNCRC.

on which a parent may choose to withdraw their child. By contrast, the provision dealing with the right of teachers to be excused from conducting or attending collective worship or teaching RE notes that the request to opt-out must be 'made solely on grounds of conscience'.⁴²

The findings of the EQIA on the Revised Core Syllabus acknowledged that information provided to parents about opt-out provisions was inadequate and concluded that:

Schools should ensure that parents are aware that they have the right to withdraw their child from some or all of RE classes and collective worship on the grounds of conscience if they so wish.⁴³

However, the Department did not set out how it intended to assist schools in increasing awareness of the right or how it intended to monitor the performance of schools in this task.

Research objectives and questions

Evidence-based research which explores the attitudes and experiences of young minority belief people concerning opt-out provisions is clearly lacking. Additionally, there has been little consideration of how

the right to opt out is viewed by parents and minority religious and non-religious communities. For example, how effective are opt-outs in protecting and respecting young people's and parents' religious freedom in schools, and the religious identity of a community? The current project was intended to play a part in filling that gap and to contribute to a greater understanding of the role, impact and usefulness of opt-out provisions in a plural society.

The objectives of the project were as follows:

- To gather information regarding how far young people from minority belief backgrounds believe the opt-out respects and protects their right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion.
- To identify to what extent these young people believe that the process of opting out is a negative or positive experience which may impact on their sense of belonging to their school and religious community.
- To gather the views of parents and communities regarding the extent to which opt-out clauses protect religious identity and freedom in schools.
- To evaluate the adequacy of the current status of opt-outs and religious liberty in schools in order to identify key policy drivers which should inform international

⁴² The Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1986, Article 22(2).

⁴³ Department of Education. 2006. *op. cit.*, p. 32.

human rights standards and domestic policy in the area.

- To draw up evidence-based recommendations for policy and educational practice.

Research Questions

1. What factors influence a young person's decision to opt out (or not) of religious education?
2. In what ways do they believe opting out respects and protects their right to thought, conscience and religion?
3. How do young people from minority belief backgrounds experience opt-out provision from religious education and other religious occasions in schools?
4. Do conflicts arise between parents and young people regarding opt out of religious education?
5. How are opt-outs viewed by minority belief parents and communities?

Methodology

The research design was based on a general fundamental principle of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, namely that young people should be consulted on all matters which directly affect them. A qualitative research approach was selected to maximise the opportunity to develop an understanding of the complexity of this issue from the perspectives of those most likely to be affected by it. The study aimed to avoid imposing a framework which could result in excluding important views by using a flexible approach to sampling, data collection and an inductive analytical strategy.

Central to the data collection was individual interviews that were conducted with young people (aged 13-18) who come from minority belief backgrounds. In addition, with the right to opt out of religious education being a parental one, minority belief parents with a child aged 13-18 were interviewed. These interviews aimed to understand the emotional and cognitive impact of opt-out decisions on parents and families, to identify areas of concern and to explore suggestions for effective strategies in schools. It should be noted that the study did not attempt to use a matched sample of parents and children in order to ensure that those who had experienced notable family tensions related to decisions about opting

out of religious education in schools could be included.

Research participants were recruited based on the prescribed four categories: (1) religious minority beliefs other than Christian, (2) Christian-related minority beliefs, (3) non-religious beliefs and (4) non belief. The purpose of this categorisation was to assure the coverage of different types of belief systems. Moreover, theoretical sampling was used for Category (1) in order to reflect the views of communities that have differing levels of engagement with RE provisions in Northern Ireland. Communities were thus categorised based on their degree of engagement in the public consultation on the Revised Core Syllabus as well as their general use of the opt-out entitlement, which were examined through the 2006 consultation document for the Revised Core Syllabus for RE and a parental survey conducted in 2003 by Richardson respectively⁴⁴. Based on this,

⁴⁴ Department of Education, 2006. *Results of an Equality Impact Assessment of Proposals for the Revised Core Syllabus for Religious Education*; Richardson, N. 2003. *Curricular, Faith and Pastoral Needs of Minority Faith Children in Northern Ireland Schools: The Views of their Parents*. These sources of information were used in the absence of official statistics for opt-out rates among minority belief groups or their engagements with RE provisions. In 2006 a number of individuals and organisations responded to the consultation document for the

four religious groups were selected as the initial focus for interviews: Muslims (high level of engagement with RE debates and high use of opt-outs), Bahá'í (high level of engagement and low use of opt-outs) Hindus (moderate level of engagement and low use of opt outs) and Jews (low level of engagement and opt-out practices unknown).

For Category (2), no statistical or other empirical evidence was available for withdrawal rates from religious education or their engagement with RE provisions in general. Thus sampling was made based on the 2001 census data of group size. As a result, two prominent minority Christian groups in Northern Ireland, Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons, were identified as the initial subject population for this category. For Category (3), the Humanist and Pagan populations were identified as the only organised non-religious belief groups existing in Northern Ireland and

Northern Ireland Revised Core Syllabus for Religious Education. The Northern Ireland Inter-Faith Forum coordinated a joint response from interested minority belief organisations. While the Hindu community was actively engaged through the Forum, both the Muslim and Bahá'í communities additionally submitted their own response. Additionally, there was relatively little engagement from the small Jewish community in the RE consultation. Richardson's survey highlighted differences among the Muslim, Hindu and Bahá'í communities whereby members of the Muslim community were most likely to opt their children out of RE lessons, while members of the Bahá'í and Hindu communities were more likely not to use the opt-out provision.

therefore became the primary focus for interviews. In practice, difficulty arose in identifying parents and pupils in the age bracket required for the research in the small Pagan community and thus all interviewees in this group were Humanists.

It should be emphasised that the qualitative data collection aimed to uncover and highlight diverse experiences encountered by minority belief individuals in relation to opt out provisions in schools. The sample of respondents is not intended to be statistically representative. Rather than asking 'How representative is this?' we considered 'What does this represent?'⁴⁵ when carrying out our data analysis.

In the process of identifying research participants, religious and non-religious (e.g., minority ethnic and youth related) organisations were initially contacted with the purpose of approaching potential interviewees. Personal networks and contacts were also used in order to facilitate access to minority belief people. In addition, newspaper letters advertising the research project were sent to the *Belfast Telegraph*, the *Irish News*, and the *News Letter*. Once contacts were established and initial participants identified, the snowball sampling technique was employed to increase opportunities for recruiting a wide

⁴⁵ Cowie, F. 2006. Dressing the part: gender, performance and the culture of law schools, *Northern Ireland Legal Quarterly*, Vol. 57, No. 3, pp. 557-576.

range of minority belief students and parents.

Representatives of religious and Humanist organisations were also interviewed in order to elicit their views about the effectiveness of current opt-out legislation in respecting their members' right to freedom of religion or belief and their community's identity.

A total of 26 students and 24 parents participated in the study. Five community representatives were also interviewed and another answered the interview questions by email. The participant students and parents were categorised based on their self-identification of faith or (non-)belief. Table 5 (on page 26) shows the numbers of the research participants by faith/belief.

The students who were interviewed can also be categorised by gender, Year Group and school types. These are shown in Tables 1-3 on this page.

Table 1 Students by gender

Gender	Number
Female	13
Male	13
TOTAL	26

Table 2 Students by Year Group

Year Group	Number
Year Group 8	1
Year Group 9	3
Year Group 10	4
Year Group 11	3
Year Group 12	7
Year Group 13	5
Year Group 14	3
TOTAL	26

Table 3 Students by school type

School type	Number
Controlled	9
Catholic Maintained	2
Grant Maintained Integrated	8
Voluntary	6
Regional College	1
TOTAL	26

Of the 26 students interviewed, nine were/had been opted out of Religious Education classes. (See Table 4 on the next page). The nine students differed in experience of opting out: while four of them had been opted out from the beginning of the first year in post-primary education, one student had experienced both opting in and out of RE lessons. The others had initially taken the RE class but were later withdrawn from it. It is worth noting that none of the 26 students had been opted out of collective worship.

Table 4 Students by RE attendance

RE attendance	Number
Opted out of RE	9
Stayed in RE	17
TOTAL	26

The student participants were asked prior to the interview to complete an exercise, where they answered a question posed by the interviewer, 'What are important things in your life?' The purpose of this exercise was to help to identify the role of religion or any other belief in their everyday lives.

In order to maximise confidentiality and to ensure that interviewees felt as confident as possible during the interview, participants were either interviewed individually or along with somebody else if they preferred this. As a result, the majority of the interviews were conducted individually. However, partners and siblings tended to be interviewed together and, on a few occasions, a parent(s) and a child from the same family were jointly interviewed. The interviews with students, parents and community/group representatives lasted between 30 minutes to 2 hours. The venue of an interview was chosen by the interviewee. Most interviews took place at the interviewee's home, but some interviews were carried out in a café, the interviewer's office or the interviewee's workplace. All interviews were recorded with the permission of the interviewee and then transcribed.

The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner. Follow-up questions were asked and in-depth conversations were facilitated. Given the sensitive nature of the study, careful attention was paid to research ethics at every stage and ethical approval was granted in 2009 by School of Law, Queen's University Belfast. Participation in the research was voluntary and all interviewees were assured that they could terminate the interview at any stage without negative consequences: the participant (and her parent or guardian, if s/he was under the age of 18) was informed about the project and signed a consent form prior to the interview. All information provided was treated confidentially and recorded interviews were stored securely. Pseudonyms were provided throughout the process of data analysis in order to retain participants' anonymity.

In addition to interviewing, various statutory documents were examined, including the Northern Ireland Curriculum, the different versions of the Core Syllabus for Religious Education and legislation. Attempts were also made to collect background information about issues related to opt-out provisions in school in Northern Ireland through email enquiries to relevant statutory organisations. From the organisations contacted, the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission (NIHRC) and the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) replied and reported that they had not received any

enquiry about opt-outs from a member of the public.

Table 5 Participants by faith/belief

Population Faith/belief	Students	Parents	Community Representatives
Bahá'í	4	6	0
Hindu	2	2	1
Jewish	2	2	0
Muslim	3	3	1
Humanist	0	1	1
Atheist	2	0	0
Non-belief	5	4	0
Pagan	0	0	1
Mormon	4	3	1
Jehovah's Witness	4	3	1
TOTAL	26	24	6

Community Perspectives

Interviews with representatives of religious and Humanist groups in Northern Ireland were conducted in order to enrich understanding of minority belief communities and their general position within society and to provide background information for the individual interviews. They also aimed to elicit the views of minority belief representatives about the effectiveness of current opt-out legislation in respecting their members' identities and right to freedom of religion or belief.

These interviews were not intended to provide a representative view of all minority belief communities in Northern Ireland. Instead they were designed to supply information for data triangulation and to highlight potential additional ways in which policies and educational practice support respective community members in feeling part of the school culture while enabling them to freely choose to join or opt-out of mainstream education.

Individual interviews were carried out with a representative of the following organisations: the Belfast Humanist Group, the Belfast Islamic Centre, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (aka. Mormons), the Indian Community Centre and Jehovah's Witnesses. In addition, a response to the interview questions was received by email from a representative of

the Pagan Federation of Ireland (Northern Ireland).

Religious education at home, in the community and school

All representatives expressed the view that it was important for children to have knowledge of a variety of religions and beliefs and that home was the principal venue where this knowledge should be acquired. Communities and groups played various roles in teaching children about their religion and beliefs. The Humanist representative stated that while the Belfast Humanist Group did not play a role in the education of young people, Humanist parents generally valued the importance for children to learn about different belief systems including Humanism, were engaged in everyday discussions and activities at home with their children, and encouraged them to make their own choice of religion or belief. Likewise, Pagan parents tended to introduce their children to Paganism and emphasise the child's own choice of religion or belief.

This position can be compared to that put forward by the representatives of the Hindu, Jehovah's Witness, Mormon and Muslim communities, who stated that parents were generally keen to transmit

their faith to their children, with their own community organisation playing a major role here. Most Hindu children were introduced to Hinduism at home from a very young age, for example, through symbols, a small temple (prayer room) in their house and religious practices within the family. The Indian Community Centre also plays an important role in teaching Hinduism to children through communal prayers at weekends and religious festivals. In addition, the Centre operates the Youth Club, where young people get together and socialise with one another.

Within the Muslim community, parents also tended to be engaged in teaching their children the Islamic faith, both at home and in the community. The Belfast Islamic Centre organises several evening and weekend classes for children, where both the faith and Arabic language are taught. In Mormon households, parents play a key role in transmitting their faith to their children at home. In addition, the Church would be instrumental in offering various religious classes for children of different ages. Children of Mormon parents would be given a choice to be baptised at the aged of eight.

Transmission of the faith to children was also vital for Jehovah's Witnesses and this would be promoted through visiting the Kingdom Hall, reading textbooks, discussions at home and joint preaching

activities of a parent and a child. Children who had Jehovah's Witness parents would be guided by their parents and other community members throughout their childhood, but would be asked to choose the faith when they were considered to be mature enough to make up their own mind. For Jehovah's Witnesses, RE lessons in schools were unnecessary because (1) they were teaching religion to their children both at home and the Kingdom Hall and (2) they did not accept any other forms of Christianity or religion.

None of the other interviewees objected to the idea of children receiving religious education in schools. For Humanists and Pagans, schools were the only place where their children would receive formal education about religions. The Hindu community mostly supported religious education provision in schools based on the view that being taught any religion was fundamentally 'a good thing' and children could compare and learn from different religions. In fact, the Hindu and Muslim representatives highlighted that parents, who often had an immigrant background, would believe that it was both important and inevitable for their children to learn at school about Christianity as the mainstream religion in Northern Ireland. For the Mormon community, RE was fairly compatible with their own faith and it provided an extra, harmless lesson for their children, who received 'proper' religious

education at home and in the Church. In comparison, many Humanist parents would support the idea of religious education in school but object to an overly Christian focus or confessional approach.

Schools' approach to minority faith/belief

Mixed views were presented on how minority faiths and beliefs were respected in schools in Northern Ireland. A positive evaluation was made by the Mormon representative who believed that Mormon faith was protected and respected in schools that were predominantly Christian in culture so that Mormons could comfortably locate themselves within such an environment. However, other interviewees disclosed more negative views on the issue. For example, the Pagan representative stated that Paganism was not at all respected in schools that tended to impose a single mainstream denomination of Christianity and discriminate against minority belief children. The Humanist representative shared this view arguing that schools were engaged in making children into 'good followers of the creed' (C3⁴⁶). The Hindu representative

⁴⁶ This refers to the interview transcription from which the quotation was obtained. The community representatives interviewed are coded as follows: C1 (Mormon representative); C2 (Hindu representative); C3 (Humanist representative); C4 (Jehovah's Witness

considered that Hinduism was not respected at all in schools, which often did not show any interest in the faith and where it was excluded from RE in spite of the presence of Hindu children in the classroom. For Jehovah's Witnesses, the situation had improved significantly compared to the past but their faith and religious practices were not respected sufficiently in some schools. Similar views were held by the Muslim representative who said that the religion was respected in general but schools differed significantly in performance.

Views and experiences of RE lessons

A number of community representatives agreed that current RE provisions focused too narrowly on Christianity and should cover other world religions. The Humanist representative emphasised the importance of including non-religious beliefs in RE lessons. Most Humanist parents let their children attend RE but they were often very unsatisfied with the content due to its narrow focus and doctrinal nature. The Humanist representative perceived that many RE teachers had misinterpreted RE lessons as an opportunity to promote their own faiths:

representative); C5 (Muslim representative) and C6 (Pagan representative).

Just as if somebody is teaching politics, you don't expect them to try to brainwash all the pupils into being socialists or conservatives or whatever. You expect them to teach politics in a neutral way. So it should be the same in Religious Education (C3).

The Pagan representative preferred children to be taught religions in a comparative manner and without bias. He clarified that Pagan parents would prefer a system where all children, of whatever religious or belief background, could participate in RE classes. Moreover, the Hindu representative argued that RE 'should be a bit broadened' and 'comprehensive' (C2) but changes should be gradually introduced to schools:

There should be some consultation paper, religious schools from all first sections should be invited and their views should be taken into consideration. And they should be implemented or phasing slowly, not overnight, see just a transitional period, and see what the reaction is.

The Muslim representative similarly argued for the inclusion of different religions in RE lessons. He said that RE tended to be 'exclusively Christian' and 'if they [schools] teach world religions it will be great for the children' (C5).

Perceptions on opt-out provisions

Opting out of religious education was not necessarily an issue for members of some minority belief communities, while it was crucial for others. For example, Mormons received no instructions or advice on the issue of opt-outs and it was up to individual parents to make a decision. It was not an issue discussed at Church and most Mormon parents were unlikely to be aware of or seek to use the opt-out clause. In contrast, the right to opt out of religious education was well known to Jehovah's Witnesses. While the Jehovah's Witnesses Kingdom Hall operated no particular policy, most parents opted their children out of religious education in schools. The Jehovah's Witness representative reported that the majority of parents would consult their children before making a decision over opting out. Some Jehovah's Witness families had faced pressure from schools not to opt out of RE. The opt-out clause was seen as problematic and the Jehovah's Witnesses representative proposed that rather than the opt-out clause, (1) RE should be removed from the curriculum or (2) an *opt-in* clause for RE should be introduced.

The Pagan representative expressed concerns that opting out of RE would make children stand out and risk their social exclusion, especially where the pupil was 'the only one' in a school (C6). It was

suggested that a child who was opted out of RE should be allowed to go home or come in later, which would be possible if, for example, RE was taught in the first or last period of the school day. Similarly, the Humanist representative reported that, while Humanist parents were mostly aware of the right to opt out, they often faced a similar dilemma between opting their children out of RE, whereby children would be singled out, and letting them join RE lessons, which were often perceived as doctrinal, in the hope that they would not be indoctrinated into Christianity. While both were 'unpleasant options' (C3), most Humanist parents chose the latter out of fear that opting-out would make their children suffer at school. Some members of the public had consulted the Humanist representative on this issue. He advised them that in his view opt-outs would do more harm to the child than staying (however uncomfortably) in RE lessons, citing an incident when an antagonistic relationship developed between a humanist parent and a school as a result of exercising the right to opt out. Humanist parents mostly felt that the current provisions of RE were highly inappropriate from an educational point of view and that RE should be inclusive and neutral so that all children could comfortably participate in the classroom and there would be no need for opt-outs.

The Hindu representative believed that most parents in his community were unaware of the opt-out clause and reported that he had never come across any parents who had opted their child out of religious education. The Hindu representative, however, believed that the opt-out clause could provoke a conflict in the minds of parents who had convictional objections against religious education. Talking of the opt-out clause as a means of protecting religious liberty, he said, 'I wouldn't put it like a safeguard. I would say [it is an] exclusion clause' (c2). The Muslim representative did not know how many parents were aware of the right to opt out, although he had come across some parents whose children were withdrawn from religious education and religious events.

Involvement with religious education in schools

All of the community representatives interviewed expressed their interest and willingness to contribute to comparative religious education in schools in Northern Ireland. However, their actual experience of involvement with schools varied greatly. While the Hindu and Muslim representatives reported that they had both been invited to many schools to introduce their faith and hosted numerous school trips at their organisations, the Humanist, Mormon and Jehovah's Witness representatives reported no such

experiences. Based on previous school visits the Pagan representative believed that pupils would always enjoy learning about different faiths but that their opportunities to do so were limited by overly defensive and prejudiced attitudes of teachers and schools. He felt that Paganism was often misinterpreted in society and more school visits by Pagan members would help to enhance a general understanding of the faith. Similarly, the Jehovah's Witness representative expressed his willingness to explain the faith and everyday activities in schools in order for his fellow members to be better understood within society. The Humanist and Mormon representatives emphasised that many parents in their respective communities would be happy to talk about their beliefs in schools for educational purposes.

Student Interviews: findings

Within Bahá'í, Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormon interviewees, there was less variation in experiences and views relating to RE than amongst other religious and non-religious groups of respondents.

Centrality of religion

A strong sense of religious identity and belonging to their respective religious communities pervaded interviews with pupils who held a particular faith. One Bahá'í interviewee explained the influence of faith on his life:

Essentially what to think or what to do... I feel it's [the Bahá'í faith] a part of my identity, cultural identity (S6⁴⁷).

Similarly, a Muslim respondent clarified why religion was important in his life: 'Because that's who I am' (S10).

For Hindu, Muslim and some of the Bahá'í pupils, who came from ethnic/cultural minority backgrounds, cultural and religious identities were inextricably linked. Although these identities were highlighted in interviews with Jehovah's Witnesses, who came from Poland where their belief is a

⁴⁷ The reference number attached to each quote refers to an interview transcript. The interview transcripts of the 26 students are numbered from S1 to S26.

minority faith too, this connection was less evident and more fraught with difficulties. Tensions were also expressed by a Jewish respondent as a struggle to balance doubts relating to his faith with his sense of belonging to Judaism:

I kind see a sense of belonging in Judaism. But then again, I still have these doubts [relating to his faith]. So it's kind of like a battle (S24).

This identity struggle was also inextricably linked with the relationship between Judaism and Israel:

I do believe in Israel being a state but I don't believe that we should support absolutely everything that Israel does just because of Jewish (S24).

For Hindu and Muslim interviewees, and to a lesser extent for Jewish respondents, learning Hindu, Arabic and Hebrew was seen as an integral part of their religious upbringing.

Religious faith was expressed in everyday practices, such as prayers, service attendance, self-study, clothing for Muslim girls, preaching for Jehovah's Witnesses, etc. Respondents generally enjoyed engaging in these practices and associated religious engagement with socialising and having fun: 'the church is very big on fun' (S20).

Faith was also seen as a positive force in keeping one on the 'right track' in life, e.g. to avoid alcohol/drugs etc and to do good/act morally in general.

In contrast to respondents from faith communities, interviewees who described themselves as non-belief or atheist did not see religion as central to their lives. While it was initially planned to differentiate between young people of 'no belief' and those identifying as Humanist or Atheist, this differentiation did not hold up in the constructions of religiosity emerging from the interviews. In fact, a number of the interviewees who did not identify with a particular faith highlighted the fluid and developmental nature of religious belief. One respondent, who described herself as 'more humanist', explained:

I don't believe in God but...I wouldn't say that I'm a complete atheist, but I don't believe...in anything yet, but I like my options are open (S26).

Despite the peripheral role of religion for them personally, respondents who did not identify with a particular religion acknowledged its influence on society in general:

You end up accepting that Northern Ireland is a very Christian place, and even everything is driven by like politics, everything is very religion-based...and multiculturalism is very slow getting here (S1).

A developmental dimension of religiosity was evident with younger children displaying a more literal understanding of religion while older participants appeared to have a more mature outlook.

Role of family and community

All respondents located learning about their own (non-)religion in the family and described close relationships with their parents, which were expressed in open discussions, joint religious practices, and trust in parental decisions. There was a strong sense of self-sufficiency and independence and respondents frequently emphasised that the decision about their religious beliefs lies with them. While learning about other faiths mainly took place in school it was also reaffirmed, expanded upon and/or re-evaluated at home through questions and conversations.

While interviews with Bahá'í, Hindu and Jehovah's Witnesses contained frequent references to same faith peers, only some of the other interviewees had an established same faith peer group in Northern Ireland. The small size of the respective communities was sometimes lamented as it did not offer much opportunity to regularly meet others of the same faith. Friendships with peers who belonged to the same religion appeared to be important to allow the development of a

secure identity and to re-evaluate faith in the face of a society with differing beliefs.

Religious ethos (e.g. assemblies)

Interviews revealed a different prominence of religion in the ethos and everyday life of different schools ranging from a strong influence of Christianity to it having little importance.

School assemblies were generally seen as compulsory and influenced by Christianity. While some interviewees reported to enjoy them because of their moral aspects or because they are 'funny' (S10), others found them rather boring. When asked whether they would consider opting out of assembly, which they had described as boring, two non-belief students explained that this was impossible:

S9: You can't opt out of assembly, they mix it [religion] in with the news of the school, so it's you are unable to opt out of assembly. Is that right?

S8: Yeah.

S9: Everybody must go to assembly.

None of the respondents appeared to feel uncomfortable during prayer in the assembly and most highlighted that they tried to show respect, e.g. by keeping their 'head down' (S12). However, some students reported occasional pressure from teachers

to join the prayer in assembly, which they objected to.

Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons raised concerns about other issues in school, which they felt contradicted their beliefs, including natural sciences:

Well, in the majority of classes the topic of religion wouldn't come up because it is a touchy subject in Northern Ireland. But in the likes of biology or physics where you have kind of Big Bang Theory against Creationism that is where religion as a whole is kind of put in conflict against science, but you have to learn the stuff because ... it will come up in your public examinations. So at times it can be a bit awkward but teachers....say 'Here is one theory of how this might have happened, if you believe in something different that is okay' (S20).

Generally, respondents felt their faith was respected by school staff: 'Yeah, it is respected a lot' (S3). The presence of other pupils from religious and/or cultural minority communities within the school was seen as helpful and schools were particularly praised if they paid attention to pupils' different backgrounds:

The school were very good about for like say for Bahá'í's Naw-Rúz new year is the 21st of March and we would put on assemblies for the whole school kind of on Naw-Rúz, just things like that you know, the little details there,

the attention to detail kind of made a difference and meant there was a greater sense of inclusion you know (S6).

Where such accommodation did not take place, it often resulted in pupils not wanting to ask for a special case to be made for them and to resign themselves to a situation. For example, while admitting not having approached the school to ask for permission to pray during school hours because he was too 'shy', a Muslim student felt 'disappointed' that he could not pray during school hours. Such feelings of timidity also emerged from other interviews and were weighted against the strength of feelings towards the issue.

Relationships between pupils of different religions within the school community were mostly regarded as unproblematic:

It doesn't seem to be a big thing between students, there doesn't seem to be any religious tension (S6).

All interviewees reported to have friends within their school, who were not members of their respective religious communities, and saw these friendships as unaffected by religion. However, discussions about religion only entered some of these friendships, while they were seen as irrelevant or too sensitive in others:

When we were younger it wasn't as important but now it is. It's quite a sensitive topic to a lot of people so it is best to just leave it alone and not impose your views on anyone else (S4).

Younger interviewees were more affected by their desire to fit in with their peers and not to stand out. For example, one respondent did not want to portray himself as a non-believer when with Christian friends:

I just say I am a Christian too, they never ask.

Interviewer: You say you are a Christian to them?

Well, I don't really...I go to a youth club and it's Christian (S2).

Throughout his interview, he emphasised that he just wanted to be treated 'normally' (S2).

There were some instances of bullying reported. In the case of one male interviewee, they were not seen as serious though they indicated an overlap of religious and ethnic/racial stereotyping. When asked if he was called names because of his religious background, a Bahá'í interviewee replied humorously:

The faith, the fact that I am not ginger...no [laugh], I am not, that's terrible, I am just tanned [laugh] it is? (S7).

Similarly, a female Muslim interviewee also referred to an incident involving name calling in school and later highlighted the intertwined nature of religious and racial prejudice:

It's not just about faith really as well it's about like what's called like racism, about colours and stuff (S13).

Most poignantly, one of the respondents reported emotional and physical bullying associated with racism inside and outside the school gates.

Religious Education lessons and content

There was wide variation in how interviewees experienced RE in their respective schools and pupils' experiences were strongly influenced by their perceptions of the RE teacher. Bahá'í interviewees in particular acknowledged the importance of learning about religions, including Christianity (to fit in with society as a whole and to learn more about their origins of their own religion), but expressed the wish to learn about other religions and disappointment about the narrow focus of the curriculum. Such sentiments were also reflected in interviews with Hindu, Jewish, Mormon, Muslim and non-religious respondents, whereas Jehovah's Witness respondents saw studying other religions as less useful. Learning about Christianity was clearly seen as important in a society

Northern Ireland which is heavily influenced by the Christian religion: 'I wouldn't want to live in a Christian country without knowing anything about ... Christianity' (S7).

When asked what they liked about RE, a number of interviewees mentioned that they enjoyed listening to biblical stories, especially when they were younger, and that it was a good opportunity to learn about other religions:

It was just a good way of reassessing my own personal religious views against the backdrop of broader society's religious views (S6).

Interviewees acknowledged the balanced teaching of RE where teachers took a neutral position and allowed them to explore issues through classroom discussions. A balanced approach to RE was also understood in terms of other religions being given equal time as Christianity. A Muslim student who positively highlighted these aspects throughout her interview was evidently enthusiastic about RE and, in particular, enjoyed when a philosophical approach was taken in class:

Well, I would even consider being an RE teacher I like it so much...I really like philosophy because you are looking at the different reasons why people believe in God and why people don't because you could say oh well if God's real then volcanoes wouldn't happen and people wouldn't

die...there are so many different arguments (S11).

Feelings of respect regarding their faith were mainly attributed to the RE teachers' approach to teaching, their interest in the pupils' religion and their awareness/knowledge about it:

She [RE teacher] is not a Bahá'í herself, she is a Christian but she knows an awful lot about the Bahá'í faith. She is really nice...she doesn't tell the class that I am a Bahá'í but she makes like wee comments like 'It's okay if anyone doesn't feel the same about this, if anyone doesn't believe this, if anyone doesn't think this is right'. But she doesn't directly speak to me...she speaks to the class saying 'It is okay if somebody doesn't believe this, they are not to be disrespected or put down or anything (S3).

Another interviewee pointed out how small differences in the way Christian beliefs were presented enabled her to feel included in RE lessons:

I think my teacher is quite good in that way...when he talks about it he doesn't say 'So what do we do?' because he knows his class is majority Christians... even so he wouldn't say, you know, 'What do we think'. He goes in general 'What would Christians think' so I can write the same thing, I don't have to change it and say 'Oh well okay if I was a Christian I would sort of think'. He doesn't single anyone out he says

'What would Christians in general think' (S17).

Where interviewees did not see teachers paying this attention to their 'otherness' in faith, it resulted in feeling tolerated rather than respected:

I wouldn't say respected, I wouldn't say disrespected. It was just kind of, I was just kind of not ignored but just not bothered really by anyone else and I was just kind of treated like anyone else in the class (S7).

Striking a balance between paying attention to pupils' different beliefs and not singling them out was important for interviewees and they appreciated teachers' flexibility in including them in their lessons by allowing them to decide whether or not they wished to contribute.

The majority of interviewees reported that their beliefs may be respected by peers and teachers but not the RE curriculum. A less heavy focus on Christianity and a broader view of world religion were consistently suggested as a way forward to make RE more inclusive for all students. RE curricular contents were seen as too narrowly focused on Christianity and respondents strongly objected to the doctrinal teaching of RE:

After I started doing the course it was all about...the life of Jesus and morality and Christian morality, and it was focused on the one religion and

we were being taught it as if this was what we were meant to believe (S4).

Some respondents also lamented that Christianity was presented as superior to other religions in their RE lessons:

The fact that Christianity is just pushed on you...it's just, you know, like 'This is what it is' and 'This is what you should believe' and that I don't like that about it (S3).

A student with no particular belief recalled a particularly poignant incident:

I remember one thing she said that really made me angry. It was, she said, 'Christians shouldn't have relationships with Atheists or people of other religions because it was easier for Atheists or other religions to bring Christians down from Christianity than Christians to pull other religions up to Christianity'. And it was just like putting Christians above everything else (S1).

Other respondents also recalled specific incidents where they felt disrespected in their beliefs by RE teachers even if this was seen as unintentional.

Feelings of disrespect and exclusion partly resulted from classroom interactions, where more specific background knowledge and understanding was required to answer questions. A Muslim respondent, who described RE lessons as predominantly

Christian, did not feel that her faith was respected:

I don't think it was [respected] at all.

Interviewer: Why's that?

Because when if I got asked a question and I didn't know it I just went all quiet and then the teacher asked someone else and everyone was looking at me like 'My god, how could you not know that?' and I am like 'How would I know that? I am not Christian'...and they keep blaming me for not knowing something that I don't believe in and something I don't understand (S13).

Others also complained about this emphasis on knowledge in RE and the lack of critical debate in lessons. Feelings of disrespect thus appeared to be compounded by the attitude of the teacher as well as classmates.

Interviews indicated a sense of discomfort with RE exams and there were various reasons provided for it. A Bahá'í pupil complained about the superficiality of the exams, which did not promote a critical perspective:

As an exam class it was very superficial...like you would get a mark for being able to name like a parable... Like you would say what it meant but it would be kind of lip service, you never kind of consider any kind of theological or moral or ethical issues in any kind of deep or personal or even relevant way (S6).

Another respondent complained about the exam questions' focus on Christianity:

In first year we learnt about Islam and then second year about Judaism but in our exam there is nothing about them at all, it is all Christianity based (S3).

Students' discomfort with this focus on Christianity in exams was further illuminated by another Bahá'í interviewee:

In exams, I just put down what they wanted me to say, not really what I thought, although they wouldn't agree with that (S7).

His statement clearly highlights the experience of internal tension: In order to pass the exams, students might feel that they have to portray views, which they do not hold, and that, if known to examiners, their alternative beliefs would be assessed badly ('they [examiners] might have been able to pick up that I wasn't Christian'; S7).

Opt-out provision

Awareness and opting out process

Awareness about and use of opt-out provisions varied among groups of interviewees and only a few students reported that school staff had made them aware of the right to opt out of religious activities. Furthermore, some students thought that because RE was a compulsory

subject in their school this meant that they could not choose to opt out of this class on grounds of conscience.

None of the Bahá'í interviewees had been opted out of RE although some of them had considered it at different stages. Amongst Bahá'í interviewees, knowledge about opt-out provision was limited and they were often aware of opt-out in higher year groups only:

I didn't know that [right to opt out] about the junior high but I know that in the next school I don't have to do RE, by law I don't have to do RE (S3).

There was sense of coercion, which could be subverted by fighting the case for opt-out:

Em, I wasn't a hundred per cent aware of my right that is because I had chosen to go to the Catholic grammar school so I was essentially adhering to their rules but I knew that if it was a big issue to me that they would kind of make an exception for me (S6).

In contrast, all of the Muslim interviewees knew about the opt-out clause for RE through their parents. Amongst Muslim interviewees, one student had opted out of RE, one stayed and one student initially dropped out, then re-joined the lessons before dropping out again. Hindu and Jewish students reported that they knew of the possibility to opt-out through other pupils in their school. Both Hindu students and one of the Jewish students stayed in

RE; while one Jewish respondent opted out of RE for GCSE. Mormon respondents were content with RE provision and none of them opted out of RE whereas Jehovah's Witnesses had been informed of opt-out provision by their school and all of them had availed of it. All interviewees with no religious affiliation were aware of opt-out laws through friends or family members and three of the five students decided to opt out of RE.

Some students regarded the process of opting out as easy while others viewed it as complex or found school staff unsupportive. Recalling a straight forward opt-out experience, one of the Jewish students explains that this might have been due to the school's experience with these kinds of requests:

Yeah, there wasn't really any...hassle about it or anything. They are probably used to it because, you know, even though it is a Christian school it is still a multi-faith school with people of other faiths (S24).

Other students reported that the process of opting out was difficult and complicated, requiring a lot of forms to be completed plus additional meetings between parents and the principal, and felt that school staff were 'unsupportive' (S4). One of the students described how awkward this made him feel when he initially dropped out of RE:

When I dropped it he actually made my Dad go and see him [principal]. He said 'No, it wasn't good enough'. He actually made him go and talk to him and discuss why I was being pulled out of it, and then he said 'That's fine' after he met with my Dad. And he said he would tell the teacher. And then he didn't actually tell the teacher before the next time I had RE ... And I sat at the back of the class and started doing my homework. When she [RE teacher] noticed I was doing this [homework], she went mental. And then she actually rang [principal] while I explained. Then he told her. So he made it very difficult to drop it (S9).

One student attributed the school's apparent reluctance to grant opt-out for students to a fear that others might follow the example:

It was made a little difficult for me by...our headmaster...he is a preacher, he would be quite inclined on you doing RE throughout so he was a bit reluctant maybe to let us drop RE... my friend had dropped it the first year, and after I dropped it several people started dropping it maybe not because they weren't religious but they just thought of it as a free period. So I think he was really testing why I wanted to drop it, was I dedicated to drop it or was it just to get out of the class? (S8)

One student also felt under pressure by the RE teacher to continue with RE:

I talked to my RE teacher first of all, and she was very against me dropping it [RE], naturally, you know, because she was religious herself and quite passionate about Religious Education, so (S8).

Another student was simply informed that opt-out was not possible:

We did ask [to with draw from RE in first year of post-primary education], but our teacher said 'No you have to do it' ... I asked him... 'Do we have to do it because we are Hindus and we don't really want to do it?' ... But at that time I was like just 11 or 12, so I didn't really understand as much as I do now... So I just said 'I don't want to'. I only asked because I heard my cousin didn't do it [RE]... and he said 'You have to do it'.

Interviewer: Really?

Yes, so we had to do it.

Interviewer: Did your parents speak to him?

We told our parents, then they said, 'Well, if he said that, do it'. So you didn't get that far. Yeah we didn't get that far (S12).

While there was a high level of convergence between pupil and parent interviews in general, pupils' and parents' views on the process of opt-out did not always converge.

Factors impacting on opt-out decisions

Opt-out considerations took account of the content of RE classes; a shared emphasis on world religions rather than solely on Christianity and the perception that the teaching was non-doctrinal were seen as reasons to remain in RE lessons. A Muslim student explained why she decided to stay in RE: 'I did talk to some other people and they said:

Look you don't have to do it' but I thought 'What's the point in not doing it?', you just miss a bit of your education (S11).

However, others felt that RE, especially at GCSE level, was too narrowly focussed on Christianity and this perception contributed to their decision to opt out of RE as one of the Jewish respondents explained:

Whenever I looked at RE specification it's, it just seemed, you know, because all seemed very, very focused on Christianity...the way everything was just purely like, strictly like Christian...questions on morality were always from the Christian morals and 'How we as Christians should look at that'. What about us who aren't Christian? (S24).

One non-belief student who had taken RE for several years decided to opt out because the GCSE curriculum was going to continue to focus on Christianity:

I thought I was not going to learn anything new. It was going to be about looking over books from the Bible and coursework, there was no ethical content or anything...It was based on one religion which I wasn't part of so it was pointless to me (S8).

Another non-belief respondent also chose to opt out after starting the GCSE course which she found to be doctrinal:

I started doing the course. It was all about the life of Jesus and...Christian morality and it was focused on the one religion. And we were being taught it as if this was what we were meant to believe (S4).

A number of students reported a reluctance to opt out of RE classes for fear of appearing different:

I don't really want [to opt out], there is no point in singling myself out and going to sit in the library for an hour a week when I can just be bored in RE for an hour a week (S17).

Another noted that when he first joined the school he wanted to fit in:

I guess it's probably a bit of the feeling to want to be accepted, you know what I mean? I was just a bit worried like, if I didn't do it, if I like end up turning like being seen like a freak or something (S24).

While not relating it to pressure, one of the younger respondents highlighted that it was important to him to remain in the RE class because he did not want to be different from his classmates who all attended RE:

Because none of my friends would [drop out], well, 'cause I just like to be normal like everyone else (S2).

One of the older students explained that opt-out was particularly important for younger children as getting older made him more confident in his own beliefs which allowed him to overcome feelings of insecurity he experienced when he was younger:

Since I was young and be easily influenced...it would basically make me think that was really what I have to believe, but at secondary level it wasn't so important to opt out because I knew it [RE class] wasn't going to influence my beliefs and RE hasn't really influenced my beliefs at all (S24).

However, considerations about continuing or dropping out of RE were not necessarily and solely based on objections against curricular contents but were frequently guided by, or overlapped with, an assessment of workload and achievement in subjects which were seen as more academically relevant. Talking about why

he had considered dropping out of RE, a Bahá'í pupil explained:

It was just a matter of having to do extra work because I did 11 GCSEs in total (S6).

Others indicated that they would prefer to do another subject instead of RE if that was offered as an alternative.

Additionally, perceptions of the usefulness of opt-out provision influenced pupils' considerations relating to opt-out. One respondent thought the point of opt-out was defeated in a school, where pupils who dropped out of RE were exempted from doing the GCSE exams but had to participate in the class anyway:

I think so, like they have got their parents to ask for them to kind of, they would still have to go to class is the thing but they wouldn't have to do the GCSE. So you still have to go to class (S6).

Few references were made to pressure from peers or their respective religious communities to study or to drop out of RE lessons. When asked about his peers' responses to his decision to opt out one of the Muslim respondents explained:

Yeah they say they don't really care. They just say 'It's OK' and that's it (S10).

Similarly, respondents with no religious affiliation felt supported by their peers, some of whom, they thought were 'jealous' (S4) and would have liked to opt out of RE too. In contrast, one pupil felt questioned by community members when she participated in RE lessons:

All my other friends that don't go to my school that are Muslim, they all stay out of RE. When I said I go to RE they were asking why I did and I was like 'Because I want to learn about it', but they said 'You don't believe in it'. I said 'It is good to learn about other people and know about other things' (S13).

Likewise, another student, who opted of RE, was questioned by her classmates why she did not want to join the lessons:

My friends say 'You should go to RE 'cause it is fun, like you are doing...some other countries and some...other religions', I was like 'But I don't like want to do it', so (S19).

Satisfaction with opt-out provision

Current opt-out provision appeared to vary substantially between and within schools and was experienced as more or less satisfactory. Provision ranged from pupils sitting in the midst of the RE lesson or at the back of it, to pupils working supervised or unsupervised in the library or other empty rooms, on their own or with others. Furthermore, a number of pupils who were

opted out of RE reported that they could re-join the classes whenever they wished to do so.

A Muslim interviewee who had only recently been enrolled in her school initially decided to opt out of RE. This student felt isolated in her class and lacked a sense of belonging to the school community, a feeling which appeared to be further increased by her dropping out of RE and provision which left her on her own in the library where she was lonely and bored. She hence joined the lessons for a short period of time but struggled with the mainly Christian content, had difficulties completing homework, and felt singled out in class where she was the only non-Christian. She therefore decided to drop out again and her parents supported her in these decisions.

Another Muslim respondent, who was opted out of RE, was asked to sit in the class during lessons along with his cousins, who were also opted out. They were allowed to do their own thing during the lesson; to read, work and wear headphones:

...do your homework or bring the Qur'an in, just, wee bit read the Qur'an and just do that or just do your homework or do things like that. That's it (S10).

For this interviewee, sitting in the RE classroom was acceptable and appeared to

contribute to his sense of inclusion and belonging to the class. Once again, the RE teacher's personality and her relationship with the pupils further added to this sense of inclusion:

Interviewer (I): Do you talk to your RE teacher a lot?

Yeah.

I: Is he or she your class teacher too?

She is just RE teacher so she is.

I: Is she nice?

Yeah, she always gives us sweets at the end.

I: Really?

Yeah.

I: To everybody?

Yeah

I: Oh - and you too?

Yep (S10).

Opt-out appeared to be handled flexibly in this school and when discussing Islam, the Muslim students were allowed to re-join the RE lessons:

We would say to the teacher, 'Can we do the subject? But after that can we go off again?' And she says, 'Yeah, OK' (S10).

Two of the respondents with no religious affiliation could work in the library or another empty room; they were both joined by other pupils and were happy with the provision. One of them explained:

I like it much better instead of sitting and being bored in a class ... I get, you

know, to do more homework so free time home (S9).

Another student with no religious affiliation, who was joined by other peers who had opted of RE, was asked to sit at the back of the RE class on the computer, which meant that they were facing the wall. He expressed a sense of exclusion and strongly objected to the fact that they could not remain in their usual seats amongst their peers:

I think it was just not a punishment but it was definitely segregation, you know, it was definitely showing that we weren't, you know, the fact she couldn't bear to have us in the room (S8).

The same student explained how the relationship with his RE teachers changed after he opted out of RE:

I didn't really talk to them much after I dropped RE, you know, we were just non-RE folk at the back of the room. That's really what we were known as by the teacher after that, you know, we were kind of faithless, we weren't their students anymore... They weren't rude to us or cheeky or anything but...we clearly were different (S8).

Provision for pupils who opted out of RE did not always seem to be high on the list of priorities for schools, especially for older year groups. A respondent, who was

generally happy with opt out provision which allowed him to study on his own, explained that one day a week the library was closed and no alternative provision made ('she [teacher] just seemed to forget about it after that [after he asked her about alternative provision]' (S24); a time which the boy used to go for an early lunch though this was not permitted by the school. Another student reported that there was not a specific classroom set aside for him and that sometimes he had to 'just go around a little [looking] for a free classroom'. (S9).

Flexibility in provision, a perceived effort to be inclusive and respectful by the RE teacher, as well as the presence of other students who also did not participate in the RE lesson, appeared to contribute to a sense of security and belonging for students.

Parental right

Interviewees did not view the fact that the opt-out decision laid with their parents as a problem for them personally because all of them felt that they could discuss the issue with their parents who would respect their views:

Because if I wanted out of RE I know I could talk to my parents and they would understand why and they would sit down and talk about it with me and stuff... (S3).

Similarly, a Muslim student described how her parents left the decision to opt-out or stay in RE lessons with her:

Well my Mum just tells me to decide if I want to do it or not (S13).

However, more generally most of them thought that it should be the child's right to decide whether or not they wished to opt-out of RE:

In most, the majority of cases, parents are going to have the child's best interest at heart, the majority of cases, but you have to be prepared for that other like however many percent because the child may be forced into doing something they don't want to...so ideally it should up to the individual but maybe there should be a cap upon the age (S6).

Many interviewees recognised the complex nature of the question of whose right it should be:

I understand even at home there could be this mixture of feelings possibly where the parents are more religious and the son or daughter wouldn't be and they would prefer not to have it, but in that instance the parents wouldn't choose to opt out their child because they believe that they should be getting this thing, whereas the child genuinely isn't interested in it and would prefer not to have it. I can understand where that would become a moral debate about whether the parents actually

have the right to force their child to learn this stuff or not (S20).

Most pupils referred to an age cap which was often seen to be around the age of 13 to 15 years or when pupils 'should be old enough to make the decision' (S11). However, some also reflected critically on the meaning of childhood in society and law and how it applies to different individuals:

Just because you are not legally an adult yet it doesn't mean you are a child...I think it's just society's view in general of, you know, children's ability to decide really or be mature about things (S24).

Reflecting the intertwined nature of reasons underlying pupils' decisions to opt out of RE, interviewees were concerned about opt-out rights being abused by children, who might wish to avoid doing an additional subject. A Muslim student explained:

I think that's perfect [opt-out being a parental right], because anyone could just say, 'No, I am not doing RE'. Anyone could go, 'No, I am not doing that'. If their parents say 'No, you have to' then they have to (S10).

Evidently, respondents felt that the right to opt-out should be based on objections due to (non-)religious beliefs rather than on mere 'laziness'.

Parent Interviews: findings

Given that the right to opt out is a parental one in international human rights law and in many domestic jurisdictions, the research aimed to interview minority belief parents in order to gather their views on the workings of opt-out clauses as well as on the educational context which may cause parents to contemplate the use of such clauses.

Dissatisfaction with RE curriculum

All parents, from the full spectrum of viewpoints represented here, commented that the RE curriculum should be broadly-based and non-doctrinal in content and taught in an open and inclusive manner: 'I think school should be neutral about religion and if someone is interested about religion he should be taught at home or at his church' (P16⁴⁸). Typical of the views of many of the parents was that expressed by a member of the Bahá'í Faith:

In my opinion, religion should be taught at school, but not as just one religion. It should be taught as a

⁴⁸ The reference number attached to each quote refers to an interview transcript. The interview transcripts of the 24 parents are numbered from P1 to P24.

realistic issue, that realistically there are other religions in the world (P9).

A Muslim respondent articulated a common viewpoint: 'I think that the children should be given the facts and they should have a choice ... no religion should be pushed down their throats' (P11). Another Muslim parent observed succinctly that RE 'should be taught non-doctrinally ... it is a multi-faith provision rather than a uni-faith provision' (P24). It was acknowledged that if a child was sent to a school which was associated with a particular belief then s/he may experience a more confessional RE curriculum. This was deemed acceptable so long as parents had a choice between this type of school and a school which taught a non-doctrinal curriculum:

The trouble is sometimes we don't have a choice so that is where the problem is. But it's no problem if students choose to go or parents choose the school for their children (P1).

While some parents believed that religion should be taught at home rather than in school, most believed that RE in some form should be taught in schools:

I think it's very good for them to be aware of what other people believe

and for other people to be aware of what they believe ... Because I think when you've tolerance in religion you have a tolerant society ... And we need a tolerant society in Northern Ireland (P18).

A Jewish parent articulated the view of many others, simply stating: 'I think religion is part of education, part of your understanding of society' (P21). Several parents were quite content to let their children learn something about Christianity, as expressed by one Bahá'í parent:

She [my daughter] had learnt very little about the Bible and things like that in her life so I thought this gives her an opportunity to learn some of these things and it will help her to understand better where some of her friends are coming from and also a lot of my family (P6).

All parents, however, expressed disappointment with the RE Core Curriculum with its heavy emphasis on Christianity:

I expected it to be much more valuing of different religions, religious backgrounds and of humanists or people of no religion but I haven't found any of that. I have found it very dogmatic (P10).

Several interviewees referred to the English RE curriculum which they described as much more inclusive:

I believe that RE should be taught as an objective view of different religions ... I know that in England it's taught much more like that ... Over here, not really, not yet (P5).

A Bahá'í parent with considerable experience of dealing with people of a wide range of beliefs expressed the view that in this regard Northern Ireland is both 'isolated' and 'way behind' in its approach to religion in schools (P9).

For many, RE classes seemed to be simply a form of Bible study and did not foster open critical discussion. As an illustration, one parent pointed out that in the Morality Section of the Curriculum reference was made to specific Biblical verses:

Are you aware of this one from Leviticus? ... This is the one that says 'Man shall not lie with a man. It is abomination'. How can that be right? How can that be right, if they are teaching under morality that it is abomination for man to lie with a man and how can this foster understanding...of different people's sexuality and living in peace? (P5).

As a Bahá'í parent put it, RE should help young people to think:

If the subject is taught, doesn't matter which subject it is, it has to be taught to make the person think and

question it. If they question it they can understand it better (P7).

There were, however, some instances where RE encouraged criticality, for example:

The children had quite a lot of opportunity for discussion because in that school there would have been Protestants and Catholics of various different denominations, Protestants were different denominations, and Jehovah's Witnesses, and there was some Muslims, and ourselves, and lots of children whose parents didn't particularly have one belief or another (P8).

The critical role played by teachers was commented upon with several respondents noting that some teachers can be biased in their approach, seeking to influence students' thinking:

I don't think religion should be taught by anybody that has a very strong religion themselves especially if the religion includes in its teachings that need to pass the word on and recruit (P5).

The way schools organise the teaching of RE was criticised:

You don't really have to be trained to be an RE teacher ...the sports teacher can do it, the maths teachers can do it, the music teacher ... so any one can do RE all you have to know is the Bible

and eh so good training, good systems... perhaps an assurance system as well (P10).

A Mormon parent noted that teachers were not well versed in minority religions and frequently made errors when discussing certain religions:

When they're discussing our church and sometimes they would say things that we know aren't true ... My boys have gone back and challenged the teacher and given them a pamphlet or given them a book and said 'Well this is how it is' (P18).

A Bahá'í parent believed there is a need for RE teachers to be better trained:

I think there are certainly gaps in there where their training could be better ... I do think that it's very difficult for people to think outside the Christian box. ... And I think that part of the training of RE teachers should be actually to think and to experience something outside the box that you were born into or whatever (P8).

Some parents had found teachers to be sympathetic, interested and willing to learn about the various beliefs of members of their class, but others had appeared very disinterested. Particular instances were cited of teachers who dealt very cursorily with 'other faiths'. A Jewish parent observed that when trying to decide what

kind of school would be suitable for her children she had discovered that even in an integrated school: 'there was nothing about other religions, they were not interested at all in my child being Jewish' (P21). One respondent had discussed the nature of the school's RE curriculum with the RE teacher:

Half of the syllabus is effectively just learning what's in part of the New Testament and regurgitating it, there's no questioning or discussion or anything of that kind at all'. The teacher explained 'that there was another syllabus that they could have chosen which would have perhaps been better but for whatever reason, a political decision was taken and the school had to go with this particular syllabus (P22).

A Bahá'í parent commented on the latitude schools were given in selecting the aspects of the Core Syllabus that they wanted to teach:

Why can they select such a narrow focus...? They are allowed to select the units that are very narrowly focused ... There are a whole range of units that can make up the GCSE. A percentage of those should have to do with world religions or general principles of religion or philosophy...to make it a bit wider, not just all about sacraments and learning about priest's vestments (P7).

Knowledge of the right to opt out

Knowledge of the right to opt out of religious activities in school varied amongst parents. Some were aware of the legal right to do so while others assumed that they would have such a right or, at least, that a request to withdraw their children would be accommodated. The remainder of parents were unaware of the right to opt-out. A number of ethnic religious minorities reported that the school had made them aware of the right to opt out. The majority of parents, however, stated that schools did not inform them of this right, neither in the school literature nor through the school website or other formal communication:

Well I was kind of aware that it [the right] was there, but no, no information is provided to you, I mean when, when you get information from the school about all the different things that the school is providing and so on, they did not provide you with any information about the opt out...it was extremely difficult to actually get that information (P22).

A Jewish parent told of how she had made a request for withdrawal in a meeting with a teacher at a very large grammar school:

She was a real experienced woman but she had clearly never been asked this before and she said 'Oh my goodness!' She said 'Oh everybody

does RE. You have to do RE, but' and then she said 'I'm sorry, I've just never been asked this before' (P21).

Several parents thought that if the right to opt out was more widely known about then more parents would exercise the right.

A number of misunderstandings surrounded the right to opt out. Firstly, there was the idea that the option did not exist in religious schools such as Catholic schools. A Bahá'í parent with one child at a Catholic grammar school telephoned the vice principal to request the child's withdrawal from RE:

I said, 'Can you ask [the principal]?' and he said, 'OK I will see but normally we don't exempt, this doesn't happen ... It's really doubtful'. And I think it was the principal who actually replied and came back to me through the vice-principal that 'The principal has said no'. So that was that. This principal is ... like God himself. No it wasn't possible (P8).

Secondly, some parents thought that when a school made RE a 'compulsory' subject for its students in general, as for example in some Catholic schools, this meant that they could not withdraw their children from such classes. A parent noted:

Most people think 'If you send your child to a Catholic grammar school, he [sic] would definitely have to do RE as a GCSE subject'. They wouldn't even hesitate, that's what they believe (P8).

Finally, one parent believed that once a child had been opted out this decision would not be reversed: 'once you've signed the form saying whether they can go or can't go it's not an option again' (P18).

Many respondents admitted that they knew rather little about the content of the RE curriculum taught in their children's school. Some went on to suggest that schools should provide information on what was taught so that parents would be in a position to make an informed choice on whether to opt their child out of RE class:

There are I suppose a lot of parents who don't know what's taught. They don't know it, you know. So is there an obligation then for a school to sort of provide some sort of curriculum content...I think that would be important so then they can make a better informed decision. Hard to make a decision about stuff if you don't have enough information you know (P20).

Factors influencing the opt-out decision

For some the decision to use the opt-out clause related directly to the religious beliefs of the parents and their view on how religion should be taught to children. For example, for the Jehovah Witnesses respondents the decision to opt their

children out of RE class was a straightforward one: 'we teach our children religion at home, at meetings, so they know what we have to believe' (P17) and 'we are learning also about different religions in our meetings so we know the basic beliefs, differences' (P17).

With Humanist and non-belief parents, as with most of the members of the minority religious communities, the decision to opt a child out of RE class was related to the curricular content and the manner in which it was taught. Parents experienced conflict with their own thinking and outlook when the teaching focused on doctrinal Christianity and was unsympathetic to other beliefs and life stances. Often the opt-out decision was arrived at after the child had been attending the class for some time and the child had become uncomfortable with what was being taught:

Whenever you read this [Core Syllabus for RE]... it says in it 'Teacher should provide opportunities for pupils to know that for Christians' ...but that's not the way it was taught to my daughter (P5).

In one case a particular event triggered the desire to opt out when the parent and student realised that asserting feelings different from the dominant Christian belief system was not encouraged and would in fact result in poor assessment marks. A humanist parent insisted on his children

attending RE in order to gain an understanding of Christianity. However, once his children had learnt 'the basics', the lack of attention and openness to other religious and non-religious belief systems led him to allow his children to opt out of further RE classes:

I insisted that they should [attend RE]. Because I did want them to, I wanted them to learn just in the same way as I like them to learn Homer and Shakespeare and Joyce, basically... the Bible is you know one of the classic texts. That's really why I wanted them to stick with it so they would know something of this classic text which informs so much of our culture... I was sorry they weren't able to learn what I learned in terms of comparative religion (P10).

Similarly when a Muslim parent felt that the school had gone back on an understanding relating to his daughter attending RE but not doing RE assessments, his daughter herself decided to withdraw and he fully supported her decision (P24).

The decision to opt out caused a dilemma for parents who were uncomfortable with the RE provided by their child's school. A non-belief parent talked of a reluctance to overly influence their children towards one particular life stance:

I didn't [opt child out] because at this stage it's very difficult and if you are

not careful you would be putting too much influence as you may trying to influence too much on the children in one way or another (P1).

All parents faced with an opt-out decision spoke of the potential negative impact on their children if they were opted out:

I think opting out is quite, it's quite a difficult thing for children to cope with so I think it creates a lot of tensions and problems for the child within the school system (P22).

Asked why more non-religious parents did not use the opt-out clause a humanist parent replied: 'I think wanting to conform really, you know, and maybe the fear that children will be treated differently' (P10).

A number of immigrant parents expressed the fear that opting a child out could add to their sense of otherness:

We feel that to make them different may be difficult for them yeah just for their sake. So they are basically very much like locals compared to ourselves....being different from other people surrounding could make you feel very...lonely and disadvantaged (P1).

The same respondent noted that immigrant parents may be reluctant to exercise their right to opt out:

Some may wonder... what would happen. Would the school look at us negatively? And so yes, it is a good idea but it won't be a good idea if the parents are still afraid of exercising their freedom or decision because in a way this culture is not their own culture. They may wonder what would happen to them, how the school will look at them if they do this, if they do that (P1).

A similar view was expressed by a Jewish parent who, despite her reservations about the nature of RE in the school, was extremely concerned about potential antagonism towards her children because: 'people can be very narrow minded and bigoted ... in the society in which we live and I don't want my children eyed out, I don't want them being fingered' (P14).

For Humanist and non-belief parents, there was a sense that opting out because you were non religious was more difficult than opting out because you belonged to another (non-Christian) religion:

You stick out a bit and are seen as a bit of a trouble maker, that can create problems for you, you know.... I think it would be unfair to put a child in a situation where especially where you have teachers in the school who are Evangelical Christians. They're likely...to take it out on the child I would think (P22).

One Muslim parent, however, expressed her regret at having agreed to withdraw her child from RE, initially because her husband had taken advice from a friend. Because the integrated school in question seemed to her to be very respectful of different beliefs, she acknowledged:

I wish now that I hadn't done that because I have seen and heard different things from other friends who are Muslim whose kids were not pulled out and then telling me 'You shouldn't have done that' ... They are not shoving one religion down their throat which I kind of thought would have happened (P11).

Experience of opting out

The experience of parents when contacting schools to advise that they would be withdrawing their child suggests a lack of awareness among teachers about the right to opt out of RE. It also suggests that some schools fail to provide clear guidance on the procedure to be followed.

One parent described her experience to opt out her daughter as a 'struggle' and suggested that parents should have to opt their children *into* RE class rather than force people to go through the difficult process of opting a child out. This parent telephoned the school and spoke to a teacher:

She was as rude to me and she says...it is compulsory she can't opt out of RE ...she didn't insult me but she was very patronising. She said to me it is important for them for their upbringing it is important for their moral upbringing for them to learn these things (P5).

The parent eventually wrote to the principal and received a 'respectful letter back'.

A Jewish parent who had encountered similar difficulties expressed the need to be assertive and confident when approaching schools about withdrawal from RE. Acknowledging that she had not been completely certain of the legal position, she observed:

I wasn't aware that I did or didn't have a legal right ... I just felt 'look you are not offering a syllabus that's appropriate for my child', you know, and it made me cross when...there are other RE syllabuses that are more inclusive (P21).

Another parent wrote to the headmaster and got a call asking him to come in to discuss the matter. This parent was on good terms with the headmaster and did not find the procedure problematic or intimidating. During this meeting the headmaster advised the parent of the opt-out arrangements.

Most parents generally appeared satisfied with the alternative provision provided to children who opted out (study in library; remain in class) and recognised the difficulty schools would have in providing instruction in other subjects at the time the child was withdrawn. One parent observed, nonetheless, that when students are opted out:

There isn't anything for them to participate in. And schools hate that. Schools hate that. Teachers hate that ... That is difficult for everyone because they have to make some other provisions for that child during that time (P7).

Several parents, however, expressed unhappiness with the overall concept of the opt-out clause as a means of protecting and respecting minority beliefs in schools:

I don't think it's a good system at all. It marginalises kids that are from minorities. I mean it makes you be obvious. You *have to* opt out, you know, that's wrong ... You shouldn't have to opt out of something like religious study. They could probably change it quite easily. I would say that nobody would want to opt out of it if they were taught differently (P5).

Another parent noted that while an opt-out provision should exist and should be 'more widely publicised', it 'puts the onus on the parents very much to go in and say "I opt my child out"' (P7). He argued for a reform

of the curriculum in order to avoid the necessity of exercising the right to opt-out.

A parent whose son opted out noted that opt-outing made him and his son feel as if they were 'somehow disruptive' and 'causing trouble' for the school. Furthermore, this parent stated that the process did not value the child or their beliefs:

Every child's self-esteem should be enhanced, their beliefs valued and so on, there was none of that... I didn't see any of that ... Their own beliefs are not being recognised. Simply that their lack of belief in the dominant religion is being accepted and 'Well if you don't want to hear that you don't have to' or 'If you don't want to participate in the class you don't have to'. Well that is not protecting other children's beliefs or their self-esteem (P10).

Despite some difficulties, however, many parents did seem to feel that their beliefs were respected in their respective schools.

The right to opt out as a parental right

Most parents agreed that it was appropriate that the actual right to opt out should transfer to the child at some stage during their schooling. While all generally felt the child at any age should be involved in the decision, it was recognised that it was

difficult to determine a particular age when the right should become the child's:

I think it has to be a parental right because children at eleven, twelve, thirteen, will take the path of least resistance; 'Oh, I don't have to do that class? Right I won't do it then', you know? I think sixteen's fine. Sixteen, I would be happy with, I think by sixteen, you know, children are... practically not children anymore. And there's a lot of things that you're allowed to do in the Northern Irish society at age sixteen so why not be given that option? (P18).

All the Bahá'í parents interviewed suggested that 15 was an appropriate age for a child to be able to decide about RE, as this is regarded in the Faith as the age of responsibility and maturity.

One parent who felt that ultimately the right should remain a parental one thought that the school should involve the child to a greater extent in the process so that the child could give her/his views on the decision and also on the alternative provision that was offered:

I think that the school should be caring enough in its pastoral care to actually talk to the child about it ... There's no discussion with [the child] about why he wanted to opt out and did these circumstances suit him and there was no question about ...how are you getting on with that, is the

teacher you know treating you well and so on, no, didn't care, no pastoral care there at all so the child has no part in the process from the school's point of view which is sad (P10).

Conclusions and Recommendations

CONCLUSIONS

Young people, parents and community leaders were interviewed to explore the views and experiences of young people of minority belief with respect to opt-out policies and provision, and to examine the extent to which participants believe that this measure protects their right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion in schools.

It should be noted that the research does not provide a representative analysis of minority belief communities' views on religious education and opt-outs, and that results cannot be generalized. However, the flexible approach to this qualitative research with regard to the sampling strategy and data collection enabled the in-depth exploration of key issues raised by young people from minority belief communities. Data triangulation based on the interviews with parents and community leaders corroborated the findings from the research with young people and provided validation of the findings.

Research questions

In the following, the findings are synthesized with reference to the research questions.

1. What factors influence a young person's decision to opt out (or not) of religious education?

The research clearly demonstrates that young people and parents from minority belief backgrounds are not necessarily aware of opt-out rights in relation to religious education and, in particular, to other religious occasions in school. In fact, interviews revealed that minority belief families often requested an opt-out without knowledge of their legal entitlement.

The decision to opt out of RE was influenced by perceptions of RE lessons as being doctrinal in content, too narrowly focused on Christianity with little attention paid to other belief systems, strained relationships with RE teachers or peers, academic considerations and, in very few instances, the belief that RE in any form should not be taught in schools. In many cases a plurality of factors were identified as influencing the decision to withdraw from RE lessons. No pupil or parent reported opting out of collective worship. The

reasons for this appeared to be both a sense of tolerance on their part and the practical reason of not wishing to miss important school announcements. However, some pupils did opt out of special religious events such as Christmas parties.

For those that knew of the opt-out provision and remained in RE lessons, the decision to do so was based on an individual's interest in learning about a range of religions, inclusive approaches taken by the school to Religious Education in terms of content and pedagogy, a fear of appearing different, positive relationships with the RE teacher and classmates and academic considerations. Some pupils were persuaded to stay in RE lessons by their parents who believed that it would be in their best interest to gain an understanding of the dominant religion of the country.

2. In what ways do they believe opting out respects and protects their right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion?

In general students recognised and accepted the underlying rationale for the right to opt-out of religious education. However, the existence of this right – whether used or not – did not necessarily lead them to feel that their religion or beliefs were acknowledged and respected in the school. While many felt supported

by their peers and, at times, by their teachers, the lack of attention given to their beliefs in the RE curriculum caused them to feel that these beliefs were not valued or respected by the school, nor indeed more widely by the education system.

In addition, the lack of accessible and transparent policies and procedures dealing with opt-outs as well as the lack of consultation relating to alternative arrangements for opted-out students led to a sense amongst many minority belief students that their beliefs were not of interest or concern to their school. In order for pupils to feel respected and protected in their right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, young people expected schools to move beyond merely offering a poorly executed opt-out clause. However, some students felt that the opt-out clause had been effectively implemented in their school and as a result did not feel that their beliefs had been marginalised or ignored by the school management.

3. How do young people from minority belief backgrounds experience opt-out provision from religious education and other religious occasions in schools?

Pupils' experiences of opt-out provision varied widely between schools and within schools, depending on the teacher's approach and attitude. Pupils felt more

content with opt-out provision if they had a sense of inclusion in the school community and experienced positive relationships with school staff, flexibility in alternative provision and the option of continued inclusion in the RE class if requested. The research also suggested that pupils' satisfaction with opt-out provision was based on their age, self-esteem and confidence in their own beliefs as well as the presence of other pupils opting out of religious education in the class or school. Pupils' perception of academic advancement through alternative educational provision was important to promote a sense of purpose to opt-out experiences.

4. Do conflicts arise between parents and young people regarding opt out of religious education?

The present findings did not indicate any conflicts between young people and parents in relation to opt-out decisions. In fact, opt-out decisions appeared often to have been left to the young people or were discussed with them. Indeed, there was clear support from both parents and students that the students themselves should be legally allowed to exercise the right to opt out at a given age. For young people this was often seen to be around the age of 13 to 15 years; for parents the age range was typically 14 to 16 years. Even where it was felt that the right should

always remain a parental one, it was suggested that students should be more formally involved in the decision-making process as well as in discussions around the kind of alternative provision that should be offered during the opting-out period.

The lack of tension in the findings between parents and pupils may be partly due to the research design. As parental consent was required for young people's participation in the research and all participants were recruited through community networks, the sampling strategy may have precluded parents and pupils to come forward who adhered to different beliefs or who did experience tensions in relation to opt-out decisions.

5. How are opt-outs viewed by minority belief parents and communities?

Interviews with parents and community representatives revealed that many parents were unaware of the right to opt their children out of religious education and that the degree of awareness among parents significantly varied across different faith and belief communities. The majority of parents reported that schools did not inform them of this right (during the application process, open days or via the school website). Furthermore, many respondents acknowledged that they knew little of the RE curriculum taught in their children's schools and expressed a desire

that schools provided information on both the curriculum's content and the manner in which it was taught.

For those parents who did withdraw their children from RE, the decision was related to the curricular content which they felt conflicted with their own belief system. This occurred most frequently when the teaching focused on doctrinal Christianity and was unsympathetic to other beliefs. Often the decision was reached after the child had been attending the class for some time and had become uncomfortable with what was being taught. Most parents who were faced with an opt-out decision spoke of the fear that their child would 'stand out' and feel excluded. For parents not originally from Northern Ireland this was a particular concern.

The decision not to opt a child out of RE was based on the wish for the child to learn more about other religions, including Christianity, and the belief that religious education as taught in their school was not doctrinal or that the child would be immune to potential indoctrination because of the exposure to their own or other faith in the home and community environment.

While opt-out clauses were seen as sufficient by some, several parents and community representative expressed dissatisfaction with the overall concept that the opt-out clause could protect and

respect minority beliefs in schools, preferring a system where parents would choose to opt their children *into* RE, rather than out, in order to remove the pressure from minority belief parents. Additionally, it was suggested that the right to opt-out was not so much a protection mechanism for minority belief individuals but an 'exclusion clause' and that it was damaging to a child's self esteem if her or his beliefs were not recognised within the school and the curriculum.

Additional conclusions

Dissatisfaction with teaching of RE in Northern Ireland

A strong and consistent view to emerge from the study concerns the nature and approach of Religious Education in all kinds of schools in Northern Ireland. On the part of people of minority religion and belief there is significant dissatisfaction with the content of RE and with the way it is taught. Some of the parents and pupils interviewed appear to have learned to tolerate this situation and to try to make the best of it and have therefore made positive choices about how they participate in RE; in a few cases our respondents have noted good practice of which they very much approve. Almost all, however, have expressed a desire for an approach to RE that is more broadly-based rather than narrowly-focused on Christianity, non-doctrinal, non-confessional, open and inclusive in tone and

style and committed to the development of critical thought.

Respondents wanted more emphasis on teaching a range of world religions and other life-stances (for example, Humanism) and greater balance in the discussion of morality from a range of perspectives instead of the implication of Christian superiority. Some community representatives mentioned their involvement with schools in teaching world religions, but felt that this should be covered more formally in the curriculum. It appears that at present schools which go beyond the statutory syllabus inevitably and heavily rely on the resources of voluntary organisations and minority faith communities, resources which may be difficult or impossible for schools in rural areas to access.

Particular concerns were expressed about the limitations of public examination syllabuses (in particular, the GCSE examination, taken at age 16) and the ways in which topics and modules were chosen at this level. The training and deployment of RE teachers was also a cause for concern, especially with regard to teachers' awareness of religions and beliefs other than Christianity and their capacity for inclusive classroom practice.

Lack of knowledge on part of teachers and schools

In addition to the clear lack of knowledge on the part of parents and students regarding the existence and use of opt-outs, the research revealed that many teachers, including senior management, appear to have little awareness of the legal situation. In some cases, teachers reacted in an emotional and negative way when parents raised the question of opt-outs. In some instances, parents were provided with inaccurate information and advice.

The need for research in primary schools

While the situation in relation to primary schools was not the concern of this research programme, the experience and dilemma of opting out young children of primary school age was expressed by a number of respondents. It was clear that while the decision to withdraw a child of any age is rarely an easy or straightforward one, it is particularly difficult for parents of young children who fear that their children will be too young to understand and to cope with being separated from their peers during the school day. This finding raises a particular question over the use of opt-outs in primary schools and its usefulness in protecting the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion in this context.

RECOMMENDATIONS

While this research project was carried out in Northern Ireland many of the emerging recommendations are relevant to wider national and international situations. We have therefore distinguished here between those recommendations that are applicable generally and those that are specific to Northern Ireland.

Legal issues

1. International human rights bodies should recognize that the legislative existence of a right to opt out of religious education and collective worship is at times insufficient to protect the beliefs of minority belief individuals. These bodies must be ready to consider, *inter alia*, the age of the student, the religious composition of the school and the society, the nature of the Religious Education curriculum and the quality of the alternatives offered to the student, in order to determine whether an opt-out provision is the appropriate mechanism for protecting the right to freedom of religion in a particular instance.

2. International human rights bodies should recognise that while opt-outs may formally protect against unwanted indoctrination, opting children out of religious education does not constitute

respect for the beliefs of those children. States should be encouraged to view their obligations of respecting and fulfilling the right to freedom of religion as ones that include the teaching of a range of belief systems within the RE curriculum and the wider school curriculum.

3. When doctrinal or confessional religious education is permitted to be taught in schools, international human rights bodies should consider protecting the right to freedom of religion of minority belief individuals by requesting states to operate an opt-in rather than an opt-out mechanism. This approach would remove many of the dilemmas and difficulties typically encountered by minority belief individuals when considering whether to exercise their right to opt-out of religious education.

4. International human rights bodies should be prepared to examine complaints to do with religious liberty in schools under the child's independent right to freedom of religion rather than under a parental right. Such an approach would accord with the principles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Furthermore, it would indicate to Member States that relevant domestic legislation must acknowledge the right of the child in the decision-making process and that the right should transfer to the child in accordance with age and maturity.

Awareness of opt-outs

5. Education authorities (at national, regional or local government level as appropriate) should issue information to clarify that the right to opt out of religious education and collective worship is applicable to *all* schools. Standardised guidelines should be issued on appropriate practice for schools with regard to the notification of the right to opt out and the procedures to accommodate those wishing to exercise the right.

6. Schools should explain the right to opt out to parents and students through various avenues, including at open days, parent/teacher meetings, in school literature and via the school website.

7. To assist parents in making an opt-out decision, parents should be made aware of the content of the RE curriculum and assemblies for collective worship. The teaching of confessional or doctrinal religious instruction should be clearly notified to parents.

8. School managements should ensure all teachers are aware of the right to opt out and the process that should be followed if approached by a parent.

Procedural issues

9. Schools should have a well publicised set of clear and straightforward procedures setting out how parents can exercise their right to opt-out their child. Such policies and procedure should be reviewed by the school management on a regular basis.

Alternative provision

10. Where opt-outs are requested, schools should make every effort to provide alternative activities that are educational. Students and parents should be consulted in deciding on alternative provision. In order to avoid feelings of marginalisation or exclusion, schools should treat the issue as a pastoral matter and ensure that staff with responsibility for pastoral care are properly informed and involved in the process.

11. Schools should regularly review the situation of pupils who have opted out.

Curriculum implications

12. Schools should issue clear information to parents about the aims and purposes of their RE teaching. In particular they should clarify if their intentions are to promote a particular faith position or alternatively to teach inclusively about religion in a

balanced manner that is acceptable to people of all faiths and those of no religion.

13. All schools should review the content and approach of their Religious Education curriculum and periods of collective worship with the aim of making each more inclusive and welcoming of diversity in order to minimise the need for parents to withdraw their children. In this regard we commend the principles and practices indicated in the *Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching about Religions and Beliefs in Public Schools* (OSCE/ODIHR, 2007) and also the *Recommendation CM/Rec(2008)12 of the Committee of Ministers to member states on the dimension of religions and non-religious convictions within intercultural education* (Council of Europe, 2008).

14. Schools should deploy properly trained teachers for RE as for any other subject; the use of RE as a timetable-filler is unacceptable. Teachers should be made aware of their responsibilities in relation to people of minority belief, including the importance of using inclusive language and creating an ethos of inclusion.

15. The training of teachers specialising in RE should reflect the recommendations above. Particular attention should be given to the continuing professional development of RE teachers, especially any who have not

taken courses on world religions during their initial teacher education.

Recommendations specific to Northern Ireland

16. Given that all schools in Northern Ireland tend to follow a Christian ethos to a greater or lesser extent, the Department of Education for Northern Ireland should require all school types, irrespective of what domestic law permits them to teach in confessional or denominational RE, to ensure that some or all of their RE is non-confessional and inclusive and that parents and pupils are made fully aware of this. The increased provision of inclusive RE within the Northern Ireland education system would provide an option for minority belief students who wish to study RE and would also considerably reduce the need of many to opt out.

17. To enhance respect for the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion of minority belief students, RE in all school types should focus on the development of awareness, mutual respect and critical thought. World religions and non-religious life-stances should be included throughout the Key Stages of the Northern Ireland Curriculum, and particularly at Key Stages 2, 3 and 4, as appropriate to the ages and abilities of the pupils. To this end the Northern Ireland

Core Syllabus for Religious Education should be reconsidered and re-drafted by a group that is much more representative of the religions and beliefs of Northern Ireland than is presently the case.

18. The current uneven system of inspection of Religious Education in Northern Ireland, whereby many schools receive no external quality control on their provision, should be replaced by regular inspection from the Department of Education's Education and Training Inspectorate on the same basis as all other curriculum subjects. The Inspectorate should take particular account of the needs of pupils of minority religion and belief and of the functioning of opt-out mechanisms.

19. Schools should review the options available at public examination level (GCSE and A-level) in order to reflect greater religious diversity. Considerations should be given to revising the regulations for GCSE in order to stipulate the inclusion of at least one unit on world religions to be taken by each candidate, or by the inclusion of a broader range of religions within other modules, particularly those dealing with religious approaches to moral issues.

20. Domestic legislation should guarantee a child of sufficient maturity the right to withdraw from religious activities. In line

with the recommendation of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child that 'States parties should consult children at the local and national levels on all aspects of education policy', the Northern Ireland Department of Education should involve young people when consulting on the necessary legislative development and in determining the appropriate age at which the right should transfer from the parent to the child.

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