

Religious Education

Towards an Inclusive Approach in Northern Ireland

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ARE THERE ANY possible alternatives to the Churches' Core Syllabus for R.E.? Would it be better to exclude religious teaching altogether from publicly funded schools, as some people argue, or is there a place for teaching religion in a way that is genuinely *educational*?

It may be perceived that those who object to the nature and content of the Churches' Core Syllabus for Religious Education in Northern Ireland are entirely negative in their outlook, but this is certainly not the case. There are very different ways of teaching religious themes and topics, well-tried in other countries, which do not focus exclusively on one religious tradition and which do not make assumptions about the religious commitment or otherwise of either learners or teachers. Some teachers in Northern Ireland have already done their best to teach R.E. in this way, despite the constraints of the Core Syllabus. In this brief document I want to offer some key principles that might help give shape to a positive alternative approach to R.E. in a religiously and culturally plural society.

1. A fair and inclusive syllabus for Religious Education in publicly funded schools should be designed by representatives of various religious traditions, including the Christian Churches, and of other interest groups (for example, professional Religious Education bodies; Humanists; teaching unions). The Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order of 1989 requires a Core Syllabus for Religious Education to be produced by "persons having an interest in the teaching of Religious Education in grant-aided schools". Government has continuously interpreted this as applying only to the four largest Christian denominations, but such "interest in R.E." is clearly shared by others, including members of other faith communities.



2. An educational approach to the teaching of religion in schools could find a useful basis in internationally agreed human rights principles. The following statement, for example, offers a possible starting point for a rationale that could be widely acceptable in the publicly funded schools sector:

"... the education of the child shall be directed to ... the development of respect for ... his or her own cultural identity, language and values ... and for civilisations different from his or her own; ... in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship among all peoples, ethnic, national and religious groups and persons of indigenous origin ..."
(Article 29 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989))

3. An inclusive approach to Religious Education would seek to develop a balanced content, taking account of the religious traditions of the majority (Christian) but also of other traditions, particularly, though not exclusively, those with a local presence. Such an approach is suitable for *all age groups* (not just at Key Stage 3) and there are excellent resources available, nationally and locally, that can support such work at all stages of education.

4. Religious awareness and understanding can effectively be built on a developing knowledge of religious beliefs and practices, supported by a sensitive but open-ended exploration of questions of meaning and various religious and non-religious responses to them. In primary schools a thematic

approach may be particularly helpful in the process of religious learning; in post-primary schools a more systematic approach is often appropriate.

5. Religious learning must engage children both intellectually and affectively. Religious understanding is not just about building up knowledge, but also relates to emotional development and attitudinal development. It is sometimes suggested that the discussion of religious concepts and religious diversity is too difficult and confusing for young children. Yet the work of movements such as *Philosophy for Children* (Lipman and others) has demonstrated the capacity of children to discuss such issues so long as they are presented in a manner appropriate to children's age and aptitude.

6. Encouragement should be given to pupils to explore religious diversity, within as well as between religious traditions, according to age and ability. This should include the consideration of divergent truth claims and support for the development of skills in approaching controversial issues.

7. An inclusive Religious Education syllabus should have a particular focus on promoting inter-religious awareness and mutual understanding, in relation to Christianity and to other faiths and alternative life stances. Such understanding can only truly come about on the basis of open discussion of genuine differences. A Religious Education that did no more than reinforce stereotypes, even if only by the exclusion of alternative beliefs and practices, would be a very dangerous thing. R.E. teachers need specific awareness of religious diversity and keen skills in inter-religious encounter and dialogue.

8. Church schools and other faith-based schools in Northern Ireland, as elsewhere, regard their role as one of "faith formation", although the great majority of such schools in Northern Ireland ➤