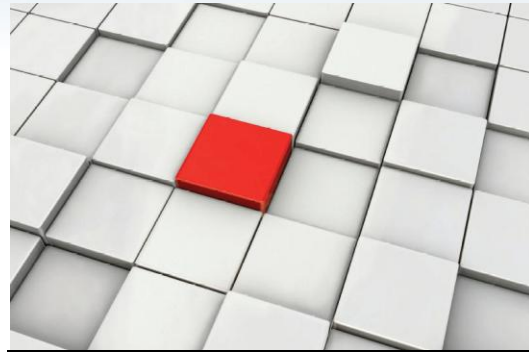


Opting out of RE could and should be easier: a case study from Northern Ireland



Project report cover image

In international human rights law, doctrinal religious instruction may take place in any school and an opt-out is regarded as sufficient protection for the freedom of thought, conscience and religion of those who do not wish to take part. Alison Mawhinney and her team, funded by [the Religion and Society Programme](#), set out to explore this opt-out's suitability for protecting religious liberty in the diverse society that is contemporary Northern Ireland, and found ignorance surrounding the option, difficulties and concerns about taking it, and desires for more inclusive Religious Education (RE).

Most schools are state funded in Northern Ireland and Christian in character. They are all obliged to provide RE according to the Core Syllabus for Religious Education, drawn up between the Catholic, Presbyterian, Anglican and Methodist Churches in Ireland, and hold a daily act of religious worship. Parents are entitled to opt their children out of both.

Interviews were conducted with Atheist, Baha'i, Hindu, Humanist, Jehovah's Witness, Jewish, Mormon and Muslim young people, parents and community representatives about opting-out, alongside a Pagan representative. Interviews revealed great variety of experiences, but the majority of parents had not been informed by their school about the opt-out. Some teachers and school management were also unaware of it. There was parental concern that children would stand out and feel excluded if opted-out. Dissatisfaction with the Christianity-focused curriculum was the chief reason for parents' decision to withdraw their children from RE (often the children had been attending and felt uncomfortable with the lesson content). The process of opting-out had been difficult for some. No conflict between young people and parents regarding their opt-out decisions was found. The young people learned about their belief systems mainly at home with their families. Generally students felt their faith respected in schools and appreciated efforts at inclusion, but some experienced embarrassment in RE classes and racist bullying at school. Overall, Northern Ireland was seen as a Christian country and so to know about this religion was felt to be helpful.

Based on their findings, the team concludes that the RE opt-out is at times insufficient to protect and respect minority beliefs. They recommend children be more directly involved in decision making. RE would be improved by requiring teaching on a range of beliefs. Standardized guidelines for appropriate practice for schools should be produced, and schools should explain the opt-out and content of the RE curriculum to parents and teachers and make good alternative provision for those pupils who do withdraw. In Northern Ireland specifically, consulting much more widely to rework the Core Curriculum for RE could reduce the number of pupils opting out.

Find out more...

- Download the project's report:
http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/uploads/docs/2010_10/1286011377_Optiting_out_of_Religious_Education_QUB_2010.pdf
- See the project's web page:
<http://www.law.qub.ac.uk/schools/SchoolofLaw/Research/ResearchProjects/OptingOutofReligiousEducation/>
- Read the Child Rights Information Network's Review 23 in which the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief Asma Jahangir references this project:
http://www.crin.org/docs/CRIN_review_23_final.pdf

You might also be interested in...

- The large project led by Jim Conroy at the University of Glasgow asking if RE in the works which is also funded by the Religion and Society Programme:
http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/research_findings/projects/phase_one/large_research_projects
- Mark Pike's Religion and Society funded research about Christian ethos schools in Britain:
http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/research_findings/featured_findings/christian_ethos_schools
- The report *Materials used to teach about World Religions in Schools in England* produced by Bob Jackson and most of the team at Warwick University involved in the Programme supported project [Young People's Attitudes to Religious Diversity](#):
http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/uploads/docs/2010_02/1265114944_DCSF-RR197.pdf
- The Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching about Religions and Beliefs in Public Schools which Alison Mawhinney and her team recommend for guidance on inclusive RE:
<http://www.osce.org/odihr/documents/29154>
- The European Wergeland Centre - a European resource centre on education for intercultural understanding, human rights and democratic citizenship: <http://www.theewc.org/content/about.ewc/>

Project Details

Award Title

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

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Research Partners

Advisory Group

The Advisory Group met several times during the course of the project. The group consisted of the following members:

Mr. Alf Armstrong (North East Education and Library Board)

Mr. Iain Deboys (Humani)

Mr. Edwin Graham (Inter-Faith Forum)

Mr. David Oldfield (former president, Association of Teachers and Lecturers)

Dr. Jacqueline Reilly (University of Ulster)

Dr. David Russell (Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission)

Mr. Patrick Yu (Northern Ireland Council for Ethnic Minorities)

Award Type

Phase 2 Small Grant

Key terms

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