

Conversations from a Troubled Past

- “Whatever you say, say nothing” Séamus Heaney, title of a poem from his collection entitled, ‘*North*’, 1975. This can make it quite difficult to have certain conversations even in ‘polite’ society in which we are advised to avoid talking about ‘religion or politics’. However, today we are going to be brave and sail our ship out of the ‘safe haven’ and examine the many conversations which are happening about that most controversial of subjects - Religious Education.
- Northern Ireland mainly known (until Game of Thrones came along) for its Troubled History and the resulting divisions in society.
- Norman Richardson has recorded and explained the historical context in the EFTRE Newsletter for many years so I am not going to rehearse the same discussion because thankfully, after almost 20 years of the same conversations going round and round without any resolution, there are several new strands to the conversation in the last two to three years which means that the RE curriculum is very much ‘back on the table’ again.
- While there has been some movement to more mixing of the community in certain areas of the province, many communities still live huddled together (in places still protected by ‘peace walls’) and are unwilling to let those they perceive as ‘other’ come to live among them. Many of these communities are still controlled by ‘former’ paramilitaries who ensure people stick to their rules with threats, intimidation and sometimes violent so-called ‘punishment’ attacks on those who ‘step out of line’.
- We still have a mainly divided system of education where over 90% of our children attend schools associated with the denomination of Christianity associated with their Community
- We still have a Core Syllabus for Religious Education in which other world religions are only (officially) to be taught in secondary school from the age of 11+

Conversations in a Changing Society

- In 1998 the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement brought peace and a power-sharing devolved government – generally successful with a couple of ‘breakdowns’ along the way where the government of Northern Ireland has reverted to Direct Rule from Westminster.
- Global and national factors have (despite Brexit) brought many more people from other parts of the world with their cultures and religions to live in NI.
- The 2021 Census records that 1.3% of the population now are members of religions other than Christianity – they are generally concentrated in particular communities with the highest concentration in Belfast, but significant communities in other smaller towns around the country.
- This figure is still significantly lower than in other parts of the UK, but most are young people or couples with young children who are, or will be of school-going age so the population growing up as members of another religion is bound to increase
- We are not immune to the increase in secularism in the Western world and the numbers of those of ‘no faith’ has increased dramatically to 17.4%
- These figures are significantly concentrated in particular areas of NI and are generally away from the areas of sectarian and inter-community division.
- The numbers of those attending Integrated schools has also increased with many formerly Controlled (Protestant) and one Maintained (Catholic) choosing to transform to Integrated status.
- The Integrated Education Act (2022) also requires that the Department of Education ‘encourages, supports, facilitates and provides for’ integrated schools ahead of other school sectors.
- August 2024 sadly saw a wave of anti-immigrant riots and disturbances across Northern Ireland when homes and businesses belonging to members of minority ethnic families, some of whom had lived and worked in NI for many years were looted, burned or attacked. There have been sporadic recurrences of racism and targeting of families in particular areas and communities since then (often involving young people) which shows more than ever the need for good RE and the promotion of respect for all faiths and ethnicities in schools from the early years onwards.

Conversations in the Law Courts

- In 2022 the High Court in NI found that the Northern Irish school curriculum for religious education was in breach of the ECHR rights of a child and her father as it was 'not sufficiently objective, critical and pluralistic'.
- *Article 9 ECHR and by A2P1 which requires any State that provides public education to "respect the right of parents to ensure such education... is in conformity with their own religious and philosophical convictions."*
- This was successfully appealed by the Department on the grounds that what was actually taught in class did not amount to *indoctrination* and that the parents had not exercised their right to withdraw the child from either RE or from Collective Worship.
- The appeal did however uphold the initial finding that the curriculum was not 'conveyed in an objective, critical and pluralistic manner'.
- This decision was appealed to the Supreme Court in May 2025, and we are still awaiting the outcome of their deliberations.

Conversations about Inclusive Religious Education

- The Core Syllabus for Religious Education in Northern Ireland was devised by the four largest Christian denominations.
- Protestant schools are required to teach non-denominational Christian RE based on the Holy Scriptures while Catholic Schools nurture the faith that community with a denominational confessional teaching and a strong Catholic ethos throughout the life of the school.
- Many schools now have pupils from a range of different religious backgrounds, or none, and some Controlled schools and most Integrated schools have begun to teach some aspects of world religions.
- Representatives of the four denominations had already begun working on a revision of the Core Syllabus to bring it more in line with the rest of the curriculum and also to include the study of other

religions in the primary school – before the JR was taken but progress was derailed by the collapse of the NI Assembly and then the wait for the outcome of the JR and then the Review of Education and of the Curriculum.

- There is a new group of Parents, mostly of humanist or atheist backgrounds which is combining the influence social media with research funded by the Integrated Education Fund and the support of one of the political parties in the Stormont Government to popularise the idea that the churches and religion generally were responsible for much of the sectarian division, and, by association, the main cause of the Troubles and to call for the removal of church-nominated governors from Boards of Management, Religious Education as part of the Core Curriculum and Collective Worship as part of the life of the school.

Conversations about Curriculum

- In January 2020, the Northern Ireland executive was restored following the ***New Decade, New Approach*** agreement, and devolved ministers resumed responsibility for governance in Northern Ireland.
- **As part of this agreement the DENI set up a sweeping Review of every aspect of education in Northern Ireland. Its terms of reference stated that it would be ‘expected to identify barriers within the education system which inhibit positive outcomes for children and young people as well as explaining structural issues which lead to inefficiencies or ineffectiveness’ – focus on quality, equity and sustainability of the system.**
- The churches used their collective and individual submissions to the Review to reiterate their call for a revision of the Core Syllabus as well as for more and better funding for schools and for pupils with Special Educational Needs.
- One of the many Recommendations of the Review was that the Department should “Undertake major reform of the curriculum and keep it under continual review”. The Curriculum currently in use dates from 2007 (almost 20 years ago now – although still referred to by teachers of a certain vintage as ‘the new curriculum’).

- Although the RE is not technically part of the Statutory Curriculum, Lucy Crehan was happy to engage with the TRC, as she did with the Council for Integrated schools and other stakeholders, and listen to the churches' concerns for the future of Religious Education going forward.
- The Final Report of the Curriculum Review published only on the 3rd June mentioned that there was agreement on the need to review it and to include the teaching of religions other than Christianity in the primary syllabus. A revised syllabus can be developed separately and in parallel to revision of the Northern Ireland Curriculum framework.
- It concluded that Religious education should be retained in the curriculum but as a balanced and neutral subject which incorporates morality and citizenship and teaches children in a factual way about the diverse religious and cultural landscape we now live in.
- It also calls for the development of a 'Knowledge-Rich' Curriculum and what that looks like in the context of RE is the subject of academic debate (another conversation) in England currently too. I will come back to this in a further slide.

Conversations about Church Engagement with Schools

- Do you know the joke about how to move a piano across to the other side of the church without anyone noticing – one inch per week! The movement of the churches has had to proceed at a glacial pace, and it has moved but moved so slowly that nobody has noticed. Certainly not the media, who love a villain and who paint churches and Christians as the enemies to progress, inclusion and whose motives are always suspect.
- The churches have profoundly changed their motivation and attitude towards their relationship with schools. They are no longer just seen as a convenient 'pool' from which to fish for members through the minister preaching at assembly in the morning and advertising the Bible Clubs held in the church hall. Church congregations now want to serve their community to witness to their Christian faith which gives selflessly asking nothing in return.
- In a school this translates into churches asking, "what can we do to help?" and looking for ways in which they can serve the whole school community. This can take the form of fundraising to equip a computer suite or sensory room, Gifts of educational resources or renovation of school property/outside spaces to alleviate pressure on school budgets, running 'uniform swap' or book

bank days in the church hall. Church volunteers are engaged in reading recovery programmes and mentoring schemes and homework clubs, where they come alongside children in need of a little extra support which cannot be supplied due to budget cuts in government programmes.

- Even the language used in RE lessons has become more inclusive (in most cases) with teachers now very aware that the children listening to them on a weekday are generally not attending churches on a Sunday morning and will, in most cases have little or no familiarity with the Bible Stories they are telling. They are encouraged to use inclusive language to explain that “Christians believe that.....” rather than “We believe.....” and to encourage pupils to think about their own beliefs as well as learning about the beliefs of others.
- Ministers and Christian organisations who are invited in to speak at Assemblies are also beginning to appreciate the difference between sharing their faith and evangelising and what is appropriate in a school context.
- The TRC is in the process of developing a Charter which ministers and groups can sign up to which outlines their respect for the beliefs and identities of everyone and acknowledges the rights to and respect for individuals’ own cultural, ethnic and faith background including those of no faith.
- This has been a huge shift in mindset, and we are aware that although church leaders endorse this new approach some ministers and lay people, sometimes even including teachers, still see the role of schools to teach and promote the Christian faith.

Conversations about Compulsory Curriculum Content in RE

- In Northern Ireland we are ‘listening in’ with interest on the Conversations about RE which are happening around the UK. The National Content Standard was developed by the RE Council in 2023 and provides benchmarks for evaluating excellence in RE but does not determine precisely what content schools should teach.
- The Curriculum Review in Northern Ireland has made much of the standardisation of content across schools which is aimed at eliminating the gaps in knowledge when pupils transfer from different Primary schools into larger secondary or grammar schools. Currently many teachers have to go back and teach topics which one group of children have never covered, some have covered at KS1 level and others in great detail in P7, just the previous year as 11 year olds.

- In RE the danger of a standardised curriculum is that it would remove the flexibility of schools to choose, for example, to teach about the particular world faiths of the pupils who actually attend their school.
- On the plus side, It might remove the ‘Cinderella Status’ of RE where teachers had to scrabble around for resources or relied on outdated printed resources passed down and re-photocopied for decades – if the curricular content was standardised *even if only across the Controlled (Protestant) sector* – there would be more of an incentive for local publishers to produce good quality up-to-date resources for schools.
- Catholic Schools have a resource for Religious Education which is used across all Catholic primary schools in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland and a study of RE Teaching in Integrated schools has come up with a suggested framework for RE in that context too.
- In England, Ofsted, the inspectorate recently completed a subject report for RE and found that in many cases the level of subject knowledge was too shallow and had no real meaning for children’s lives. It had too much content and did not leave time for engagement. In Northern Ireland we tend to be at least a decade behind educational innovations in the rest of the UK so if we can get teachers to teach world religions at all, we should start with the personal worldviews of the families who are part of their communities and encourage them to teach our children about their beliefs and how they impact on their lives.
- RE would also have to be inspected as part of the Core Curriculum, an outcome which all parties, including the churches, have been lobbying for, for a long time in Northern Ireland in an effort to get the educational standard of RE teaching raised and lessons not just given to the Infant teacher who happens to be a church goer, or reduced to a time-filler on a Friday afternoon where the children are read a Bible Story and then given a colouring sheet to keep them busy.
- What / Whose knowledge do you make compulsory? The Core Syllabus in Northern Ireland was a skeleton comprising what could be agreed by the four main churches at a particular time in the recent past, as necessary content with the option for schools to add in additional content as they felt necessary for the children and families they were teaching; and yet it was widely derided as providing the ‘Lowest Common Denominator’ and leading to cautious, unexciting teaching and lessons lacking relevance for the modern world.

- Religious Education is to be 'objective, critical and pluralistic' is that enough justification for removing the right to withdrawal. This was attempted in Wales and has led to several legal challenges. What about the conflict between the rights of parents and the best interests of the child?

Conversations about RE Going Forward.....

1. What conversations still have to happen?
2. Who will be involved in the conversations needed to revise the RE Core Syllabus?
3. What does a Knowledge-rich Curriculum look like in RE?
4. How do we continue the conversations around faith and ultimate truth in the classroom with integrity respecting the views and beliefs of all in a multi-faith society?