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The Primary Curriculum for Religious Education in Northern Ireland:

Making a case for epistemic justice

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ABSTRACT

Religious Education (RE) in Northern Ireland is taught according to the Core Syllabus produced by representatives of the region's four main Christian Churches and, at primary level, is exclusively Christian in content. In this chapter, we apply the lens of epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007) to examine the implications of this given an increasingly diverse society and pupil population. Drawing on a recent study of educational experiences among minority ethnic and migrant groups, we suggest that the primary RE curriculum may perpetuate epistemic injustice in three ways: by impeding children from minority faith traditions from sharing their experiences in a way meaningful to their peers; by reducing the resources available to children to make sense of encounters with other religious traditions; and through a lack of appropriate alternative arrangements for pupils whose parents withdraw their children from RE. We conclude with recommendations to increase epistemic justice within the primary RE curriculum.

RESEARCH CONTEXT

While Northern Ireland (NI) has long been home to ethnic minority communities, the decades since the 1998 Belfast/Good Friday Agreement have seen substantial inward migration. This, combined with growing secularism in society, has resulted in the proportion of children from 'other' (i.e. neither Catholic nor Protestant) or no religious background almost trebling from 7% in 2002/03 to 20% in 2022/23 (DENI, 2023).¹

Despite this increasing religious diversity, as well as a curriculum aspiration to foster "mutual understanding in the local and global community" (CCEA, 2007, p.2), the NI Core Syllabus for Religious Education (RE) remains largely Christian in content. Designed by a Working Group comprising representatives of the four main Christian Churches – Catholic, Presbyterian, Church of Ireland and Methodist – the curriculum was considered an "ecumenical achievement" when it was issued in 1993 (Armstrong, 2011, p.297), but received some criticism for its monoreligious orientation (Barnes, 2002). A revised syllabus, issued in 2007, includes a requirement to teach two 'world religions' at Key Stage 3, but remains exclusively Christian at primary level, as reflected in its three learning objectives: 'the

¹ Current data collection practices in NI do not permit the disaggregation of numbers specifying 'other religion' and 'no religion' respectively.

Revelation of God’, ‘the Christian Church’ and ‘[Christian] Morality’ (DENI, 2007). This chapter considers the implications of this, particularly for children from other religious traditions.

LITERATURE

Arguments justifying or critiquing the curricular focus on Christianity often centre around the types of knowledge that are deemed important – for example, knowledge of Christianity in a society in which it remains dominant, or knowledge of different religious traditions in the context of increasing religious diversity (Barnes, 2002; Nelson, 2019). Questions of what knowledge is valued, and particularly how knowledge transmission processes perpetuate social inequalities, are central to Fricker’s (2007) work on epistemic injustice, which she defines as “consisting, most fundamentally, in a wrong done to someone specifically in their capacity as a knower” (2007, p.1). Fricker defines two forms of epistemic injustice: ‘testimonial injustice’, where a speaker is accorded reduced credibility on account of identity bias; and ‘hermeneutical injustice’, whereby a lacuna in the collective interpretive resources impedes a person’s ability to make sense of their social experiences. The latter is particularly pertinent to our analysis.

Within education, scholars have suggested that children are at particular risk of hermeneutical marginalisation as they lack power in decisions about what they learn and thus the knowledge they receive to interpret the world (McNulty and Henning, 2019). Members of racially minoritised groups are also at risk as they are under-represented in knowledge construction processes, including curriculum development (Omodan, 2023). Where such marginalisation constitutes injustice – that is, Fricker (2007) argues, where absences in the collective hermeneutical resources are “harmful but also wrongful, whether because discriminatory or because otherwise unfair” (p.151) – the impacts can be substantial. In education, these include the devaluation and erasure of minority histories, philosophies and cultural perspectives (Omodan, 2023), and lack of opportunity to explore and engage with alternative knowledges and worldviews – outcomes antithetical to contemporary decolonisation movements, which seek to interrogate and challenge the primacy of Western knowledge systems. This marginalisation, in turn, can impede a subject’s ability to express their experiences intelligibly, thereby reducing their intellectual confidence (Omodan, 2023).

OBJECTIVE, AIMS, QUESTIONS

The research that forms the basis of this chapter was conducted as part of a 2-year study examining the educational experiences of minority ethnic groups in NI, funded by the Nuffield Foundation (Loader et al., 2023). Involving participation from children, parents and educational and policy stakeholders,

the study represents the most substantial piece of research to date exploring perspectives on schooling among, and for, minority ethnic and migrant families in the region.

An objective of the research was to examine how the curriculum is responding both to an increasingly multicultural pupil population and to wider calls for the diversification and decolonisation of knowledge. This has received limited attention in educational research in NI to date, which has more commonly focused on the representation of British/Protestant/Unionist and Irish/Catholic/Nationalist perspectives and traditions in the curriculum. Thus, the study provided a vehicle to explore this topic.

METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

The research comprised three phases, the first involving analysis of relevant regional and school-level policy, including the curriculum for Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 3, and available educational data. The second phase comprised interviews with children (aged 9-15) from minority ethnic and migrant backgrounds across NI and their parent(s)/carer(s) to explore their experiences of education. In total, 62 children and 53 parents were interviewed, typically in their home or a community venue. Interviews with children were based around a creative task for which materials were provided. The third phase involved interviews and focus groups with 43 individuals working in educational policy and delivery, including teachers, and community organisations that support minority ethnic and migrant populations. Ethical approval for this research was received from the departmental ethics committee at the authors' institution. In this chapter, we draw principally on curriculum analysis and relevant interview data to reflect on the provision of RE at primary level.

ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

The Core Syllabus at Key Stage 2 includes an objective to “develop an awareness, knowledge, understanding and appreciation of the key Christian teachings” (DENI, 2007, p.13); in comparison, pupils need only become “aware of and have respect for differing cultures and faiths” as a manifestation of “Christian moral principles” (DENI, 2007, p.19). In this way, the curriculum establishes Christianity as normative within the school and society and “communicates a message that certain knowledge systems are superior or more valid than others” (Omodan, 2023, p.4). This may marginalise those from minority traditions directly, through the exclusion of their experience from the curriculum, and indirectly, by fostering an educational and social climate in which these traditions lack value, as the following participant recognised:

“I think we should have a fundamental review of collective worship and religious education in schools... It must be welcoming to all, even if you don't have any ethnic minorities in your school. And I think that's the misconception. 'Oh we don't have any ethnic minorities in this

school. It doesn't matter therefore that we only do this.' Yes, it does. Because you're giving a message to the young people who are in your school. You're actually devaluing everything else." (Stakeholder)

Interviews also revealed that, for those teachers who wished to acknowledge diverse beliefs and religions beyond Christianity, there was only enough space to do this in a fragmentary way, typically through teaching about individual festivals such as Diwali and Eid. This serves to reinforce a religious hierarchy as, while Christianity is taught as an integrated belief system, other traditions are not afforded similar epistemic status or coherence.

Through this marginalisation of other religious traditions, we suggest that the Core Syllabus may perpetuate epistemic injustice in three ways, first by impeding children from faiths other than Christianity from sharing their social experiences in a way meaningful to both them and their peers. As the current curriculum provides only the concepts and language of Christianity to communicate religious experience, children from other faith traditions may find that the available hermeneutical resources offer "at best ill-fitting meanings to draw on in the effort to render [their social experiences] intelligible" to others (Fricker, 2007, p.148). The hegemony of Christianity is such that children may find themselves having to 'translate' their experiences into terms familiar from Christian teaching.

Second, by limiting teaching about the range of religions and beliefs in NI, the curriculum reduces the hermeneutical resources available to all children to make sense of their encounters with faiths or belief systems of which they are not members. This may be considered an injustice against children in their capacity as knowers, given their lack of influence over the curriculum that maintains their ignorance. Moreover, in the absence of such information, children may rely on what hermeneutical resources are available to evaluate other religions. Due to the marginalisation of members of minority faiths, such resources are "unduly influenced by more hermeneutically powerful groups" (Fricker, 2007, p.155) and may portray non-Christian religious traditions unfavourably, particularly Islam (see Ahmed and Matthes, 2017). This, in turn, can precipitate the development of negative attitudes towards these faiths among children, as one mother described:

Some of them, the boys in [my son's] school, were telling about terrorists, that Muslim represents terrorism... So I think that awareness is very important. Telling people what is, for example the real Islam. What do Muslims do, real Muslims, what our values are, what we believe in. Because it's so prevalent, that Islam is a religion of killing... I remember he said that in first year and second year. (Mother, Indian ethnic group)

This participant reports that children had formulated prejudiced views of Islam before the first year of post-primary school, when 'world religions' are first introduced in the curriculum. This was also the

experience of teachers interviewed by Nelson and Yang (2022), who reported that such attitudes could subsequently inhibit pupils' willingness to learn about other religions. The interviewee's reference, above, to the association of Muslims with terrorism illustrates, furthermore, how the available hermeneutic resources also shape perceptions of faith group members, such that the latter can be "socially constituted as... something they are not, and which it is against their interests to be seen to be" (Fricker, 2007, p.168). This constitutes a further example of hermeneutic injustice – one that might be diminished by the earlier introduction of 'world religions'.

Third, where parents do not wish their children to participate in exclusively Christian RE, the only alternative, which is to withdraw the child from all RE teaching, may entrench epistemic inequalities. Like some parents interviewed by Richardson and colleagues (2013), we found that provision for pupils withdrawn from RE is often inequitable and lacks a defined educational purpose, with reported activities including drawing or using an iPad. Several participants also stated that withdrawn pupils remained in the classroom where RE was taught: "*the lesson is for Christianity so we Muslim students have to stay at the back*". These examples suggest that RE at primary level risks perpetuating epistemic injustice both by failing to provide teaching of equal educational value to pupils from other faith traditions (and none) and by failing to respect parents' decisions that their child *not* be exposed to certain knowledge.

STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS

A key strength of this research is the inclusion of the perspectives of children, parents, and educational, policy and community stakeholders among the participant group, permitting exploration of multiple perspectives concerning practice in RE. The principal limitation is that, as data were collected as part of a larger project which prioritised ethnic rather than religious diversity in the selection criteria, some faith traditions were under-represented in the sample. A more focused research project, with purposive sampling to maximise participation from participants from a range of faith backgrounds, would provide further insight into variations in experience.

IMPACT AND NEXT STEPS

A High Court judicial review in 2022 ruled that the RE curriculum for state-controlled primary schools in NI "is not conveyed in an objective, critical and pluralist manner" and is thus unlawful according to the European Convention on Human Rights (JR87, Re Application for Judicial Review (Rev1) [2022], p.23). The Department of Education is expected to review the primary RE curriculum in the light of this ruling, though the outcome of an appeals process, underway at the time of writing, may circumscribe

the resulting reform. Based on this research, we make the following recommendations to ensure that future arrangements meet the criteria of being both human rights-compliant and epistemically just:

- Include members and adherents of major world religions and worldviews alongside Christian representatives on the working group responsible for drafting a revised syllabus.
- De-centre Christianity within the primary curriculum to allow for more substantive content on other religions and worldviews.
- Encourage the teaching of religious plurality as a priority in schools with limited religious diversity.
- Require schools to provide alternative activities of educational value for pupils whose parents exercise their right to withdraw them from RE.

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