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Religion and Worldviews Education for All. Possibilities for change to religious education in Northern Ireland

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RELIGION & WORLDVIEWS EDUCATION FOR ALL:

Possibilities for Change to Religious Education in Northern Ireland

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CULHAM ST GABRIEL'S
GRANT FUNDED PROJECT

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Executive Summary

The **'Religion and Worldviews Education for All' (RWE for All)** project was devised to explore possibilities for an inclusive approach to religious education in Northern Ireland (NI). Our aim was to build an evidence base which would provide insights into:

a) current attitudes to religious education in Northern Ireland among the general population;

b) the views of those who belong to groups that up to now have had limited or no opportunities to influence or contribute to syllabus design in religious education; and

c) the perspectives of primary school teachers and school leaders with a particular interest in religious education.

A secondary aim was to provide opportunities for dialogue and education around religious education by supporting education professionals, parents of school-age children and other stakeholders in education to explore new possibilities for teaching and learning the subject in primary schools in NI.

To meet these aims we conducted research that involved: a representative survey of the NI population; focus groups with community representatives in a 'Dialogue Group' format; and a focus group with primary school teachers.

The survey was undertaken on behalf of the Queen's University research team by LucidTalk in February 2025. There were 3,001 responses to the survey; after data were cleaned and weighted by gender and community background to ensure a representative sample, 1,051 responses were recorded. The Dialogue Group consisted of 19 members with an interest in religious education, including those who belong to belief groups that have previously had little input into curriculum design. The group met six times between October 2024 and May 2025. The focus group with primary school teachers (n=7) was held in June 2025. This involved teachers with a range of experience, including one principal with whole-school curriculum responsibility, four teachers involved in coordinating religious education in their schools, and two recently graduated teachers with experience of teaching the subject.

Key Findings

1. PUBLIC ATTITUDES TO CURRENT ARRANGEMENTS FOR PRIMARY RELIGIOUS EDUCATION (SURVEY FINDINGS)

The survey revealed divergent attitudes toward current RE practices based on religious background, but indicated an appetite for reform:

- **Church control:** There was considerable dissatisfaction (42% overall) with the fact that churches are responsible for writing the RE syllabus. This dissatisfaction was highest among respondents of no religion (88%).
- **Christian focus:** Roughly equal proportions of the general population were dissatisfied (38%) and satisfied (37%) that primary school children are only required to learn about Christian beliefs and practices.
- **Group differences:** Protestant respondents expressed the highest satisfaction levels with current arrangements (over 60% on most items). Conversely, Catholic, non-religious, and other faith respondents expressed significantly greater dissatisfaction.

2. PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR BROADER AIMS AND SOCIAL PURPOSES OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION (SURVEY FINDINGS)

The survey showed widespread support for reforming RE to achieve social outcomes:

- **Social benefits:** At least 60% of all respondents agreed that learning about a range of religions and beliefs in primary schools would contribute to specified social benefits, such as **highlighting freedom of religion** (73% agreement) and **reducing prejudice** (65% agreement).
- **Desired aims:** There was strong support (over 50% agreement) for aims not currently central to the syllabus, including helping pupils to **understand different religious worldviews** (65% agreement) and **different non-religious worldviews** (59% agreement).

- **Christian faith:** The lowest level of support was recorded for the aim to **accept or deepen Christian faith and beliefs** (45% agreement, 24% disagreement), despite this arguably being the most prevalent aim in the existing curriculum.

3. EXPERIENCES OF PRIMARY RELIGIOUS EDUCATION AND CALLS FOR INCLUSIVITY (QUALITATIVE FINDINGS)

The Dialogue Group and teacher focus group highlighted critical issues regarding current practice:

- **Confessional nature and indoctrination risk:** Participants widely reported that religious education is experienced as **confessional Christian teaching**, with some raising concerns that it borders on indoctrination.
- **Assemblies and external visitors:** Assemblies are closely linked to religious education and school ethos through acts of collective worship. Teachers and parents reported discomfort regarding some visitors who deliver age-inappropriate, judgemental, or fear-inducing messages as part of assemblies.
- **The dilemma of withdrawal:** While withdrawal from religious education or collective worship is a legal right, parents described it as an **'impossible dilemma'**. Choosing withdrawal risks 'othering' or excluding the child, while alternative provision is often vague, inadequate, or lacks educational value.
- **Vision for religious education:** The majority of participants across the Dialogue Group and teacher focus group favoured an inclusive, shared religion and worldviews education from which no one would need to withdraw. This was envisaged as a separate curricular area, distinct from religious observance.
- **Pedagogy and content:** There was a general desire that inclusive religious education would be **person-centred**, acknowledging that every child has a worldview, whether religious or non-religious. It should include philosophical enquiry, different 'ways of knowing' religion and beliefs (e.g. historical, sociological, theological) and connect to 'lived religion'—the contemporary, local expressions of beliefs.

4. TEACHER VULNERABILITY AND LACK OF CONSISTENCY (QUALITATIVE FINDINGS)

Teachers reported significant inconsistency in the provision of religious education (e.g. resources used, time allocated) across and within school types. They identified feeling vulnerable and unprepared to manage the growing diversity of beliefs in their classrooms, often lacking the necessary subject knowledge, professional development, or policy guidance. Teachers often felt caught between competing expectations from principals, governors, parents, and curriculum requirements for religious education.

Conclusions

The research confirms that **the current Core Syllabus for Religious Education is not suitable** for Northern Ireland's increasingly plural environments and creates challenging ethical circumstances for children, parents, and teachers. Despite these challenges, there is **widespread support for forms of religious education** in schools which are inclusive of diverse religious and worldview perspectives. There is also broad sympathy with aims that seek to build a cohesive and peaceful society, tackle prejudice and misinformation, and create positive, respectful relations through understanding diverse beliefs and ways of life.

Key necessities for change include:

- **Establishing a new approach to the curriculum review process for religious education:** A fundamental step is moving control of the subject away from the exclusive responsibility of churches to include a wide and diverse range of faith and belief groups, supported by a professional curriculum authority.
- **Developing an inclusive religious education syllabus:** The new syllabus must be person-centred and support teaching about religions and worldviews in 'dignity safe' environments which guarantee equal status for all pupils.

- **Policy leadership:** Strong policy leadership is needed to provide clear guidance for teachers and principals in relation to pedagogical expectations for teaching religious education. Similarly, guidance on alternative provision for pupils who have been withdrawn is essential.
- **Enhanced teacher professional learning (TPL):** TPL is crucial to address subject knowledge gaps, help teachers reflect on their position when teaching in plural classrooms and ensure they are provided with a strong educational rationale for religious education.
- **Ensuring professional standards in school assemblies:** To guard against pupils being exposed to material that is inappropriate, a code of conduct for external visitors should be developed.
- **Extending community connections:** Exploring community links with a diverse range of established religious and worldview groups could help schools to develop alternative responses to religion beyond confessionalism or secularism.
- **Quality control:** To ensure consistency of standards and quality of educational provision, mechanisms for the professional evaluation of religious education in schools should be prioritised.

Introduction

Religion has been and remains deeply intertwined with education in Northern Ireland. Historically, Christian churches or Christian philanthropists were instrumental in the establishment and running of many schools, and when national schools were provided by the state from the nineteenth century onwards, they too came under the influence or guardianship of Christian churches (Akenson, 1973). The result has been the development of a school system where almost all schools have a Christian ethos. At primary level, Catholic maintained schools are under the trusteeship of the Catholic Church and managed by the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS).[1] Controlled schools are 'non-denominational' Christian schools which reserve places on their Boards of Governors for representatives of Protestant Churches[2] and are assisted by the Controlled Schools' Support Council in cultivating an ethos grounded in 'Christian core values and principles'.[3] Integrated schools are 'essentially Christian in character'[4] and intentionally bring together children from Protestant, Catholic and other backgrounds.

The Christian influence upon schools is reflected in local legislation which mandates for compulsory religious education and collective worship, based upon the 'Holy Scriptures'.[5] Since 1997, a common Core Syllabus for Religious Education (DENI 1993; 2007) which was produced by four Christian churches has been in place for all schools. At Primary level the three areas of study are: The Revelation of God, The Christian Church and Christian Morality. The syllabus encourages teachers to help children 'to develop an awareness, knowledge, understanding and appreciation of' key Christian teaching and beliefs as well as 'to relate Christian moral principles to personal and social life' (DENI, 2007). In practice, religious education and collective worship are seen as 'two sides of the same coin' (Hunter & Richardson, 2018, p. 13). Collective worship varies according to the school type though is likely to involve assemblies in which one or more elements of Christian practice are included, such as scripture reading, prayers, songs, and a homily or reflection led by school staff, local clergy or representatives of Christian organisations.

While grounded in their Christian values and practices, the school sectoral bodies and schools themselves are keen to underline their inclusivity and openness to all (Gracie & Brown, 2019; O'Connor, 2002; The Catholic Bishops of Northern Ireland, 2001). Indeed, there are many examples of schools which celebrate their diverse pupil populations whether in relation to their pupils' nationalities, cultures, languages or religions. Organisations such as Schools of Sanctuary[6] or Community Relations in Schools[7] support all school sectors in both educating and celebrating their diverse populations within schools or across the wider community.

Nonetheless, there are concerns that the ability of schools to be inclusive spaces for children from a wide range of worldviews is constrained or made more difficult by several factors including the expectation of participation in Christian practices during assemblies and the narrowness of the religious education curriculum. The Independent Review of Education in Northern Ireland expressed dissatisfaction with the current Core Syllabus and stated that 'the increasing diversity of Northern Irish society makes it highly desirable that a review be undertaken in the near future' (Bloomer et al., 2023, Section 4.100). They added that a new syllabus '…should help young people to understand the society in which they are growing up, including both its increasing diversity and its Christian traditions and heritage… It should be knowledge-based and separate from religious observance' (op.cit. sec. 4.101).

In investigations into the experiences of newcomer and migrant children, it was shown that for those young people who came from belief backgrounds that were minorities in Northern Ireland, current arrangements for religious education had the effect of either marginalising them or risked denying them their right to freedom of belief (Niens et al., 2013). This can impede young people from minority faith traditions sharing their experiences in ways that are meaningful to them and prevents them from having their beliefs validated within the school community (Loader et al., 2024).

[1] CCMS https://www.ccmsschools.com/
[2] Three Protestant denominations coordinate their educational efforts, including involvement on school boards, in the Transferor Representatives' Council (TRC), https://trc-churcheducation.org/
[3] https://www.csscni.org.uk/about-us/history
[4] https://nicie.org/what-is-integrated-education/
[5] The Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986, Part III, 21(2)
[6] https://www.eani.org.uk/school-management/intercultural-education-service-ies/schools-of-sanctuary
[7] https://www.crisni.org/

Furthermore, research carried out by Parents for Inclusive Education (2024) highlighted that schools regularly invite clergy and members of evangelical religious organisations into schools as part of their religious education classes or school assemblies. In many cases parents are not informed about the extent of this input, nor given a choice about their child's involvement, and in cases where children are withdrawn, they are not provided with a reasonable alternative. This confirmed previous findings that parents were unaware of their rights to withdrawal (Richardson et al., 2013) and that parents often chose to keep their children in assemblies due to the pressure to conform or to prevent their child experiencing a sense of exclusion (Mawhinney et al., 2010).

In addition to these concerns around assemblies and curriculum content, there has been a view expressed that it is not only the current practice that needs attention but the processes by which decisions are made about religious education (Loader et al., 2024; Richardson, 2014). The Department of Education (DE) has traditionally adopted a laissez-faire approach to matters of religion in education (Nelson & Irwin, 2017): religious education is not subject to inspection by Northern Ireland's Education and Training Inspectorate, and control over the curriculum and provision has been devolved to the four churches. When concerns were raised about the fairness of this during the revision of the Core Syllabus in 2007, a number of mitigations were offered by the DE including the establishment of a Religious Education Advisory Council, the review of the syllabus in relation to equality impacts, and consideration given to introducing inspection of religious education. However, the Advisory Council was stood down in 2019 and, despite an attempt to re-establish it in 2022-23, has not met since January 2023. There is no evidence that either of the other proposals have been pursued further.

A Supreme Court decision[8] in November 2025 has, however, changed the context significantly. The decision related to a child (JR87) from Northern Ireland whose parents believed their right to freedom of religion (Article 9 of the European Convention of Human Rights) was infringed by the religious education in their daughter's controlled school. They argued that the Core Syllabus for Religious Education did not meet the standards set in the European Court of Human Rights that religious education in publicly funded schools be objective, critical and plural (Nelson & Richardson, 2025). The judges unanimously agreed that there had been a breach of rights under Article 2(i) of the First Protocol (read with Article 9) of the European Convention of Human Rights which respects the right of parents to bring up their child in conformity with their own religious or philosophical conviction. They added that the right to withdrawal from religious education and collective worship, which was available to JR87's parents, was an inadequate mitigation as it was capable of putting an undue burden on both the parents and the child. For example, the parents could have been brought into conflict with the school and the child could have experienced stigmatisation.

This judgment means that the current Core Syllabus for Religious Education (2007) must be replaced with a curriculum that is 'objective, critical and plural'. For those parents who choose to opt their children out from religious education classes or collective worship, significant efforts must be made to ensure the process of opting out does not place an undue burden on them or their child. Further, the judges were clear that there is a positive duty upon governing authorities in the UK to inspect religious education and take action if it is not being taught in an objective, critical and plural manner.

Following the Supreme Court Judgement, the Department for Education in Northern Ireland must give careful attention to developing a new syllabus. This will include addressing questions such as who will be involved in writing the new syllabus, what name the subject is given, its overall aims and how it will be resourced. Similarly, clear guidance will be needed on how schools manage religious practices in assemblies, classrooms or dining halls. As well as strong leadership, however, there must also be listening and consultation. At present, there are few structures, processes or networks to facilitate new ways forward. Until now, those from minority religions, non-religious groups, or Christian churches other than those with historical control in education have been largely shut out of decision-making processes. It is also important that those drafting guidance or curricula are aware of current attitudes to religious education among the wider public. It is hoped that this research can inform that work as it develops.

[8] In the matter of an application by JR87 and another for Judicial Review (Appellant). Neutral citation: [2025] UKSC 40. 19 November 2025. https://supremecourt.uk/uploads/uksc_2024_0095_judgment_074a604162.pdf

The 'RWE for All' Research Project

The Religion and Worldviews Education for All project was designed with the purpose of exploring possibilities for an inclusive approach to religious education in Northern Ireland. We received funding for the project from Culham St Gabriel's Trust. The term 'religion and worldviews education' (RWE) was chosen as it includes not only the well-known religious traditions but those beliefs and ways of life that are grounded in non-theistic value systems. Our aim was to build an evidence base which would provide insights into:

a) current attitudes to religious education in Northern Ireland among the general population;

b) the views of those who belong to groups that up to now have had limited or no opportunities to influence or contribute to syllabus design in religious education; and

c) the perspectives of primary school teachers and school leaders with a particular interest in religious education.

A secondary aim was to provide opportunities for dialogue and education around religious education by supporting education professionals, parents of school-age children and other stakeholders in education to explore new possibilities for teaching and learning the subject in primary schools in Northern Ireland. It was hoped that in facilitating such spaces we would build capacity for participants to bring forward creative responses to current challenges.

Our decision to focus upon primary schools was influenced by the context. The JR87 case concerns a child of primary school age, and it has highlighted a lack of knowledge about what happens in religious education in that particular phase of schooling. Additionally, at primary school level, the compulsory Core Syllabus for Religious Education in Northern Ireland is exclusively Christian in content and potentially creates challenges unique to this phase of schooling for some teachers, parents and pupils as school populations become more plural.

We adopted a multi-method approach (Hesse-Biber & Johnson, 2015) which involved the collection of both quantitative and qualitative data: a representative survey of the Northern Ireland population in relation to their views of religious education; six focus group sessions with individuals from belief-based organisations or groups who are minorities in Northern Ireland, who formed a Dialogue Group along with a number of educators with an interest in religious education; and one extended focus group with primary school teachers. More details on the methodological approaches are contained within relevant sections below.

To assist us in recruiting members of the Dialogue Group, researchers developed partnerships with two community groups who have a particular interest in religious education: the Northern Ireland Interfaith Forum and Parents for Inclusive Education.

Survey

Method

The polling was conducted by LucidTalk, a leading polling and market research company in Northern Ireland, on behalf of the Queen's University research team. The aim of the poll was to explore attitudes to religious education (RE) among a representative sample of the Northern Ireland population. The researchers and project partners, in consultation with LucidTalk, devised three questions for inclusion in LucidTalk's quarterly Omnibus poll. These addressed views of current provision for religious education in Northern Ireland; the potential contribution of religious education to a range of social benefits (e.g., peacebuilding, reducing prejudice, promoting recognition of religious and non-religious worldviews); and the purpose of religious education. The questions are provided in Appendix 1.

The polling was conducted online and by telephone during the period 14th-17th February 2025. Participants were drawn from the Lucid Talk's online Opinion Panel, which comprises over 16,000 members who are reflective of the Northern Ireland population in terms of gender, age, geographical residence and community background. There were 3,001 responses to the survey; after data were cleaned and weighted by gender and community background to ensure a representative sample, 1,051 responses were recorded. These responses are used in the analysis below. Data are accurate to a margin of error of +/-2.3%, at 95% confidence interval.

Findings

Attitudes to current arrangements

The first question asked participants for their responses to a series of statements regarding current arrangements for religious education in Northern Ireland, using a scale from 1 (completely dissatisfied) to 5 (completely satisfied). Responses for all participants are given in **Table 1**.

Notable from the table is the strength of feeling at either end of the scale, with at least half of respondents selecting either 'very dissatisfied' or 'very satisfied' in response to items 1-4'. While similar proportions were 'neutral' towards current arrangements, comparatively few participants selected other options. Combining options 1 and 2 ('very dissatisfied' and 'quite dissatisfied') and 4 and 5 ('quite satisfied' and 'very satisfied'), there appears to be greatest satisfaction with the current principle that the same syllabus should be taught to all children, irrespective of their beliefs (46% satisfied). There is considerable dissatisfaction with the fact that churches are responsible for writing the religious education syllabus (42% dissatisfied).

A larger proportion of participants were satisfied than dissatisfied that religious education is compulsory for all pupils (41% satisfied) and that teaching about morality is done in the context of Christian beliefs (40% satisfied), but in both cases almost a third (32%) of respondents were dissatisfied with existing arrangements. Interestingly, roughly equal proportions were dissatisfied (38%) and satisfied (37%) that primary school children are only required to learn about Christian beliefs and practice. Across all questions, the proportion reporting neutral views (25%-30% in each case) suggests that a substantial group may be equally accepting of the current arrangements or options for reform.

As highlighted in later chapters of this report, the content and delivery of religious education at primary level in Northern Ireland may differ by school sector. Given the association between community background and school management type, data were disaggregated to explore views of religious education by religious background, and notable differences were identified. Protestant respondents expressed the greatest satisfaction with current arrangements for religious education, with satisfaction levels of over 60% for four of the five statements. Relative to other statements, Protestant respondents reported slightly lower levels of satisfaction with the fact that the churches are responsible for writing the religious education syllabus, but over half (52%) remained satisfied with this. In comparison, Catholic respondents expressed greater dissatisfaction with current arrangements for religious education, notably the role of the church in writing the religious education syllabus (40% dissatisfied compared with 23% satisfied) and the requirement for primary school children only to learn about Christian beliefs and practices (44% dissatisfied compared with 20% satisfied). The one item attracting net satisfaction among Catholic respondents was that the same syllabus is taught to all children (36% satisfied, 23% dissatisfied), though it should be noted that here, as elsewhere, a significant proportion were neutral on the issue.

Respondents from non-religious backgrounds were consistently the most dissatisfied with existing arrangements for religious education, with dissatisfaction rates over 50% on all items. Particular dissatisfaction was expressed concerning the role of the churches in producing the religious education syllabus (88% dissatisfied), the requirement for primary school children only to learn about Christian beliefs and practices (72% dissatisfied), and the teaching of morality in the context of Christian beliefs (73% dissatisfied).

A majority of those selecting 'other faith/prefer not to say' were also dissatisfied with arrangements for writing the religious education syllabus (58% dissatisfied) and with the focus on Christian beliefs and practices at primary level (56% dissatisfied). Like Catholic respondents, however, this group was also slightly more favourably disposed to teaching the same syllabus to all children regardless of belief (42% satisfied compared with 36% dissatisfied).

Table 1: Attitudes to current arrangements for religious education in Northern Ireland

At present all primary schools are required to teach a Core Syllabus for Religious Education which has been written by the four largest Christian churches (Catholic, Presbyterian, Church of Ireland, Methodist). It contains 3 main topics the revelation of God, The Christian Church and Christian Morality. On the scale below please indicate how satisfied you feel about each of the statements regarding these current arrangements for religious education in Northern Ireland.

	1 COMPLETELY DISSATISIFIED	2	3 NEUTRAL	4	5 COMPLETELY SATISFIED
Religious education is compulsory for all children	24%	8%	27%	13%	28%
Churches are responsible for writing the religious education syllabus	32%	10%	26%	11%	21%
Primary school children are only required to learn about Christian beliefs and practices	28%	10%	25%	12%	25%
Teaching about morality is done in the context of Christian beliefs	22%	10%	28%	12%	28%
The same syllabus is taught to all children irrespective of their beliefs	17%	7%	30%	15%	31%

Table 2: Attitudes to current arrangements for religious education in Northern Ireland by religious background

Indicate how satisfied you feel about each of the statements regarding these current arrangements for religious education in Northern Ireland.

	COMMUNITY BACKGROUND (RELIGION)	1 COMPLETELY DISSATISIFIED	2	3 NEUTRAL	4	5 COMPLETELY SATISFIED
Religious education is compulsory for all children	Catholic	22%	11%	35%	17%	15%
	Protestant	10%	6%	20%	14%	50%
	Other Religion/ Prefer not to say	37%	4%	23%	14%	23%
	No religion	57%	8%	26%	6%	3%
Churches are responsible for writing the religious education syllabus	Catholic	30%	10%	37%	11%	12%
	Protestant	12%	8%	27%	15%	37%
	Other Religion/ Prefer not to say	42%	16%	20%	10%	11%
	No religion	78%	10%	9%	1%	2%
Primary school children are only required to learn about Christian beliefs and practices	Catholic	30%	14%	36%	11%	9%
	Protestant	9%	8%	20%	15%	48%
	Other Religion/ Prefer not to say	42%	14%	15%	10%	19%
	No religion	63%	9%	14%	7%	7%
Teaching about morality is done in the context of Christian beliefs	Catholic	22%	9%	40%	13%	15%
	Protestant	5%	7%	23%	15%	50%
	Other Religion/ Prefer not to say	39%	6%	21%	9%	25%
	No religion	53%	20%	15%	4%	8%
The same syllabus is taught to all children, irrespective of their beliefs.	Catholic	15%	8%	40%	17%	19%
	Protestant	6%	5%	25%	16%	48%
	Other Religion/ Prefer not to say	20%	16%	22%	26%	16%
	No religion	43%	10%	20%	10%	17%

Attitudes to the social purposes of religious education

The second question explored participants' perspectives on the extent to which learning about a range of religions and beliefs at primary school would contribute to specified social benefits. As **Table 3** illustrates, the responses to this question showed a high level of agreement: across all items, at least 60% of respondents selected either 'tend to agree' or 'strongly agree'. The highest levels of agreement concerned the contribution of learning about a range of religious and non-religious worldviews at primary school to 'highlighting freedom of religion and belief as a fundamental right in our society' (73% agree), 'encouraging respect towards places of worship' (71% agree), and 'encouraging respectful debate about beliefs' (70% agree). In comparison, there was slightly lower agreement that learning about a range of religions and beliefs would contribute to 'improving recognition of minority religious groups' (60% agree) or 'improving recognition of people with non-religious worldviews' (61% agree). Notably, however, fewer than 1 in 5 respondents disagreed with these latter statements, while just over a fifth neither agreed nor disagreed.

Disaggregating responses by community/religious background, differences again emerged between groups (**Table 4**). Catholic respondents expressed the highest levels of agreement across all but one item, with at least 75% selecting 'strongly agree' or 'tend to agree' in each case. Levels of agreement were also high among respondents of no religion, at least two-thirds of whom agreed with every statement, and among other respondents, with at least 60% agreement across all items.

In comparison, while the largest proportion of Protestant respondents reported agreement with the statements, levels of agreement (combining 'strongly agree' and 'tend to agree') were lower among this group. For example, while at least two-thirds of respondents from Catholic, other and non-religious backgrounds agreed that learning about a range of religions and beliefs at primary school would contribute to positive relations between religions, this figure was 50% among Protestant respondents. Similarly, 49% of Protestant respondents agreed that such learning could contribute to reducing prejudice, while the equivalent figure was at least 70% for all other groups. Protestant respondents also expressed more cautious agreement relative to others, with larger numbers selecting 'tend to agree' than 'strongly agree' for each statement.

Levels of disagreement with each statement were highest among respondents from Protestant and other backgrounds, with between a fifth and a quarter disagreeing that learning about a range of religions and beliefs at primary school can contribute to the specified purposes. However, Protestant respondents were also most likely to express a neutral perspective, indicating a greater range of views among this group than others.

Table 3: Attitudes to the social purposes of religious education

	1 STRONGLY DISAGREE	2 TEND TO DISAGREE	3 NEUTRAL	4 TEND TO AGREE	5 STRONGLY AGREE
Building a more peaceful society	8%	9%	17%	29%	37%
Creating positive relations between people of different religions	8%	7%	19%	30%	36%
Creating positive relations between people with a religious worldview and people with a non-religious worldview	7%	8%	21%	32%	32%
Improving recognition of minority religious groups	10%	8%	22%	29%	31%
Improving recognition of people with non-religious worldviews	8%	8%	23%	30%	31%
Encouraging respect towards places of worship	6%	6%	17%	35%	36%
Highlighting freedom of religion and belief as a fundamental right in our society	7%	5%	15%	33%	40%
Reducing prejudice	8%	9%	18%	31%	34%
Encouraging respectful debate about beliefs	7%	7%	16%	35%	35%

Table 4: Attitudes to the social purposes of religious education by religious background

In the context of Northern Ireland, to what extent do you agree that learning about a range of religions and beliefs in Primary schools would contribute to the following social benefits...

	COMMUNITY BACKGROUND (RELIGION)	1 STRONGLY DISAGREE	2 TEND TO DISAGREE	3 NEUTRAL	4 TEND TO AGREE	5 STRONGLY AGREE
Building a more peaceful society	Catholic	3%	5%	13%	31%	48%
	Protestant	14%	12%	23%	29%	22%
	Other Religion/ Prefer not to say	8%	16%	8%	27%	41%
	No religion	5%	9%	12%	25%	48%
Creating positive relations between people of different religions	Catholic	3%	3%	15%	30%	49%
	Protestant	14%	10%	27%	33%	17%
	Other Religion/ Prefer not to say	7%	15%	11%	25%	42%
	No religion	7%	5%	11%	23%	53%
Creating positive relations between people with a religious worldview and people with a non-religious worldview	Catholic	3%	4%	16%	31%	46%
	Protestant	11%	11%	33%	31%	14%
	Other Religion/ Prefer not to say	8%	13%	11%	31%	37%
	No religion	7%	7%	11%	35%	40%
Improving recognition of minority religious groups	Catholic	5%	6%	14%	33%	42%
	Protestant	15%	11%	32%	28%	14%
	Other Religion/ Prefer not to say	9%	17%	11%	28%	36%
	No religion	10%	6%	11%	25%	48%

	COMMUNITY BACKGROUND (RELIGION)	1 STRONGLY DISAGREE	2 TEND TO DISAGREE	3 NEUTRAL	4 TEND TO AGREE	5 STRONGLY AGREE
Improving recognition of people with non-religious worldviews	Catholic	3%	3%	18%	35%	41%
	Protestant	13%	16%	32%	27%	12%
	Other Religion/ Prefer not to say	8%	14%	15%	29%	34%
	No religion	7%	2%	12%	27%	52%
Encouraging respect towards places of worship	Catholic	1%	2%	13%	35%	48%
	Protestant	10%	8%	19%	35%	28%
	Other Religion/ Prefer not to say	6%	11%	11%	34%	37%
	No religion	5%	7%	22%	33%	33%
Highlighting freedom of religion and belief as a fundamental right in our society	Catholic	2%	4%	12%	35%	47%
	Protestant	12%	7%	20%	32%	29%
	Other Religion/ Prefer not to say	5%	14%	20%	28%	33%
	No religion	6%	5%	10%	30%	47%
Reducing prejudice	Catholic	2%	6%	14%	32%	46%
	Protestant	14%	13%	24%	32%	17%
	Other Religion/ Prefer not to say	5%	15%	9%	30%	41%
	No religion	9%	5%	10%	28%	48%
Encouraging respectful debate about beliefs	Catholic	2%	4%	14%	34%	46%
	Protestant	12%	10%	20%	38%	20%
	Other Religion/ Prefer not to say	6%	18%	4%	41%	32%
	No religion	5%	7%	13%	29%	46%

Attitudes to the aims of religious education

The third question from the poll sought respondents' views on the purpose of religious education. This question presented a number of potential objectives for religious education at primary level and invited respondents to indicate to what extent they agreed or disagreed with each of these. As the data in table 5 demonstrate, there was significant support for the specified purposes: over 50% of respondents either tended to agree or strongly agreed with each statement, with the exception of item 3.1 – that the purpose of religious education at primary school should be to help pupils 'to accept or deepen Christian faith and beliefs' (45%). There was particularly strong support for religious education's role in helping primary school pupils to 'ask questions and learn to think in a philosophical way' (72%), 'learn to act morally' (71%), and 'understand their religious or non-religious background as one among many reasonable worldviews' (68%). Combining responses selecting 'strongly disagree' and 'tend to disagree', the highest levels of disagreement were recorded in response to statements that the purpose of religious education should be to 'help participants accept or deepen Christian faith and beliefs' (24%) or 'learn about negative aspects of religious history such as links to colonialism, conflict and abuses of power' (23%). Between one fifth and one quarter of respondents stated that they neither agreed nor disagreed with each statement, rising to almost one third (31%) concerning the role of religious education in helping pupils to accept or deepen Christian faith.

Examining responses by community/religious background (table 6), it is notable that Protestant respondents expressed the lowest levels of agreement among all groups on six of the ten items. Only 31% strongly agreed or tended to agree that the purpose of religious education at primary level should be to 'learn about negative aspects of religious history such as links to colonialism, conflict and abuses of power'; in comparison, a clear majority of respondents in other categories agreed with this as a purpose. Similarly, approximately a third of Protestant respondents (34%) agreed that religious education should help pupils at primary level to 'understand different non-religious worldviews (e.g. Humanist; atheist)', while this figure was above 70% among respondents in other groups. However, Protestant respondents were the most likely to agree that a purpose of religious education should be to help pupils to 'accept or deepen Christian faith and beliefs' (66%). The proportion of respondents selecting 'strongly agree' or 'tend to agree' for this statement was considerably lower among Catholic (43%), other religious (28%) and non-religious (10%) respondents.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, those of other religious beliefs were the most likely to agree that religious education's purpose includes helping primary school pupils to 'understand different religious worldviews (e.g. Muslim; Buddhist; Jewish)', though over 75% of Catholic and non-religious respondents also agreed with this. Similarly, those from non-religious backgrounds most strongly agreed that a purpose of religious education is to help pupils to understand different non-religious worldviews (e.g. Humanist; atheist) – a view also shared by over 70% of respondents from Catholic and other religious backgrounds. Across the majority of items, there was considerable consensus among respondents from Catholic, other religious and non-religious backgrounds. The main divergences occurred in relation to the role of religious education in helping pupils to learn about the positive contribution of religion to cultural and political life, which attracted stronger support among Catholic respondents than among other groups; and concerning the purpose of religious education in helping pupils to learn to act morally, with which both Catholic and Protestant respondents were more likely to agree than those of other religious or non-religious backgrounds.

Table 5: Attitudes towards the aims of religious education

Thinking about how religious education should develop pupils' knowledge, values and skills, rate whether you agree or disagree with the following statements. The purpose of religious education should be to help primary school pupils...

	1 STRONGLY DISAGREE	2 TEND TO DISAGREE	3 NEUTRAL	4 TEND TO AGREE	5 STRONGLY AGREE
Understand different religious worldviews (e.g. Muslim; Buddhist; Jewish)	8%	6%	21%	36%	29%
Understand different non-religious worldviews (e.g. Humanist; atheist)	10%	8%	23%	31%	28%
Accept or deepen Christian faith and beliefs	13%	11%	31%	26%	19%
Understand their religious or non-religious background as one among many reasonable worldviews	4%	5%	23%	39%	29%
Examine and reflect on their own beliefs	3%	5%	20%	43%	29%
Examine and reflect on the beliefs of others	4%	7%	25%	37%	27%
Learn about ways religions have contributed positively to cultural and political life in Ireland and the UK, including peacebuilding and reconciliation	3%	9%	27%	39%	22%
Learn about negative aspects of religious history such as links to colonialism, conflict and abuses of power	12%	11%	20%	29%	28%
Ask questions and think in a philosophical way	3%	4%	21%	41%	31%
Learn to act morally	3%	6%	20%	33%	38%

Table 6: Attitudes towards the aims of religious education by religious background

	COMMUNITY BACKGROUND (RELIGION)	1 STRONGLY DISAGREE	2 TEND TO DISAGREE	3 NEUTRAL	4 TEND TO AGREE	5 STRONGLY AGREE
Understand different religious worldviews (e.g. Muslim; Buddhist; Jewish)	Catholic	4%	4%	18%	41%	34%
	Protestant	14%	10%	25%	38%	12%
	Other Religion/ Prefer not to say	6%	7%	5%	36%	45%
	No religion	5%	4%	14%	24%	53%
Understand different non-religious worldviews (e.g. Humanist; atheist)	Catholic	4%	5%	20%	36%	35%
	Protestant	20%	14%	31%	26%	8%
	Other Religion/ Prefer not to say	6%	6%	14%	43%	31%
	No religion	3%	2%	8%	33%	54%
Accept or deepen Christian faith and beliefs	Catholic	6%	13%	38%	27%	16%
	Protestant	3%	5%	27%	35%	31%
	Other Religion/ Prefer not to say	27%	16%	29%	12%	16%
	No religion	47%	18%	24%	7%	3%
Understand their religious or non-religious background as one among many reasonable worldviews	Catholic	2%	2%	18%	41%	37%
	Protestant	8%	8%	31%	39%	14%
	Other Religion/ Prefer not to say	5%	4%	12%	53%	26%
	No religion	2%	6%	9%	36%	48%
Examine and reflect on their own beliefs	Catholic	2%	1%	20%	45%	32%
	Protestant	4%	6%	24%	45%	22%
	Other Religion/ Prefer not to say	3%	8%	10%	70%	9%
	No religion	2%	7%	19%	34%	38%

	COMMUNITY BACKGROUND (RELIGION)	1 STRONGLY DISAGREE	2 TEND TO DISAGREE	3 NEUTRAL	4 TEND TO AGREE	5 STRONGLY AGREE
Examine and reflect on the beliefs of others	Catholic	2%	2%	21%	40%	36%
	Protestant	7%	12%	34%	35%	12%
	Other Religion/ Prefer not to say	5%	9%	12%	44%	30%
	No religion	3%	7%	13%	34%	43%
Learn about ways religions have contributed positively to cultural and political life in Ireland and the UK, including peacebuilding and reconciliation	Catholic	1%	4%	20%	44%	30%
	Protestant	5%	10%	31%	39%	15%
	Other Religion/ Prefer not to say	10%	11%	33%	24%	22%
	No religion	2%	16%	26%	33%	23%
Learn about negative aspects of religious history such as links to colonialism, conflict and abuses of power	Catholic	3%	5%	18%	36%	37%
	Protestant	23%	20%	26%	20%	11%
	Other Religion/ Prefer not to say	16%	12%	10%	38%	24%
	No religion	7%	5%	7%	34%	48%
Ask questions and think in a philosophical way	Catholic	1%	3%	15%	45%	36%
	Protestant	5%	5%	32%	39%	20%
	Other Religion/ Prefer not to say	0%	2%	14%	50%	34%
	No religion	4%	2%	11%	37%	46%
Learn to act morally	Catholic	1%	5%	19%	34%	41%
	Protestant	2%	3%	20%	32%	44%
	Other Religion/ Prefer not to say	5%	6%	22%	41%	25%
	No religion	9%	17%	21%	30%	23%

Conclusions

The results of this poll point to considerable divergence of perspective among the Northern Ireland population concerning current practice in religious education. While approximately one third of respondents were satisfied with 'the role of the Christian Churches in producing the religious education syllabus' and 'Christianity being the sole focus of primary religious education', at least 38% were dissatisfied. This, together with the relatively high proportion adopting a neutral perspective (approximately 25%) on these issues, suggests there may be support for reforming some aspects of religious education provision, particularly the arrangements for producing the curriculum and its focus on a single faith.

The case for reform appears to increase when examining attitudes towards the aims and social purposes of religious education. There was majority support among respondents for religious education's role in relation to almost all the suggested aims within the poll. This is notable as several of these aims are not part of the current syllabus. These include aims to 'understand different religious worldviews (e.g. Muslim; Buddhist; Jewish)', 'understand different non-religious worldviews (e.g. Humanist, atheist)', and 'examine and reflect on the beliefs of others'. By contrast, the lowest levels of support were expressed for the aim to 'accept and deepen Christian faith and beliefs', although this is arguably the most prevalent aim in the existing curriculum. Most participants (60% or more) also agreed that religious education could contribute to a range of specified benefits, including highlighting freedom of religion and belief, improving recognition of people with minority religious beliefs and non-religious worldviews, and reducing prejudice. This suggests widespread agreement that religious education reform to better achieve such outcomes would be successful.

Examining responses by community background, several trends emerge. Overall, respondents from Catholic, other religious and non-religious backgrounds were more dissatisfied with current arrangements for religious education than Protestant respondents. For example, over half of Protestant respondents were satisfied that the four main Christian churches write the religious education syllabus, compared with less than a quarter of respondents from any other group. Catholic, other and non-religious respondents were also more likely to express positive responses regarding religious education's potential to contribute to specified social benefits and to agree that religious education should help pupils to understand different religious and non-religious worldviews. Importantly, though Protestant respondents were more inclined than others to agree that religious education should help pupils accept or deepen a Christian faith, over half also believed that religious education should help pupils understand different religious worldviews. Therefore, while there are tensions within and between groups concerning the purpose and provision of religious education, there is support for a broader curriculum than exists at present.

Dialogue group

As noted in the introduction, a number of social changes suggest a need for reform or development of religious education in Northen Ireland, including the increasing diversity of religious beliefs among the population and the rapid rise of those who do not identify with a religion. Until now, Christian churches have had responsibility for designing a religious education syllabus, and while this included some consultation during the drafting phases (including an equality impact assessment (EQIA) process in 2006-07), the influence of voices beyond the churches has been minimal. Following the last revision of the syllabus, the examiner of statutory rules noted that, in giving the control of the core syllabus to the churches, the DE had taken 'an unusually narrow view' of the legislation which required the syllabus to be prepared by 'persons having an interest in the teaching of religious education in grant-aided schools' (Examiner of Statutory Rules, 2007, para. 4). As researchers, we wanted to take a broader view by engaging those beyond the four main churches who have an interest in religious education. We wished to understand the perspectives of those who currently have limited opportunity to provide input into formal discussions or decision-making around religious education.

Our approach was to create a setting in which participants could engage in informed conversations about religious education over a period of time. Influenced by community engaged researchers who see research as a tool to 'educate, empower, and transform' (Boyd, 2020, p. 745), we aimed to go beyond gathering a single 'snapshot' of opinions (Boyd, 2020, p. 745). In practice, this meant building the capacity of participants to engage in the conversations by introducing them to different ways that religious education is taught in neighbouring contexts and how education systems accommodate diversity in designing a religious education syllabus.

Procedure

Table 7: Dialogue group participants

PARTICIPANT CODE (P#)	RELIGION OR WORLDVIEW IDENTITY, WHERE DISCLOSED
1	Non-religious
2	Non-religious
3	Non-religious
4	Bahai
5	Not disclosed
6	Not disclosed
7	Christian
8	Bahai
9	Buddhist
10	Buddhist
11	Muslim
12	Christian
13	Muslim
14	Jewish
15	Jewish
16	Christian
17	Muslim
18	Muslim
19	Hindu

We purposely recruited individuals from diverse backgrounds and perspectives for the dialogue group. A key criterion was that they should be interested in dialoguing and learning about religious education and keen to explore new possibilities for teaching and learning about religion and worldviews. In total, six Dialogue Group sessions were held in hybrid format. Twenty people agreed to be members of the group. This included a diverse range of religious people, including those from Muslim, Jewish, Bahai, Buddhist, Christian, and Hindu backgrounds, and some who were Humanist or atheist (Table 7). All had a particular interest in education and were committed to constructively addressing some of the challenges that arise from teaching and learning about beliefs and values in plural classrooms. Some were educators and/or parents and others had connections or roles with sectoral educational groups or education unions.

The first and last dialogue sessions were opportunities for open conversations about the main themes of the research. Participants were invited to share experiences and opinions of religious education in Northern Ireland but also to discuss what changes and developments could be possible and beneficial. The format of the other dialogue sessions involved a short introductory session where participants heard input from one or more expert on religious education from a different policy context which was then followed by discussion. The inputs included contributions on Northern Ireland, England, Wales and the Republic of Ireland. Not all members were able to attend all events; the average attendance was 10 people per dialogue session. Proceedings were recorded and transcribed and then analysed by the project researchers. The outcomes from this process are organised below as responses to three questions: *Where are we now? Where do we want to be?* and *How will we get there?*

Where are we now?

Religious education as Christian and confessional in nature

The experience of the Dialogue Group members, whether as educators and/or as parents or grandparents of primary-aged children, was, almost exclusively, that religious education in Northern Ireland was conveyed as Christian education. Consistent with the Core Syllabus for Religious Education (DENI 2007), participants described a focus on Bible-based teaching and Christian celebrations. Teaching about other religious traditions was typically deferred until post-primary school, meaning children left primary school with a limited understanding of religious diversity.

> *[W]hen they get older they'll do something about Islam or about Judaism and so on. But otherwise, it's intense detail about the Christian perspective. (P15)*

Several reasons were offered for the prevalence of Christianity in primary religious education. These included the historical dominance of Christianity within the region and education, including among the working group with responsibility for designing the current syllabus. Also significant was a continued commitment among some parents and school authorities to preparing children for cultural and religious rites of passage. Several participants suggested, furthermore, that a sense of fatalism and resignation to religious education in its current form, in addition to more explicit religious conservatism, helped to sustain a Christian curriculum at primary level.

> *[People] just accept that that's part of the package if you go to this school or that school, that you get some emphasis in RE education at that school and others. I wouldn't say people necessarily desire it, but I think the majority have just accepted that that's the way it is. (P9)*

As well as being Christian in content, the religious education Curriculum in Northern Ireland was perceived to be largely confessional, with the aim of encouraging Christian faith formation. Discussing the distinction between, as one participant described, 'being educated into a religion or…being educated about religion', group members described the former as the prevailing approach. There were concerns that, legally and in practice, this confessional approach risked veering into indoctrination. Participants referred to the recent JR87 case (Nelson & Richardson, 2025), and to pedagogical differences between religious education and other areas of learning, as indicators of a lack of criticality in the curriculum.

> *The Appeal Court actually said the only thing stopping the current RE curriculum from being indoctrination, crossing 'the forbidden line of indoctrination,' which is what they said, is that right to withdraw your child, which is inadequate. It's just not acceptable. (P1)*

> *I think, if this was a maths lesson, we'd be open to all ideas. We'd be examining them. 'This is very successful because there are many ways you can solve this problem. How many ways can we find?' But when it comes to RE, it's, 'This way or no way.' (P8)*

While group members from non-Christian backgrounds were keen for their children to learn about Christianity – ideally, alongside other religious traditions – the confessional nature of the curriculum raised significant issues. Parents reported that religious education teaching was, at times, inappropriate to the pupils' age and stage of development, with Biblical events presented in ways that frightened or upset young children. Moreover, there was some concern that children were introduced to Christian ideas, such as the divinity of Jesus (described by one participant's child as 'a magic baby'), before they had developed the conceptual understanding to make sense of them.

> *It's Easter and she comes home extremely upset and told me the crucifixion story in a lot of detail, which alarmed me, because she's five and they're talking about crowns of thorns and dots on the hands is what she told me. So, we got quite annoyed with that, because we wanted her to learn, but none of this was expressed in what we thought about the ethos of the school. (P15)*

Confessional Christian teaching could also cause confusion in young children from other religious and non-religious backgrounds, as the following examples illustrate. In one case, where a child's teacher taught one set of stories and beliefs as true, and their family shared and taught different beliefs, the child struggled to make sense of whom and what they should believe. In another case, where a child's family did not share Christian convictions, the intensive focus on Christianity at school was perplexing for the child.

> *I contacted the school and said, 'We told you she's non-Christian and now she's upset thinking that we are saying that the teacher is a liar,' because we're saying, 'No, we don't believe that.' But if the teacher says it's literally true and we say it's literally not true, then she's five... (P15)*

> *I was collecting her from school and the second she said to me, 'Guess what?' And I said, 'What?' 'We're doing a play about baby Jesus again.' I thought that's interesting, because she's as baffled as maybe your child [of a different faith] would be. (P9)*

Religious education, school ethos and collective worship

While the focus of discussions was on religious education within the formal curriculum, the close relationship between religious education and collective worship, and the influence of school ethos on both, was acknowledged within the group's dialogue. As noted in the introduction, the vast majority (approximately 98%) of schools in Northern Ireland, including integrated schools, have a Christian ethos, and this was considered to shape the curriculum – though there were examples of representatives of other traditions and worldviews, including Humanism, visiting schools. The specific denominational ethos also influenced the nature of religious education, with preparation for the sacraments of First Confession, First Communion and Confirmation a distinctive feature of religious education in Catholic primary schools and some integrated schools. Collective worship was typically integrated into the school day, in the form of prayers in class (primarily in Catholic schools), or took the form of regular school assembly. Some participants reported that confessional instruction was particularly pronounced in the assemblies that they had experienced, some of which had included teaching that they considered exclusionary or had found upsetting.

> *[W]e've had assemblies where we've had visitors in from the various organisations and they say some really intense things. There was one assembly that really stands out for me where the preacher told the children – this is in a controlled school – to pray for anyone who didn't believe. If you know anyone that didn't believe, they're going to spend eternity in hell, so let's pray for them. I thought, that's me, I'm the person, I'm one of those people you're talking about, and I found it so, so upsetting that I had to go and have a break and leave my class with the teaching assistant. (P3)*

> *[W]e've the usual assembly visitors and we've heard about some quite extreme things being said by those visitors. For example, recently, messages about disability – essentially, a preacher telling a story about a man who was turned blind because he didn't believe in God. And then when he believed again, he was given back his sight. So, I think not very inclusive messages and concerning ones about disability and connections between disability and sin. (P2)*

Given the prevalence of schools with a Christian character in Northern Ireland, schools with a plural or secular ethos were typically unavailable to those who sought them. For parents seeking to avoid confessional, Christian-based religious education and collective worship, school admissions could therefore be particularly challenging as they sought to identify schools where their worldviews would be respected and, ideally, reflected. There were examples of parents choosing schools that they perceived to be more welcoming to different faith traditions – for example, integrated schools or schools with high levels of diversity – and being generally satisfied with their choice. However, other parents suggested that some schools did not understand the challenge that a religious ethos and confessional Christian practice could pose for families of different traditions and worldviews, or that schools did not provide accurate information about the nature of religious education during admissions.

> *We chose to send our child to a Catholic school, but also a school of sanctuary, which I think made a very big difference, because there are a lot of Muslim children in her primary school. (P14)*

> *[W]hen I was looking at nursery for him we went to our local nursery to look at it, which was a Catholic one, and I asked, 'We're not Catholic, we're Humanist, is it okay? Can we come here?' 'Yes, yes, of course you can, we're open to all.' 'Do you say any prayers or do you sing any hymns? Is there any worship?' 'We say a wee prayer in the morning, we say a prayer before lunch and we say a prayer at home time, but it's only a wee prayer,' was the sort of ethos. What harm would that do? (P3)*

> *I'm the mother to small primary-school children, and they go to a controlled school. So we didn't want them to go to a Catholic school because we're not Catholic or religious. We very much didn't want any of that. We didn't quite realise the extent of the Christian RE that they would be getting in a controlled school. (P2)*

Given the various constraints on school choice – including availability of places and geographical proximity – children could be placed at schools that were not their parents' first choice. As the example below demonstrates, this could mean parents having to accept an ethos at odds with their preference, with consequences in terms of the nature of the collective worship and religious education their children encountered.

> *[My daughter], she wanted [her children] to go to [integrated school], but they ended up in [controlled school], which the two little boys are only in the beginning classes, and they do love it. They're very happy there. But the principal said, 'This is a Protestant school, beginning, end, and middle,' which is a challenge to my family. They didn't really want that, but the children are happy there. So that's part of the deal. (P9)*

Treatment of other religions and worldviews within the primary curriculum

While it was recognised that some primary schools had made efforts to explore religious diversity, there was consensus among the Dialogue Group that this was an area in which significant curriculum change was required. In cases where primary schools had sought to teach about faiths other than Christianity, this was typically through learning about specific celebrations and holy days. As one parent described, such teaching could seem superficial and, in practice, contribute to the marginalisation of non-Christian religions and worldviews. While Christianity was taught as a cohesive belief system, the teaching of other traditions lacked the same coherence.

> *It has been an issue a little bit, I think, in that they're learning about Christianity, but they're not learning about other faiths. The school is doing it as an add-on, so they'll learn about Buddhism, because people will come into the school, they'll do all about the celebrations, they do Eid every year… So, it's a very different approach, as well, to the extent that you're almost othering the religion in the teaching of it, because there's a depth to how they teach Christianity but not a depth to how they teach a lot of the other faiths. (P13)*

Variation in teachers' knowledge or preparation to teach religious and non-religious worldviews other than Christianity was also discussed as a challenge to the delivery of more plural religious education. Participants recognised that teachers had typically been educated in Christian-ethos schools, had received limited teaching about other faiths and worldviews, and lacked both training and confidence to teach these to their pupils. This could mean that, where teachers made efforts to teach about faiths other than Christianity, their teaching contained inaccuracies and biases.

> *A lot of the teachers from the communities that we've had so far here wouldn't have the background themselves, you know? They just wouldn't. They've been channelled through various strictly faith-based schools, most of them. (P9)*

> *I also see the problems for the teachers. A teacher took great courage to teach Islam but had not been given the proper training to teach Islam, and of course, then, there were mistakes made, coming from a Christian background, particularly over prayers. She said, 'Muslim children will pray five times a day, but Christians pray all the time.' This is a common mistake that is made. (P8)*

Dialogue group members identified a number of negative consequences of the lack of teaching about different religious and non-religious worldviews at primary school. For all children, the current curriculum was felt to limit access to important and enriching knowledge about religions and worldviews, as well as to impede opportunities for dialogue with peers from different backgrounds.

> *I would like them to have respect for all religions and worldviews and to have a curiosity and an understanding. I think that's really important in the world that we are living in today, the increasingly diverse world. So, yeah. But without, essentially, the Christian instruction that they're getting at the moment. (P2)*

> *[A]ll of the children, including the Christians, would benefit from everyone together doing something like what [participant 12] articulated and exploring each other's viewpoints and learning about each other, from each other. So, it just feels like there's so much missed opportunity if that doesn't happen. (P1)*

The omission of faiths and worldviews other than Christianity also appeared at odds with current imperatives for conflict transformation, such as promoting mutual understanding and collaboration, and reducing prejudice and discrimination. At a time when racist and Islamophobic hate crime has reached the highest levels recorded in Northern Ireland (PSNI, 2025), the opportunity to learn about other traditions was considered particularly important.

While the Northern Ireland Curriculum (CCEA, 2007) aims to develop pupils' democratic competences through key elements of 'personal and mutual understanding', 'cultural understanding' and 'citizenship', religious education's position at the periphery of the curriculum, along with its Christian focus, means that opportunities for it to contribute to these elements may be lost.

> *So a lot of my time is spent in the community, trying to bring unity, trying to bring people together of all religions or no religion, bringing them together so they can work together and find common ground. And I find this is really, really very important in a society that's so fractured. And you go into a school, and then you see the education of the RE system, and it is targeted in one way only. (P8)*

> *Part of I think particularly the breakdown we're seeing now, the rise of Islamophobia, the rise of antisemitism, the rise of just hate that we're seeing in our society, this is critical that people learn. (P13)*

A consequence of a monofaith religious education curriculum was to invisibilise the beliefs and practices of children from minority faith and belief backgrounds within settings characterised by hegemonic Christianity. Participants gave examples of occasions when the universality of Christianity had been assumed by teachers and pupils, thereby creating an environment in which children from other backgrounds could be marginalised and misrecognised.

> *The other thing I was saying today was the children said, 'Everybody celebrates Christmas.' And I said, 'Well, actually, they don't.' They went, 'What? What do you mean they don't?' You know, this is a simple thing that they don't understand. A Muslim child, a Bahá'í child does not celebrate Christmas, that there are other holy days that they celebrate. Not that they don't recognise Christ, but they celebrate other days. (P8)*

As a result of this marginalisation, pupils typically knew little of the beliefs or practices of their peers from faith and belief backgrounds other than Christianity. Several participants suggested that this impeded children's understanding of, and ability to engage with, their classmates' daily lives and experiences, as well as the lives and experiences of others within their community and society. It could also result in a lack of reciprocity, as one participant described, where minority faith pupils participated in school-based Christian celebrations but did not have the opportunity to share their faith with others.

> *So, say, for instance, we don't celebrate Christmas, but we're in a Christian school who celebrates Christmas and we're very happy to celebrate. As a Bahá'í I'm very happy to celebrate with them, but do they understand what we celebrate or do they understand why that child doesn't get Christmas presents from Santa? Or that child is isolated because of that, their belief in that system? But nowhere in the school do we educate them. (P8)*

In such cases, and absent school-based learning about a range of faiths and worldviews, young people from minority faith and belief backgrounds could be forced into the position of teacher and ambassador for their faith.

> *Our kids are going through school as minorities where people don't know anything about them, people don't know anything about their faith, and they almost have to be ambassadors for their faith. Like they have to explain, like I'm sure [Name] had to explain all the different things about Judaism and holidays and my kids have to explain Eid, and all the other stuff is just normalised. (P13)*

Low priority and lack of transparency

Two further themes were prominent among the Dialogue Group's discussions, the first being the low priority that religious education was perceived to have in Northern Ireland. It was argued that, at policy level, religious education compared unfavourably with other countries, such as Wales, where there had been significant developments in religious education frameworks and curricula. Participants noted that religious education had been omitted from the recent Strategic Review of the Northern Ireland Curriculum (Crehan, 2025), was excluded from school inspections, and had been the subject of no significant publications over the previous decade.

> *I am slightly jealous of a country [England] that has been able to produce five significant pieces of research around RE in seven years. Whereas our last significant piece of work for primary education around RE, correct me if I'm wrong, was the non-statutory guidelines in 2014. That's 11 years ago and they're non-statutory. To get to the last piece of whatever it is here, the curriculum with actual legislation here, we're talking back to 2007, which wasn't wildly different to what was produced in the '90s. (P7)*

At school level, several participants reported little discussion about religious education among staff and limited professional development. Consequently, the nature of religious education provision could be dependent on teachers' and schools' interests and commitment to the subject. While a lack of inspection constraints could give teachers the flexibility to pursue new approaches to religious education, participants reported any such flexibility could be constrained, in practice, by senior staff and school cultures that were unsupportive of change. Without policy or curriculum imperatives to reform religious education, Dialogue Group members spoke of a reliance on dated resources and considerable variation in the class time dedicated to it.

> *RE in the school that I teach in, it's never talked about, it's never mentioned, every term there are a set of Bible time lessons that appear on the staffroom table. And you're supposed to take them and then go and teach them, no one ever talks about it, it's a very, very low priority. And I wish that it was given more value and it was given more airtime, but it's not. (P3)*

> *The most [religious education was taught] was once a week or less often. Lots of [student teachers] saw no RE in their schools at all across seven weeks, and a couple saw maybe one activity around Easter that was maybe colouring or drawing. (P16)*

In addition to this lack of emphasis on religious education, one participant perceived there to be a lack of transparency. This included a lack of information about the content of religious education lessons and about the types of speakers that were allowed in to speak to children on religious themes (see also PfIE, 2024). They also reported that the school was evasive in response to questions, speculating that this might signal the school's awareness that their current provision was inadequate.

> *What I feel concerned about is the lack of transparency and the lack of open discussion about what RE is covered in schools. And I just don't see why there isn't more openness, why not say what is taught? Unless there's a concern that it doesn't reflect what parents might want. And if that's the case then it's a chance to work together and create some kind of more inclusive RE that maybe does reflect the values and backgrounds of all children. (P2)*

As this quote illustrates, such a lack of transparency not only highlighted the limitations of religious education but also served to impede change.

Withdrawal and alternative provision

For parents concerned about the Christian, confessional nature of religious education and collective worship at primary level in Northern Ireland, there is a legal right to withdraw from this provision. Several parents within the Dialogue Group had exercised this right, in at least one case prompted by a specific incident that had caused them concern; other parents had not withdrawn their children, although the school had presented this option. Neither choice was regarded as 'an option without penalties', as one participant described, and decisions about withdrawal involved a range of considerations. A prominent concern was that withdrawal involved the separation of the child from the rest of their class. Those who had not withdrawn their children from religious education reported that the prospect of separation, which could appear punitive, had deterred them or their children from requesting withdrawal. Parents who had withdrawn their children similarly felt that withdrawal was exclusionary and regretted that it was the only alternative to Christian instruction. Concerns about separation and 'othering' were also posited as the reason for the low numbers of parents opting for withdrawal.

> *But I asked her a couple of times, she does not want to be separated from her friends in the class and do something else... and I don't want her feeling like she's the odd one out. There's enough challenges when you're a kid going to school like that. (P15)*

> *My two children, they don't go to assembly. They've been opted out because we don't want them to have that, essentially, Christian instruction. But I guess, I would like them to be able to... not to be excluded, so not to have that experience of being othered in school and not going where everyone else is going. (P2)*

> *1.2% children are withdrawn, but many, many other children are not withdrawn because their parents feel they don't want to 'other' them. And those children deserve, I guess, a sufficient RE curriculum, that they shouldn't feel the need to... they shouldn't be in that dilemma. (P1)*

A second factor in parents' decisions about withdrawal was the quality of the alternative provision for children who did not participate in religious education. Two parents reported that they had chosen not to withdraw their children from religious education because alternative provision appeared vague or lacked educational value.

> *I said a couple of times, 'What is the child going to do outside of that? Is there a programme that they do?' And they haven't really answered me, to be honest, so I haven't withdrawn her because she doesn't want to. (P15)*

> *So, we did initially try and take her out, but with it being a small school we did not have... it was literally just colour in sheets at the back of the classroom. So, my attitude has been- and I know it's not what a lot of Muslims would have done, but in my case, I just said, this is the world that we live in, we'll let them learn. (P13)*

Importantly, as one participant (P8) noted, *'when a parent withdraws their child from RE, that doesn't mean they're not interested in learning about religion'.* Rather, these parents emphasised that they had opted to withdraw their children from a specific type of (Christian, confessional) religious instruction, but they would be keen for the children to participate in religion and worldviews education that was inclusive and plural.

Among those participants who had withdrawn their children from religious education, most reported that alternative provision comprised activities that appeared to be designed to keep children occupied and had limited educational value. While some parents reported recent improvements in the alternative offered, they remained dissatisfied with the options available, as the comment below indicates. Such dissatisfaction was not confined to parents: one participant reported that his granddaughter, aged 7, had also remarked on the unfairness of religious education classes that separated pupils physically as well as by task.

> *In our school they've brought in an alternative this year… Now what they do is they fill out worksheets, and they're based on the school values. So, recently they're spending weeks filling out worksheets on respect and they had to sit in silence and just write answers on respect. (P2)*

The latter participant noted the irony that such limited alternative provision was disrespectful to children. The absence of an educationally equitable alternative for those withdrawn from religious education may also conflict with schools' commitments to respect for diversity of belief. In one case, however, a participant (P14) reported that their child had participated in a self-guided '*separate curriculum…. where they covered things like what's a good friend or just basic ethics*', which they had valued. This generated significant interest among the Dialogue Group as an example of what could be offered within the existing curriculum framework. This example notwithstanding, the group's preferred solution, as described above, was to develop a more inclusive and responsive R(W)E curriculum that would reduce the need for withdrawal. The following sections detail their perspectives on what forms this might take in Northern Ireland.

Where do we want to be?

Religious education as shared or separate

There was a broad commitment to inclusive and shared religious education amongst the group, yet there were a few participants who made a case for separate provision of religious education in certain circumstances. One drew upon the perspective that learning about multiple religious traditions could cause confusion and, as can be seen in the quotation below, another participant was similarly concerned that inclusive religious education could open the door to ideas or information that parents would prefer their children did not know. Conversely, for both, being introduced to a coherent religious worldview at young age was regarded as aiding identity development and a sense of community belonging.

> *I'm all up for inclusive education, but I feel like there is that fear factor that can be from someone who may be religious. No matter what religion they are, they might think that this sort of broadening the scope too much into, for example, adding values and ethics could leave this gap or things being added on which they wouldn't want their children to know. (P18)*

Interestingly, one of these participants explained that he had previously been committed to separate religious education for different faith groups in primary schools, but after carrying out some background reading on the matter, he had altered his position on the issue. He understood there was value in some common religious education in schools for all children, though he believed that there was still a strong argument for the majority of time to be focused on separate religious education:

> *I am supporting, always, to focus on a specific religion. And that was my view.*

> *And of course, when I did my research on the importance of specific religions, it showed me also, no, you need also to introduce the students to other religions. They need to also be exploring other religions too, to reduce bias and also, maybe, improve relationships with people and stuff like that. (P11)*

Others, however, queried if it is the role of the state to provide confessional religious education, while some felt that the provision of specific religious education to some would always create exclusion and unequal treatment for others. One participant emphasised that separation of pupils would only be reasonable if parents had a range of choices for their children in relation to different religious and secular schools or different curricula, options which were not available for non-religious parents or those with minority religious beliefs in Northern Ireland.

The discussion about separation of children for religious education was informed by a contribution from a specialist in religious education from Dublin who spoke about the provision for religious education in community national schools (CNS) when first established in Ireland in 2008. In the early years of this curriculum, pupils were separated by belief for parts of their religious education (Faas et al., 2019). This approach of separating children by belief became both impractical and controversial and over time was replaced by an inclusive common approach. There was sympathy, however, from some of the Dialogue Group for multiple forms of religious education in one school; and they suggested that where this had been done in integrated primary schools in Northern Ireland, it had been successful when pupils had taken common classes in religious education alongside the separate ones:

> *I used to be principal of [####] Integrated Primary and we had that system for an hour a week where the whole school split, as an affirmation of their own faith and cultural background. And then there were common sessions during the week where all of that sort of stuff was shared or there was a curriculum where we took different world faiths and studied them as a group for a long time… the core being that there was an affirmation of the child's own cultural background mixed with a respect for other cultural backgrounds (P12)*

Looking across the dialogues, however, the vision articulated for the future of religious education in Northern Ireland mostly coalesced around a version of the subject that was inclusive and shared.

Digging deeper into the discussions, it is possible to identify more precisely what participants meant when they wished for inclusive forms of religious education. Primarily, religious education was understood to be inclusive when it takes account of the diversity of people and ideas in a classroom. One participant expressed it as:

> *engaging with children as people and seeing what they're bringing themselves to the classroom… really acknowledging the children are there with their own views, their own values and their own curiosity. (P2)*

Several participants were keen to emphasise that 'basic inclusivity' should mean widening the scope of the subject beyond religious views to include non-religious worldviews as well:

> *Whatever we're putting into the curriculum has to sit on the principle of we are drawing as wide a circle as possible to involve and include as many people as possible… One of the things that's really important to me is that we get RE and worldviews or beliefs, whatever it is that the title is, to a stage where you don't have kids in the room going, 'Well, I'm not religious, so this is the bit in the week where I switch off, because I don't believe in anything.' (P7)*

Indeed, many were supportive of the Religion and Worldviews Education (RWE) approach developed by educators in England (Pett, 2024), which is founded on the premise that everyone has a worldview and 'no-one stands nowhere' when it comes to beliefs and values.

Working from this starting point, the subject content is focused on themes that can be explored through a variety of worldviews. The objective is that the subject will be relevant to all learners, and all will feel they have equal status in the classroom.

Ideally, then, participants suggested that inclusive religious education would provide a space where pupils were given the confidence to express their beliefs. This was described in dialogical terms as 'an openness in the room' for discussion about beliefs and was regarded as beneficial for all.

> *And that benefits all the children, not just the minority religions or the people without a religion, it's the Christians as well, because they get to see things from a different perspective. (P1)*

Inclusion was also defined by comparison with withdrawal, which was considered antithetical to inclusive principles, as one participant described

> *There's not an inclusive way to say, 'You don't have to be here.' (P7)*

There was a general aspiration amongst the group that Northern Ireland should develop a form of religious education from which no-one would need to withdraw, similar to the situation in Wales. As a result of curriculum reform there, religious education has become religion, values and ethics education (RVE) (Education Wales, 2022) and the option for withdrawal has been removed on the grounds that the content and approach to teaching of the subject is 'objective, critical and plural'.

> *But that is, I think, what we're all wanting, is the subject to be taught that is inclusive of everybody and everybody can stay and nobody needs to leave. Why should a child have to leave any subject in school? (P8)*

> *Any groups that I've been involved with, any discussions I've had recently with various different interest groups have all been about making the RE curriculum more inclusive. And yes, hopefully coming to a position where nobody needs to be withdrawn from RE, that would be an aim for a lot of different groups. (P16)*

There was a recognition, though, that for this to be realised, certain standards for inclusion would need to be set, and these were expressed differently across the group. For some, inclusivity could be achieved when religious education avoided 'indoctrination' and was 'educational'. Others were more specific and drew attention to the human rights guarantees that had been put in place when the withdrawal option was removed from the Welsh RVE curriculum.

> *I would be hoping that in the future with a more balanced, broad, open, inclusive curriculum that there simply would be no need for withdrawal from RE... And I think that's probably what we're all hoping to work towards. (P16)*

> *And that's what this human rights legislation is about. So, you know, if you have that and the onus is then on the schools to ensure that it is critical, pluralistic and inclusive, then it's fine. (P4)*

Learning Together

Building on the vision for an inclusive form of religious education, participants had ideas for how the content and approach of religious education could provide a shared learning experience. Some suggested an emphasis on contemporary and local expressions of beliefs:

> *...this is critical that people learn. Not to necessarily learn about other religions, but to understand the people they're actually at school with and to understand why that kid is off today and why that kid's had this particular celebration or is eating that particular food or is off today. It's part of understanding the world that we're actually living in and that's why it's so critical we're learning from a young age and from the primary age, not just waiting until they get to secondary school and then suddenly they're do two months on Judaism in the first year and two months on Islam in the second year. And then that will be it for the rest of their entire school lives. (P13)*

It is interesting to see in this appeal for a diverse curriculum a view that beliefs should not be presented in ways that are bounded by certain times or places, but as the expression of 'lived religion' (Jackson, 1997). Participants were aware that such a contemporary approach could also introduce pupils to examples of division and conflict, but they felt this was appropriate if done sensitively as it was essential that the curriculum was relevant to the world as it is.

> *It can't reflect what society was like in the 1940s, it now needs to reflect where we are now and what that is going to look like going forwards, to some degree. (P7)*

> *A lot of the content is outdated and isn't in any way empathetic to the lives that our children lead. And the teacher being pivotal in the whole thing is absolutely crucial, and also how religion is linked to difficult situations in the world... it's the reality of the world that we live in and I think the religious education programme and the ethics and the whole structure of it should be related to the reality of that world. (P12)*

There was an awareness, however, that any curriculum still required a certain amount of defined content and there were different views on what constituted core knowledge and who should decide what is taught. As part of the dialogue group sessions, participants had access to different examples of inclusive curricula from other contexts and, through exploring these, different priorities became evident in the group. For some the starting point needed to be 'total equality', where no single religion or worldview is privileged; this group endorsed the Educate Together (2022) Ethical Education curriculum as an example of this. Others were less comfortable with such an approach, feeling it compartmentalised faith within specific topics and divorced it from themes such as 'family' or 'fairness' in a way that did not make sense to a person of faith.

An alternative approach favoured by some participants involved starting with big questions that were of shared concern or interest. This enquiry-based approach is a key aspect of both the RVE curriculum in Wales and the RWE curriculum in England. Enquiry was viewed as valuable because it began from pupils' standpoints and honoured their positionality as well as providing them with agency. From the data it was possible to identify how participants imagined an enquiry-based approach could be usefully employed with primary school pupils in Northern Ireland. Firstly, they envisaged an exploratory or investigative pedagogy that could embed the subject more strongly within the wider Northern Ireland curriculum and allow for meaningful cross-curricular connections to be made, especially with the Personal Development and Mutual Understanding (PDMU) and the World Around Us (WAU) areas of learning.[9]

[9] These areas of learning refer to the Northern Ireland Curriculum (2007). At the time of writing this curriculum is under review.

> *We were thinking previously the worldviews are a bit nebulous and potentially could… they could actually be part of lots of different subjects. Like World Around Us, for example, maybe that's its strength, it's about, say, if you're teaching the environment, the natural world, a particular topic, you think that is the topic and build it around it. And then you could talk about different religions' approach to particular societal issues or challenges and also morals and ethics and including non-religious worldviews approaches. (P2)*

Secondly, several participants were enthusiastic about exploring religious education content from different disciplinary perspectives, for example history, philosophy, social science and theology. This method is an aspect of the RWE approach in England, where pupils are introduced to beliefs and worldviews through different 'ways of knowing' (Pett, 2024) at an age-appropriate level.

> *History, I think that's an important strand. Then there's the theology, the sociology, which is the lived experience, as well as the philosophy. So, I think combining all of those four, someone said that's going to be challenging because it's a lot, but, you know, I think it's where we should aspire to be. And then centring it on the pupil, as well, I think that's a really important thing to really engage children and make them feel like they're invested in the stuff, it's not just knowledge being thrown at them that they're expected to learn. So, I'm really pro the approach. (P1)*

There were reservations, however, about an enquiry-based model. These related to a concern that a curriculum requires content as well as questions.

> *I'm totally with child-led education, but there is a 'but' to that too, because I also want them to be… it's that phrase, well-informed… And there are things I want them to know about that they might not always ask about, so I'm totally willing to go where they want to go, but not always. (P7)*

Despite these reservations, there was generally a desire for an educational approach that would acknowledge the many different perspectives that young people bring to class and would increase the status of their questions and contributions during the time spent on religious education. Some emphasised that such a person-centred approach would not only develop children's awareness of differences between people, but would also help them to see, when it comes to values and beliefs, that every individual's worldview is an amalgam or blend of views based on their experiences and influences, and may change over time.

> *I really like the way that she spoke about how we… The person-centred approach, that we have, you know, everybody, whether they're religious or not religious, has a layered approach. Their worldview is not just one thing, it's multiple and layered. So, even this distinction between religious and non-religious is not clear-cut, is it? For example, I was brought up Catholic, I'm now non-religious, but still I have all that in my mind, I still bring all of that background to my worldview. (P2)*

A person-centred approach was also discussed in relation to the curriculum and resources, though with a different meaning. In this case it referred to the value of introducing young people to religions and worldviews through examples of how people live out their faith. This idea of beginning with people's lived experience reflects the interpretive approach to religious education which has identified the value of using 'insiders' as a key pedagogical strategy (Jackson, 1997). Focusing on examples from local communities was also felt to have particular value by some of the group.

> *I do think it's important that the curriculum is informed with authenticity from people who have beliefs or have Humanist beliefs or whatever the curriculum is going to involve, that it's really informed by real-life experience and it's brought to life by those communities specifically in Northern Ireland, as well, so that all children are aware that, for example, being Sikh isn't something that only happens in India. We have Sikh people in our country and our society and our culture. (P3)*

Social purposes of religious education

When considering the future of religious education, a strong theme among participants was that religious education has an important contribution to make to building a socially cohesive society. This was most frequently expressed as an aspiration: that through increased knowledge and awareness of diverse beliefs, young people would gain a greater understanding of others and prejudice would be reduced. Indeed, reflecting on her participation in the Dialogue Group, one participant felt that this was an insight that she had achieved, which highlighted the special importance of religious education.

> *I have learned that, actually, we have come here and all agree. We're all quite unified. And I often think, 'Is that because we are now educated about what it is to have RE in schools, and what are the repercussions of not having a diverse education in schools? And are the general public aware of that?' I query that because, when I have conversations about, maybe, prejudice growing in young children around not having that RE education, they're a bit puzzled. You have to go a bit deeper into that conversation for them to understand. So it's about raising that knowledge, that diversity, and that RE in schools is actually really important for the social education of all of our children. (P8)*

This reflects arguments made by religious educators keen to justify the value of the subject for building positive attitudes (e.g. (Miller, 2014)), and there is some empirical evidence for this claim (Francis et al., 2017; McCowan, 2017). For some in the group, the social value of religious education was in fostering understanding of newer or growing forms of diversity, while for others the work of encouraging cross-community understanding across traditional divides in Northern Ireland remained important.

> *I think we still have a lot of recovery to do here, in Northern Ireland. And so, maybe, social cohesion should be very much an explicit aim and a fundamental base for RE because we don't want to sweep things under the carpet and assume that they'll just organically get better. I think we should be intentional and specific about social cohesion as a product of a diverse learning experience and for there to healing and recovery in that, as well, even for teachers, for people teaching RE (P3)*

While supportive of the social purpose of religious education, a few participants suggested that it should not be a primary aim. They felt that while social cohesion might be a 'noble thing', visions of a socially cohesive society might differ significantly. Indeed, this might have been influenced by awareness of the difficulties in finding agreement locally for community policies such as CRED (DENI, 2011) or T:BUC (The Executive Office, 2013). These participants considered personal development to be a better starting point.

> *I think, before we get to social cohesion, which I'm not against… but for me, the reason for RE is probably because it develops the person and helps you to understand how other people function. So it's about personal development. It makes you understand your personal development, which in a bigger picture contributes to social cohesion, but I wouldn't necessarily make the jump directly to that point. (P7)*

How do we get there?

When recruiting to the dialogue group the researchers made clear that they were looking for people committed to constructively addressing some of the challenges that arise from teaching and learning about beliefs and values in plural classrooms. It was no surprise, then, that participants were thoughtful and constructive in suggesting changes, adaptations and improvements. They were, however, also increasingly conscious through the dialogue sessions at the scale of the challenge. As one person commented 'this has been a bit of an eye-opener as to all the things that can go wrong or all the things that are needed to make this work'. Nonetheless, from the dialogues three key priority areas for actions were identifiable: curriculum reform; teacher professional learning; and resourcing. Yet participants were also keenly aware that changes could not be entirely outcome focused rather, due attention should be given to the processes involved.

Developing a process

There was a general sense that in order to change it will be important to develop processes that could facilitate consensus building and mutual understanding. Some felt positive about a citizens' assembly style of event, similar to others undertaken on the island of Ireland, where a representative group of people could deliberate on the issues in a detailed way over a period of time and work towards recommendations based on consensus (Farrell et al., 2019). More generally, though, participants believed that creating opportunities at school or community level for both learning and dialogue around religious education and related issues would be valuable.

> *I think the process is really important, we need time to hear what people's concerns are and time to work through what is or isn't going to happen and time for that to be implemented. (P7)*

> *We talked about the importance of a space like this. It's not very often that you have the opportunity to sit and listen to people who have different worldviews. And so, intentionally creating that space and bringing people together is so valuable and so powerful and you learn so much just from the other people in the room. So yeah, just having this was really important. (P8)*

One participant highlighted that, for him, the most important aspect of a dialogue process was learning how to listen attentively, conscious that there may be differences in meaning when talking about religious education, even when people are using similar language. Drawing on personal experience with the dialogue group, he understood that even basic terms could vary greatly in meaning, and misunderstandings and obstacles to dialogue around change could arise if these differences are not acknowledged or understood.

> *We use language in different ways, and there's a lot of professional language around what the scheme is and, 'The approach that we're taking is this, and it's called this.' But to have that space to drill into exactly what we mean when we talk about those things. On a couple of occasions, when you sit and listen, you think, 'I don't think that at all.' But as conversation had moved on, it was like, 'Oh, that's not what I thought you meant the first time,' as we've got under the layers of that. (P7)*

The deeper listening also brought participants to a greater recognition of different perspectives, through which they understood that everyone with an interest in the subject is struggling with it in their own way.

> *I think one of the things that has struck me from the conversations in the room and also from the presentations is that everybody's struggling with this. Everybody's trying to find the right way forward because religious education, even though it is an educational process, especially in Northern Ireland, there's a lot of emotion attached to it and a lot of connotations and labelling and everything else attached to it. (P12)*

The value of people not only naming their particular struggles but also recognising others' struggles was acknowledged as part of a journey of change. Indeed, there were several examples of these moments in the sessions when participants recognised the challenges faced by others. These could be considered as empathic moments when the dialogue experience itself seems to have generated a more generous disposition and allowed people to see issues from the perspective of others. Some participants recognised, for example, the struggles that schools faced in respect of religious education. They noted that schools were constrained by curriculum, legislation and expectations of different stakeholders – parents, boards of governors, churches – and had a duty of listening to these groups. Similarly, there was sympathy for teachers and an awareness that they may not have had opportunities to develop their own knowledge or skills in teaching religious education.

> *But others are quite constrained by principals or heads of key stage or whatever and it's going to take a while, you know, a good while. (P16)*

> *A lot of the teachers are just ordinary people that don't have strong faith themselves, but they're told to do this, they probably do it the best they can (P9)*

With this sensitivity to the range of challenges, there were those who emphasised that change would not be immediate but would require patience. However, this was balanced by those who felt that it was not necessary to wait for 'top-down' change; rather, they suggested that grassroots actions could begin at any time and might actually be the more effective way to bring about positive change.

> *The next step is taken from wherever you are now. I'd love to see an ideal that's way over there. But to get there, we'll take several steps here. It's not going to be done in one bound. (P7)*

> *I really think there's power coming from the grassroots up. Sometimes, when you're fighting the institutions at the top, that's not always the way. The power really lies with the people. And if you are directing your view down to the grassroots, that is where the learning happens. That's where the growth happens. That's where the reflection happens. (P8)*

There were several examples of grassroots initiatives that participants would like to see. One was a pilot project which they imagined would involve the trialling of inclusive RWE materials in a small number of primary schools who would then share their experiences with others. Another suggestion was to build capacity for representatives of different minority religions and non-religious groups to provide visitors for schools to talk about their beliefs. A third was taking groups of teachers or policymakers to other jurisdictions to visit schools who have reviewed and reformed aspects of their religious education curricula. A fourth was to encourage a culture of openness among schools, in terms of both sharing what they currently do in religious education and engaging in conversations around how the subject might change or develop.

> *Speaking from my own experience as a parent trying to have some conversations with our school, which are going nowhere, it seems to me there's little if any, sort of, openness to thinking about how things might be done differently. And I just wonder how… that seems to be the challenge in how you get beyond that at all. How do you engage with school? (P2)*

Despite the different views on the potential speed of the process or whether it required stronger leadership or more grassroots action, participants felt that engaging in a process of dialogue and learning had increased their awareness of approaches to religion and worldviews education and strengthened their hope that processes of change can bring positive results.

> *When we had all the presentations from England and Wales and the South [of Ireland] that it showed that change is possible and that, actually, religion and a diverse curriculum is so valued in those places that they have made those steps and worked through all the challenges to get to a point where they have something that is really quite inspiring to us. So it's possible there might be light at the end of this tunnel that we're in over here (P3)*

Addressing key priorities

When thinking about how they might reach some of the core aspirations articulated previously, the majority of participants' comments and suggestions were directed towards three areas where they regarded change as a fundamental necessity: curriculum reform; teacher professional learning; and resourcing.

Regarding curriculum reform, participants felt this would be more likely to be achieved if it were done authentically and led with a positive vision of inclusive religion and worldviews education. In this context 'authenticity' would mean an inclusive process of curriculum design whereby the voices of a wide and diverse group would be involved in developing a new curriculum.

> *I'm thinking about that balance of authenticity, you know? Because you could put a bunch of educational professionals into a room and say, 'Could you write us an inclusive curriculum?' And they'd have a really good go at it, I'm sure. But it's about having those real-life experiences and the knowledge of people who actually are from faith or non-faith belief backgrounds. And I know that traditionally our curriculum is written by the four main Christian churches, so they definitely have a voice and they definitely are able to, of course, shape the curriculum. But what appetite would there be for having an inter-faith curriculum advisory group? And draw on the balance between educational professionals and people from belief backgrounds and that sort of collaborative approach. (P3)*

> *Now, having seen, yeah, what a really well thought out, inclusive RE curriculum could be and how valuable I think it would be, I think I would be, yeah, a lot more convinced… And showing people what it could look like, I think, is really key (P2)*

Another example of how curriculum reform could be achieved related to shifting control of the subject away from the exclusive responsibility of churches and into the curriculum authority with all other subjects.

> *It can't be that difficult to remove RE from being in this little asteroid belt that it's in now… I mean, it's still part of the rest of the curriculum, so it needs to have those links to other subjects. It can be advised by whoever has a vested interested, as any other subject could. I'm not trying to get rid of the churches overnight or anybody else of religious interest. But actually, it needs to sit with the rest of the curriculum. As long as it doesn't sit with the rest of the curriculum, it's always going to be this certain, funny, weird little space out there somewhere. It needs to attach itself to communication and to history and to geography and to PDMU. And is its own space too, but it has to be part of everything. It can't just be something different. Can you imagine doing that with history, teaching everything else except for history which has its own thing over there? But that's where RE has ended up. So I think the first thing is to undo that. (P7)*

Alongside curriculum reform, teacher professional learning was identified as an important aspect of any future developments in religious education and was mentioned frequently throughout the dialogue sessions. Some focused upon a knowledge gap that they witnessed when engaging with teachers.

> *I know from working in a school myself the teachers do not have the information to teach world religions. And they try very hard, but they are… they do not have the basis to be able to teach these. And it's really important that starts in the colleges, because if the teachers don't have the structures or the language it's not going to work. (P8)*

> *I agree with [Participant 8] about having to start with the teachers, because they're the ones who are going to have to deliver whatever is delivered. And a lot of the teachers from the communities that we've had so far here wouldn't have the background themselves, you know? They just wouldn't. They've been channelled through various strictly faith-based schools, most of them, so I do think, like [Participant 8] says, we have to start with the teachers, educate them, whatever way they need to be educated in a multi-faith and non-faith way. So they can then permeate that down to the children in whatever way they have to do that. (P9)*

Others drew attention to differences in motivation or enthusiasm for teaching the subject. This is something that has been shown previously in studies of ITE students across the island of Ireland (Kieran et al., 2020). As one participant who had experience of teacher education noted:

> *We have students obviously coming in from a huge range of backgrounds, some of whom are very keen to teach RE when they get out into primary schools and some of whom are hoping they won't be asked to teach it and don't want to teach it (P16)*

From the beginning it was acknowledged that addressing these challenges was not just a matter of giving teachers information about a few different religions or worldviews which they could include in their classes. As the question from one participant below shows, there was a sense that the 'right training' would involve a knowledge element, a pedagogical aspect and support for teachers to help children think critically and independently on issues of beliefs and values.

> *How can teachers receive the right training to be able to adequately teach about every religion so that every child can understand where everybody is coming from but also have that ability to think for themselves? (P8)*

There was a view from several participants that gaining knowledge of different religions and worldviews should be an important aspect of initial teacher education. Some believed that part of this should involve experiential aspects such as visiting places of worship and inviting guests with different worldviews to meet with student teachers. To emphasise the point, several participants drew on their own experiences to illustrate how encountering others who are different could engender powerful learning.

A counter view stated that educating all teachers with deep knowledge about a range of religions and worldviews would still not be adequate given limitations on time. Further, when teaching about any tradition from the outside, teachers will inevitably make mistakes and may interpret things wrongly. The proposed alternative was for teachers to facilitate opportunities for young people to learn directly from the resources and people of a different tradition or group.

> *I think we just need to get to a stage of accepting teachers can't do that, therefore we need to equip them with other skills, which is facilitation, being able to learn about religions and also using resources where as far as possible people of those religions and of those beliefs talk about their own experience and not try to summarise that for them. (P7)*

Overlapping with the wish for more teacher professional learning grounded in the Northern Ireland context, there was a view that religious education could be improved through better resourcing. As noted above, many were dissatisfied with the narrowness of some schemes or teaching materials used in primary schools, especially those which assumed belief or adopted a confessional stance, and they reported a need for age-appropriate resources for teaching about religion and worldviews to be made more widely available. The aspiration noted previously that local communities should be used as 'a resource' to support schools was generally endorsed, although some participants observed that smaller communities or groups could lack the capacity to support schools' work, even where they were willing to do so.

Conclusions

Over six focus group sessions, the dialogues produced a valuable and complex picture of attitudes to and experiences of religious education in Northern Ireland. While the participants were only able to provide snapshots of their experiences, it is reasonable to say that, together, they offer significant insights into current practices and the pressing need for reform. They also aid us in our understanding of how a transformative shift towards a more inclusive and educationally grounded subject might be achieved through curricular reform, professional learning and resourcing.

Participants provided examples of how they experienced the Christian-centred approach to religious education in class and assemblies. They recognised the importance of religious identity for many schools and parents, including ritual or celebratory occasions such as First Communion and Confession in Catholic schools. They also understood the potential value of learning about religion more generally. Indeed, this was a notable finding given that those from non-religious perspectives and religious traditions that are minorities in Northern Ireland are sometimes characterised as wanting to have all religious education removed from schools. However, there were differences in opinion regarding confessional teaching in publicly funded schools. Some expressed concerns that current lessons were not always age and stage appropriate and those providing religious education or assemblies could be insensitive to the plurality of belief in the classroom. Examples were given of how, as a result of some lessons or assemblies, some pupils had been upset or confused about who they should consider a trusted authority. On the other side was a concern that the omission or limited treatment of religions and worldviews other than Christianity could marginalise children who held those beliefs. Yet, despite the strong emphasis on Christian religious education, there was a parallel story of a subject that in some schools was neglected and had lower status than the rest of the curriculum, reflecting the lack of attention or support given to the subject by education authorities.

Our evidence suggests that the current arrangements for Christian religious education have created challenging circumstances for many parents, making decisions around religious education extremely difficult. This was exacerbated, for some, by a lack of transparency about what was taking place in religious education lessons and assemblies. Some described this situation as 'part of the deal', an inevitable part of getting an education in Northern Ireland. Others were less resigned and were uncomfortable with religious education; while they understood there was a right to withdrawal, they were clear that this was a case of choosing the least bad of the available options. On one hand, they could choose to keep their child in religious education and compromise their freedom of religion to bring their child up in a non-Christian tradition; or, on the other hand, they could withdraw their child and risk them feeling 'othered' and excluded by being removed from assemblies or isolated from the rest of the class.

Given the range of challenges, a small number of participants favoured separation where children from different religious traditions would be educated in their own tradition, but the majority were strongly in favour of inclusive religious education in which all pupils could participate. To achieve basic inclusivity, participants envisaged schools taking seriously the beliefs and values of every child in the classroom. In practice this person-centred religious education would require a clear separation of curricular religious education from collective worship. This would be a significant first step in recognising that religious belief was not a pre-requisite to study religion and that all children, with or without belief, could be recognised equally as learners. It was also regarded as a safeguard against indoctrination. Participants were interested in the possibility of introducing children to different age-appropriate historical, philosophical or sociological 'ways of knowing' in the study of religion and worldviews. While there were differences in opinion around the balance of content, there was general agreement that explorations of religions and worldviews would benefit from taking a contemporary approach that helped students become familiar with 'lived religion', that is, the local expression of beliefs of people and communities from across Northern Ireland. It was felt that pedagogical approaches that encouraged enquiry and dialogue around 'big questions' were also likely to be valuable, especially when connected to other areas of the curriculum. Furthermore, these approaches could help pupils to understand that people's religious or non-religious worldviews are shaped by diverse influences and can change over time.

During the dialogues there was regular reflection on the historical context, the political structures and the social reality of educating young people in a post-conflict society that is also experiencing a surge in hate crime related to religion and ethnicity. There was strong support (and hope) among participants for a religious education that could make a social difference by challenging racism, religious stereotyping and prejudice, although some were keen to point out that social transformation had to begin with personal transformation.

When asked to consider how a changed religious education would come about, a key priority was an authentic curriculum reform process that was grounded in a positive vision of inclusive Religion and Worldviews education. It was believed that such a process should involve a wide range of faith and non-faith groups and be supported by a professional curriculum authority. In addition to this paramount concern, participants repeatedly drew attention to three other cross-cutting necessities: firstly, the need for policy guidance around the pedagogical expectations for any new curriculum; secondly, a need for teacher education that helped teachers to understand the potential influence of their beliefs in the classroom when teaching religious education; and thirdly, a need for professional development and suitable resources to support teachers in their subject knowledge and to provide guidance as to what is appropriate in plural classrooms. These were considered to be the most important 'top-down' ways to assist changes to the subject. That said, there was also a view that 'bottom-up' approaches were required alongside, or even in advance of, top-down changes. Suggestions of school level processes included increasing transparency around current practice, clarifying the language used to describe religious education, adopting a listening approach to parents' concerns, and drawing on local resources to develop and support more inclusive inputs into religious education.

Teacher consultation focus group

Procedure

One teacher consultation focus group (n=7) was held in June 2025 and involved participants with a range of experience, including one principal with whole-school curriculum responsibility, four teachers involved in coordinating religious education in their school, and two recently graduated teachers with experience of teaching the subject in primary schools. Some teachers had experience of teaching in more than one school type. At the time of data collection, three were employed in controlled schools, one in an integrated school, and one in a Catholic maintained school; the newly qualified teachers were appointed to begin working from September 2025 in a controlled school and a Catholic maintained school, respectively.

The purpose of the focus group was twofold: firstly, to understand how schools organise religious education as part of their wider curriculum; and, secondly, to explore teachers' experiences of and attitudes to the subject. The structure of the session reflected these purposes, with the first part given over to hearing detailed descriptions of teachers' experiences of organising and/or teaching the subject. During the second part of the session, researchers shared the survey results and a summary of outcomes from the Dialogue Group. Participants were therefore invited not only to share their own views on current practice in religious education but also to consider and respond to perceptions among the general public (the survey) along with the perspectives of those whose beliefs are minorities in Northern Ireland (Dialogue Group).

CODE	STATUS	CURRENT SCHOOL TYPE
T1	RE Coordinator	Integrated
T2	RE Coordinator	Controlled
T3	Beginning teacher	Maintained
T4	Beginning teacher	Controlled
T5	RE Coordinator	Controlled
T6	RE Coordinator	Maintained
T7	Principal	Controlled

Where are we now?

School ethos and context

When asked how they would describe their school ethos, all teachers expressed it as 'Christian' although this was qualified by various other terms such as 'Catholic' or 'Protestant', or, indicating intensity, 'heavily Christian' or 'follow the Catholic religion very closely'. Examples were given of how the ethos was evident through the school day, which was mainly through religious education and school assemblies. These included Christian practices such as prayers, hymn-singing and ministry. Teachers also spoke about the close working relationships with local clergy who were often involved in different aspects of school life.

> *They would follow the Catholic religion very closely within the school, within the day in terms of morning prayers at lunch time, prayers at home time (T4)*

> *So we would also have praise time, as well, which is a hymn practice type thing. But during praise time, it would be the opportunity to pray together, so as in we would be asking children for prayer requests and they would be giving us things that they want to pray about as well. So it is really quite a corporate worship, Christian ethos, yeah, with P1 to P3, and then one for 4 to 7, as well. (T2)*

Interestingly, some of the teachers indicated how the school ethos was in transition or adapting to changing pupil populations by trying to increase its inclusivity. Generally, this was done by emphasising common values or morals such as respect in place of using religious or theological language.

> *So we would be more, maybe, secular based. We do have a Christian ethos. We do have ministers that come in. But the songs that we sing in assembly and so forth would be more about kindness and thinking of others and being respectful and that sort of thing rather than focusing more on religious elements. (T7)*

> *Whenever our teachers would take assemblies, and your class would take an assembly once a year, we try to say to them, 'Could you maybe do something about morals or respect?' so that children are getting a variety of ministers and clergy and pastors, but they're also getting something that's more respect and morals and things like that, or golden rules we would sometimes do. (T2)*

One teacher, however, from a Catholic maintained school, was wary of such an approach and expressed concern that it could marginalise faith perspectives within schools.

> *In my mind, there's danger of going too far the other way. And, oh, absolutely, we need to be more inclusive but not to the detriment of watering down the Christian faith that we're promoting in our schools or almost afraid to talk about our faith. (T6)*

The majority of teachers indicated that increased diversity of beliefs had become a noticeable feature of their classrooms. Towards the end of the focus group, one participant noted that one 'big takeaway' from the day was that whatever school type teachers find themselves in, they are likely to have a large diversity of beliefs in their classrooms. Inevitably, however, this was experienced differently from school to school. In one controlled school, this manifested as a significant increase in those identifying as 'other', which included a range of other religions and 'lots' who described themselves as atheists or who preferred not to define themselves in relation to a faith or belief. In another controlled school, greater diversity was manifest in an increase in the number of Catholic pupils, while a teacher from a Catholic maintained school noted the significant increase in non-practising Catholics in her context.

Given this growing diversity, some teachers reported that their schools were making efforts to develop a welcoming and inclusive ethos by building connections with their wider community. For one controlled school, broadening the pupils' awareness of different religions and worldviews arose out of a Diversity Day when pupils and their families were invited to celebrate their national and cultural heritage.

> *They brought in, maybe, food from their country, and then it ended up talking about their culture, and religion came into this, too. So it wasn't supposed to be that way, but it came out that it was covering a little bit of everything. And you had the children sitting up and listening and wanting to learn about what their friends… and what they did and why they wore a face covering and those kind of things. So it didn't start out that way, but it turned out quite beneficial in the end (T5)*

In this case, drawing on parental contributions aided the school in developing an inclusive programme. Yet, the same teacher also reported that the wider community context also placed constraints on how they approached issues related to religion and worldviews. She felt that introducing changes to religious education was a frightening prospect and could open 'a can of worms' she would be unable to deal with. This was heightened by an incident when staff were threatened.

> *I think I could be opening something that could be quite, yeah, frightening because I would have thought I felt safe there. But I don't, particularly, now. And there was a threat put to our staff last week and to our school and to our families. And it is all… in my head, does come to religion and morals. It all comes back to it in the end. So I don't know. We do need change, but I don't know how I'm going to go about this. (T5)*

An element of fear was conveyed by others who had experienced challenging conversations with parents or grandparents. One teacher in a Catholic maintained school was accused by a grandfather of 'Islamifying' his child by allowing her friend to draw henna patterns on her hand during break-time. While the situation was resolved, it raised the teacher's awareness of the negative attitudes towards other religious beliefs in the wider community.

> *And actually, once we got through all of the explanations, he was okay about that. But it took having had that conversation. And coming from a place of anger probably doesn't really help you. But I think it is, as somebody was saying, that lack of understanding of where we are in society. (T6)*

One additional element of the school environment that was mentioned by several teacher participants, and which will be a focus of further analysis below, was the religious backgrounds of teachers. There was a general assumption that teaching religious education was most suited to those who had a religious belief themselves, although this was conveyed in slightly different ways by focus group participants. In one case, religious belief was posited as a requirement for religious education teachers; in another, it was the basis for negotiations about who would teach the subject.

> *It's one thing that I would insist on. Even though everybody says, 'Everybody can be an RE teacher,' I don't agree with that at all. And when I'm talking to the principal, the only number one priority with me is that the people who are being put in front of the children must be practising the faith that they're trying to teach. And he agrees with that. And that doesn't put staff under pressure who are doing it. (T6)*

> *We tend to swap, in the older classes, who teaches RE for the people that feel most comfortable doing that because I have a few teachers who are atheist who don't really feel terribly comfortable, so you play to your strengths. We're a really diverse staff. So I have Catholic teachers within my school, and they tend to be the people who are very keen to teach RE. And they're doing a real mix of all the different elements of the Bible, which has worked really, really well. (T7)*

Religious education curriculum

When asked how religious education is organised in their schools, the majority of teachers spoke about it both as a discrete slot in a timetable and as collective worship during assemblies. One teacher reported, however, that she had taught in a school where collective worship during assemblies constituted the only time given to religious education.

While all schools are expected to follow the Core Syllabus for Religious Education, the teachers employed different schemes and resources when planning religious education and there was a significant lack of consistency in the amount of time given to it. Teachers who spoke about their experience in Catholic maintained primary schools explained that they followed the Veritas resource Grow in Love, which came with workbooks and online materials to use across the seven years, mostly twice a week. These materials were also used in the integrated school for those children preparing to take sacraments in P3, 4 and 7. In this case the teacher explained that a small group of Catholic children would be taken out of class at particular points during the year and the rest of the group would follow a Scripture Union scheme of work. For the joint religious education classes they would also mostly follow Scripture Union materials. In her role as subject coordinator of religious education, however, the teacher had recently introduced a different world religion to the curriculum for each year group, and she felt this had been a positive addition.

> *I think focusing on world religion has been a positive change, shifting from basically Catholic or Protestant to a more worldwide view, which I think is really helping the school and celebrating world religion day and culture day and big links or strong links with PDMU, which had been really positive. (T1)*

Teachers who had experience in controlled schools indicated that those schools generally employed a combination of resources for religious education. The core material tended to be resources and schemes provided by the former North Eastern Education and Library Board (NEELB) – produced around 30 years ago - or purchased from evangelical groups such as Scripture Union or Bible Time. While these were principally used for Christian teaching, some teachers also drew on them to introduce other world religions.

> *In terms of curriculum, we would use a combination of three things at the minute. We would use the Bible Time that you talked about. Our P6s and 7s really like it. We would dip in and out of the NEELB scheme. We don't follow it the whole way through. But there are lots of different things in that, particularly for the Jewish tradition that we find, actually, are quite a good way to teach children about the Jewish tradition. (T5)*

We follow a whole-school scheme. It's provided by Bible Time. So those lessons would be given to us for the teachers, and then they come with workbooks, as well. They would be based… you would have… foundation stage would cover a level. I think it's level zero. And then, our Key Stage 1 would follow level… I think it's level one. And then, Key Stage 2 is level two. They're all colour-coded books, and all the lesson plans come with it, as well. They are actually collected monthly by this organisation who mark. So, you know, we hand everything… we teach the lessons, but we hand it all back to them and they do all the marking for that. (T2)

While the teaching of religious education across all the schools focused on confessional Christian content, each school seemed to make some adjustments to manage diversity through local arrangements. Similar to integrated schools, two of the controlled school teachers described how their schools managed provision of sacramental preparation for Catholic children, one within the school and the other in partnership with their local maintained schools. None of the schools, however, offered an alternative curriculum to other groups; any children whose parents asked for them to be withdrawn from religious education were given different tasks, such as completing literacy and numeracy booklets, but stayed in the same class.

We, as I was saying, have lots of children from different religious backgrounds. And they have to remain in class when we're doing all our Christianity activities. (T7)

We don't have an alternative curriculum. I know we definitely don't. However, the child in particular, the one that I know in our school that does not participate, the teacher organises something else for him to do. So I teach that class, and I know, whenever I arrive, I cover her and I teach RE. But he does always have another activity… And in the previous school I worked in, there was no alternative curriculum, but there was always an alternative activity. But it was something that was still quite worthwhile. It wasn't a colouring-in sheet or something. So there was always something alternative but worthwhile. (T2)

While one teacher reflected that children remaining in religious education classes when they had asked to be withdrawn was not a satisfactory arrangement, she also noted that it was ultimately a matter of staffing and timetabling. Others concurred that without support or whole-school reorganisation of religious education, they could not practically provide an alternative curriculum for some children while still having responsibility for the whole class.

When asked which aspects of religious education in their school were going well, several teachers singled out the positive experience of introducing more religions into the curriculum. Another aspect of their curriculum that some teachers regarded as successful was visiting places of worship, often as part of a Shared Education project. This opportunity for experiential learning seemed to make a big impression on pupils, and teachers felt it helped to break barriers and challenge misconceptions.

I think, just being there and seeing it firsthand was different to seeing it in a workbook or learning about different religions… But going there, as a child, and experiencing that had a profound impact… And they were like, 'Oh, I remember when the priest was showing us this, and I remember whenever the minister was showing us how communion is different and it's not about transubstantiation.' (T2)

Teachers underlined the importance of good preparation in making these types of visits successful. They noted that taking pupils to new places could be overwhelming, so it was important to set expectations and introduce them to some elements of the visit in advance. Using artefacts and helping children to prepare good questions were two examples of how teachers ensured that visits to places of worship were positive learning experiences.

Assemblies

As previously noted, collective worship during whole-school assemblies is a significant way through which schools convey their Christian ethos. These assemblies generally involve aspects of religious practice such as prayer, singing or ministry. Each school, however, organises the content according to their own preferences or priorities, and the frequency is dependent upon practical arrangements: some large schools reported that assembly was held twice a term for each key stage, while some smaller schools provided it twice a week. Teachers with experience in integrated and controlled schools stated that visiting ministers and representatives from religious organisations such as Scripture Union or Bible Time were regular features of assemblies.

When it comes to our assemblies, then the Bible Time people, they would come in and do Christian-based assemblies. Our senior teacher organises all of our assemblies, so they're heavily based on Christianity. (T5)

So we would have assemblies twice a week. There's one for Key Stage 1 and one Key Stage 2. We would try, as much as possible, to involve as many people from the community as we can and not even just in the town, but having SU or as many people as we can in. However, those people are all Christian. (T2)

Similar to the curriculum, the management of diversity varied from school to school, with most making some adjustments to assemblies in response to a changing pupil profile. For some, this meant allowing students to withdraw when religious elements were introduced; for others, it meant minimising the religious content in order to create a more inclusive experience. Several schools also used assemblies as places to celebrate difference. A desire for more inclusion was evident in comments from teachers across all sectors, integrated, maintained and controlled.

In our school assemblies, every class chooses an assembly to lead, and they would choose a range of… sometimes, they're secular. Sometimes, they're religious. P7 always does world religion day, and they introduce to the rest of the school all of the different religions. Our P3s chose to do St Patrick's Day this year, which, again, in a controlled school, we're taking a big chance. But it went very well. And we continue to do harvest, nativity, and Easter, and bring in other religions into that to try and bring the diversity, as well. (T7)

Because in terms of class time, they're following Grow in Love so closely and they have Grow in Love homework every week, they would say that their assemblies, they would actually really and try and veer a wee bit away from looking directly at that but would be looking more so at things like kindness and respect just to try and open up to other children. (T4)

Significant discomfort was expressed by some teachers regarding two issues: those moments when pupils who had been withdrawn from assembly had to leave, and occasions when visitors spoke in ways that were not age-appropriate or that cast judgment on individuals or groups. One teacher related an occasion some years ago when a minister in a controlled school spoke about the children's sins in a way that had a 'traumatic' effect on her. Another explained that similar things still happened in her school and it was evident that some pupils were scared by it.

A minister came in, and he brought children up to the front and he put them in white t-shirts. And then, he took black paint and he talked about their sins. And he painted the white shirts black, representing their sins and, 'These are the black marks on your soul when you do something wrong.' And it was really… I found it incredibly traumatic. I thought, 'What are we doing to our kids when we're telling them, 'You were born pure and now, just because you've existed, you have these black scars all over your body'?' It was awful. I really, really felt very uncomfortable about that and probably has stayed with me a little bit. (T7)

We only had a speaker in last week and the same thing was going on again. And you're sitting back thinking, 'Now, I'm not in charge of organising assemblies, but maybe, should I have more of a say with being RE coordinator in the school in it?' because you could see some of those little kids sitting quite fearful. (T5)

Similar to religious education classes, the numbers who were withdrawn from this aspect of school life differed from school to school. While one teacher reported that no-one in her school had been withdrawn, another spoke of a 'mass exodus' when religious elements are introduced into assemblies.

Where do we want to be?

Teachers' comments about their aspirations for change were focused on two main areas, a purposeful religious education curriculum and more inclusive approaches to the treatment of religion in assemblies and the curriculum.

Purposeful curriculum

When asked to consider areas they would like to see improved, teachers reflected upon their own classroom practice in the first instance. They acknowledged the competing demands for timetable space and wished they had time to address religious education more substantively. Several also aimed to improve their schemes of work for the subject, to make them more meaningful and relevant to their children, but also to connect them more purposefully with other areas of the curriculum. One way that relevance was consistently discussed was in terms of lessons that had moral or social purposes, either through a focus on shared virtues like kindness and respect, or by developing pupils' understanding and awareness of religious and ethical diversity.

T5:

And I feel like RE, in our school, is just ticking a box. 'Right. You go and give them that. That's it, done.'

T7:

'Go and do that worksheet. Go and do a drama. Do a drama on…'

T5:

Yeah, or they don't see the impact of what RE can actually do when you're going back to the moral values of people.

Like participants from the Dialogue Group, there was a feeling from these teachers that there was a missed opportunity for purposeful religious education while the current Core Syllabus remained in place. They understood the potential value of the subject for addressing moral, spiritual and intellectual issues of direct significance to young people's lives and they expressed a wish to see a well-organised, well-resourced curriculum that was grounded in educational aims that were relevant for all their pupils.

Inclusive practice

Teachers were also aware of the wider policy framework for religious education and most recognised that the Core Syllabus was dated and believed it needed to become more inclusive. This was articulated in terms of a desire for a syllabus that included a variety of religions and worldviews and was more reflective of our contemporary society. Another way that teachers felt greater inclusion could be achieved was by focusing on shared values, especially those relating to social cohesion such as peacebuilding, tolerance and respect.

> *So I think a syllabus that is purely… that excludes people maybe doesn't reflect where we are in society anymore. We're not a society that… well, I hope we're not a society that tries to exclude. And certainly, within the way education works about inclusivity and the different levels within our schools in terms of their abilities and things, we would never say, 'You can't come to our school because you're not the right… you're not smart enough or you're too smart or you have the wrong colour skin.' So why are we then making religion fit a different picture? And I know that there's a history to it. (T7)*

> *I think that the picture of world religion that we have is based on the past when Northern Ireland wasn't such an ethnically diverse community. And now it is, the curriculum needs to change to suit the needs of the pupils in front of us. (T6)*

The ambition to broaden out and make the religious education curriculum more inclusive was part of a wider desire among a number of teachers to see changes to school assemblies. They felt that a greater variety of visitors to assembly would be helpful, as well as changing the tone from one that is narrow in outlook to one that is more open to different perspectives.

> *I would say we're probably good at getting a variety of people in. However, on the flipside of that… they really are all Christian. So that's something that I really need to think about. How do we get other people into school that are not necessarily from a Christian perspective? (T2)*

> *If we broaden it and make it less, maybe, preachy, 'If you are a Christian, you would believe this,' rather than, 'This is the only thing that you can believe.' (T7)*

One teacher, however, suggested that inclusivity required schools to begin with an affirmation of each person's worldview.

> *I think the common goal is, 'It's okay to have your own belief. These are the other beliefs to be aware of and just respect.' (T4)*

How do we get there?

Change process

Teachers were conscious that to make progress on some of the issues identified during the focus group would be a significant challenge. There was a sense from some that they were caught in a difficult situation and were not sure how to proceed. Thinking of her own circumstances one commented:

> *We do need change, but I don't know how I'm going to go about this. (T5)*

In this and other statements it was clear that teachers felt they were in a vulnerable situation. Not to change left them open to criticism from those who were currently excluded, but to introduce change invited anger or even abuse from those who were resistant. As a result, Teacher 5, along with some others, concluded that there needed to be collaborative leadership around change at school level, including consultation with all stakeholders.

> *I think we would need to have governors, principal, senior teacher involved in this before I even go down to the teacher's responses and the families. But something does have to change. But I would be very worried about it in this day and age. We shouldn't be. (T2)*

One teacher went further, however, stating that any significant changes to religious education required policy-level 'top-down' change in order to 'give cover' to teachers and principals. By this, she meant that placing a legal duty on schools to diversify their religious education curriculum or change their pedagogical approach was essential if teachers were not to be placed in vulnerable situations.

Support needs

As well as identifying curriculum reform as a way of bringing about change, the teachers noted a number of support needs. These included additional professional learning opportunities in religious education to provide staff with more knowledge about teaching diverse religions and worldviews and allow them to unpack their pedagogical stance when teaching the subject.

Throughout the focus group, teachers reflected deeply on their own childhood experiences of religious education as well their experience of encountering religious difference as adults. It was clear that it had taken time for most of them to develop their own personal and professional positions on teaching religious education and, for some, this was still an ongoing process. One beginning teacher felt that the quality of her teaching of religious education was fundamentally connected to her own ability to speak about religious matters with knowledge and confidence:

> *I think that, if we are more confident and comfortable talking about it and answering questions and promoting that learning, I think that the children will… I think you'll see that they'll be really receptive to it because they do have questions and their peers and their friends and, maybe, even family have different beliefs and different ways of doing things. I think it would really promote that even more if we were more comfortable in talking about. (T3)*

The importance of sound subject knowledge for teacher self-confidence is well-known. The views of this teacher also correspond with findings from other studies in religious education that note the value of professional learning spaces in which teachers can reflect on the implications of their worldviews on their own practice and also be introduced to guidelines about how best to manage their own commitments when teaching religious education (Arthur et al., 2019; Everington et al., 2011).

Conclusions

We can see that there is a high level of consistency across schools in explicitly identifying Christianity as a core element of their values and ethos. Beyond this, however, the varied experiences of teachers suggest there is very limited coherence and consistency in religious education across and even within school types in Northern Ireland. The evidence from teachers shows that this inconsistency relates to what is taught and how difference is accommodated. Regarding the teaching of the Core Syllabus for Religious Education, there are very significant differences in resource materials used, topics covered and time allocated. In respect of how schools manage diversity during religious education and collective worship, it is possible to identify two common methods employed to respond to plurality. One is to lean on the withdrawal option by offering this to parents who are not happy with Christian assemblies or religious education. A second is to take religious content out of classrooms and assemblies. Teachers explained that when pupils are withdrawn, they are given meaningful educational tasks, although no alternative curriculum is available in their schools.

Reasons for the inconsistent provision in religious education included the availability of suitable resources, lack of time and the low priority given to the subject in comparison to others within the overall curriculum. A further factor that teachers kept returning to was their own sense of preparedness. At one level this concerned basic subject knowledge and intercultural and/or inter-religious awareness; however, it also extended to preparedness to manage the competing expectations from the curriculum, schools, parents, and religious visitors while maintaining professionalism and integrity to their own personal beliefs. There were examples of teachers who found themselves at an impasse and were uncertain how to manage these competing priorities. Those teachers who had experienced external religious visitors speaking in assemblies were able to point to instances when they had felt uncomfortable and when they considered the content to be age-inappropriate and at times fear-inducing for children.

All the teachers in the group recognised that change was needed and believed that religious education has a potential role in building more cohesive schools and communities. Changes which some identified as already helping in this regard were the broadening of material or topics to draw upon diverse worldviews and cultural perspectives, especially when there were opportunities to connect these examples across different curricular areas.

Experiential learning through visits to places of worship was noted as a positive method to extend pupils' experiences and challenge misconceptions. Another way of making best use of community connections to local churches and religious organisations was through building their capacity to engage with pupils. One participant reflected that setting expectations with religious visitors in advance of them speaking to children was also a positive development. In cases where this had occurred, the conversation was welcomed by clergy who understood the need to take more account of the plurality of the audience.

Nonetheless, there were other teachers who felt less able to intervene. While they may have felt a strong desire or need to change, they felt vulnerable and unable to act until they had support from others including principals, governors and policy-writers. They also wished for clear guidance. This included guidance on how to handle personal commitments when teaching religious education. In most cases they noted that there existed an assumption that teachers who taught religious education lessons were practising believers themselves. We noted the recommendations from other studies that creating space for teachers to reflect on their positionality as part of the teaching of religious education is of fundamental importance.

Overall, teachers desired a purposeful curriculum that could set clear expectations for learning in religious education and would allow them to provide a sound educational justification to parents regarding what they teach in that subject area. This need for 'cover' was felt to be increasingly important in situations where teachers felt vulnerable and open to a potential backlash for introducing more diverse material.

Overview and Discussion of Findings

Coherence and comparability regarding experiences of religious education

Despite a common religious education syllabus, the evidence from the Dialogue Group and teacher focus group suggests that the organisation and content of religious education in primary schools is extremely variable. This is in line with previous investigations into practice across school types (Richardson, 2012) and within specific school types in Northern Ireland (Integrated Education Fund, 2025; Nelson & Yang, 2022). Lack of coherence is not, however, isolated to religious education. In reviewing all other aspects of the Northern Ireland Curriculum, Crehan (2025, p. 103) identified major weaknesses to include differing standards and variations in opportunities to learn across schools; the lack of clear progression within schools; and repetition or omission of content.

> ***Differing standards and opportunities to learn across schools are a problem because children cannot learn things that they have not had the opportunity to study. Given the power of knowledge for enabling young people to participate fully in society, there should be some knowledge that all children are entitled to, no matter what school they go to.***
> **(Crehan 2025, p.103)**

Her response was to advocate a knowledge-rich curriculum which builds around 'vertical' and 'horizontal' coherence within and across subject curricula. While religious education was outside the remit of her review, the argument that it too should specify a coherent minimum entitlement that can be meaningfully integrated within the wider curriculum must logically still apply. A shared curriculum across all school types was the most favoured option (46%) in our survey of the Northern Ireland population's attitudes towards the current arrangements for religious education, which suggests that there would be support for a curriculum that provided a common core of knowledge for all young people.

The evidence from our research shows, however, that a common core syllabus is not enough if, in practice, it fails to provide comparable learning experiences. It is important therefore that any new syllabus is implemented, supported and monitored in a way that provides greater consistency of experience and of quality for learners. Of course, any policy implementation in education can be a complex and potentially ineffective process (Ball et al., 2012).

One primary reason for failure in implementation is when educators are unable to make sense of the policy in their context (Spillane, 2004), which can be caused by not taking learners into account when policies are being written (Ball et al., 2012). This highlights the importance of policymakers giving due consideration to the diverse backgrounds and experiences of learners who will engage with the subject, in order to enhance the enactment and effectiveness of a common religious education syllabus.

The lack of consistent practice around the timetabling of religious education and the use of assemblies as a replacement for curricular religious education in some schools also underscores a need for clearer guidance. In current legislation, it is the role of the Department of Education to regulate such matters for grant-aided schools. It is given powers to set regulations regarding 'the times during which any religious observance may be practised or any religious education may be given; the times during which pupils may be withdrawn from the school…, the making of arrangements for religious education, the amount of time which may be allotted in the timetables of schools to religious education. (The Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986, 3.21 (9)).

Managing plurality of belief in classrooms

Looking at evidence from across the Dialogue Group sessions and teacher focus group, it seems schools tend to manage diversity in one of two day-to-day ways, separation or secularisation. There was a sense from the teachers that within the current context these were the only choices available and, while some wanted to go beyond these options, they were uncertain of what to do and fearful of the response they might receive if they introduced change.

Separation follows a liberal multicultural logic (Kymlicka, 1995) which suggests that groups can co-exist best when they are each given due space and respect to develop their own coherent worldviews. Boundaries between groups are expected to facilitate in-group self-confidence and are beneficial for minority groups who, otherwise, could be assimilated into majority groups. Applied to integrated schools, this theory has had general support over the years in accommodating groups of Catholic students who wish to have separate religious education for sacramental preparation, and there is evidence from our sources that some controlled schools are doing the same. The Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (2022, p. 8) also seems to support this type of separation by saying

that 'Catholic schools… work with the families of learners from other religious traditions and cultures to assist them in developing their understanding of their own faiths', although we found no examples of alternative belief-specific religious education in Catholic maintained schools in our research. We can see, however, from the testimony of parents that what might be true for groups does not function well at individual level when there are multiple pupil beliefs to be taken into account. In these situations, separation is more likely to be felt as exclusionary and can negatively impact children's sense of dignity. When pupils are withdrawn, teachers are often still responsible for them and organising alternative supervision or work is challenging; Dialogue Group participants testified to this and felt arrangements were often poor or inadequate. This confirms previous research in this area (Richardson et al., 2013) and highlights once more a deficit in equality of treatment for these children.

The second response to diversity among schools is to minimise difference by creating spaces where religious input is reduced or removed. This pluralistic approach avoids separation and keeps all children involved on the basis that equality is best served by secularising the environment. Examples were given of how religious content in classrooms or assemblies was replaced with generic themes such as 'respect' or 'kindness'. In some contexts, such as France or USA, the removal of religion and the focus on common democratic values has been a well-established practice in plural classrooms. However, the removal of religion could have other negative consequences. Bekerman and Zembylas (2017) argue that minimising or ignoring religious and cultural affiliations can make it difficult for students to fully participate in a school community, particularly for those from minoritised or marginalised groups. It was also notable that members of the Dialogue Group were sensitive to this and made no arguments for such an approach to be applied to primary schools in Northern Ireland. Instead, they favoured intercultural approaches where differences in belief were acknowledged but did not require separation (Akkari & Radhouane, 2022). Thus, learning together was preferred on the grounds that dialogic or shared pedagogies of religious education could allow students to develop their own worldview through engagement with others. There was also general agreement that the ideal would be a subject that was taught in an objective, critical and plural manner, and therefore did not require any option for withdrawal.

The survey also shows strong support for a shared curriculum in religious education which builds religious literacy through understanding different religious and non-religious worldviews as well as examining and reflecting on children's own and others' religions and worldviews.

Vulnerability, discomfort and uncertainty: 'We are all struggling with this'

The experiences of parents, grandparents, teachers and school leaders in our findings suggest that current arrangements are associated with significant ethical and emotional issues for many who have a direct involvement with the school system. As one member of the Dialogue Group noted, *'we are all struggling with this'*. There are concerns that children are not being protected from messages that may make them confused or fearful; that parents feel pressure to make uncomfortable choices that compromise their own values; and that teachers feel personally and professionally vulnerable to criticism and threats. Of course, this is not the whole picture, but it is part of it and takes place in a context where there is uncertainty over how schools should manage religious education in plural settings. Clearly, there is work to be done to create educational environments where there is a greater sense of safety for children, their parents and their teachers. In this instance we use safety to mean 'dignity safety', which Callan (2016) distinguishes from 'intellectual safety'. Education may well at different times lead us into intellectual challenge or risk, but that should be possible without making learners feel their dignity is threatened. Callan explains that a fundamental indicator of a dignity safe environment is equality, that a person can be 'confident that others will respect them as an equal' (p.68) and can have a reasonable expectation that they will not be humiliated. In the Northern Irish context this would mean parents, pupils and teachers feeling included and able to express their beliefs without concern that these will be dismissed because they are different from the school ethos. During the Dialogue Group sessions there was considerable support for the idea that religious education be reframed as 'religion and worldviews education' and there be an acknowledgement that every person has a worldview, whether religious or not. Such a change, if accepted, would be a fundamental shift towards greater equality in the treatment of all involved in teaching about religions and worldviews in classrooms.

Other practical suggestions which had support from teachers in their focus group was to ensure that teachers and any faith-based visitors receive appropriate training regarding how to teach about religion in ways that are respectful and rights-respecting in plural environments.

Elements of an Inclusive and Shared Religious education: a person-centred approach

The survey results showed there is majority support for all children in Northern Ireland to study the same syllabus of religious education. Alongside this there was overall agreement that religious education should help children to 'understand different religious worldviews', 'understand different non-religious worldviews', and 'examine and reflect on the beliefs of others'. Taken together these point to a desire for a common syllabus that is suitable for classrooms in which children have diverse beliefs and that introduces them to a range of religious and non-religious worldviews. The qualitative results provide a more detailed picture of what an inclusive approach might look like. We might characterise it as person-centred, in that it begins by taking seriously the beliefs and values of every child in the classroom. Participants in the Dialogue Group generally believed that it was possible to do this through a clear separation between religious education as an academic, inclusive subject and religious education as teaching for faith or religious practice. This reflects distinctions made in the Toledo guidance to OSCE states (ODIHR 2007) regarding the right to freedom of belief in respect of religious education in public schools. It also corresponds with the recommendation from the Independent Review of Education in Northern Ireland that there should be a separation between religious knowledge and religious observance (Bloomer et al., 2023, Section 4.100). Notably, there was no principled opposition to religious influence in school per se; no strong arguments for removing all religious practices from schools were made. Rather, reflecting human rights frameworks regarding education, there were requests for transparency, reasonable alternatives, and equal status for all children.

A religion and worldviews approach (Pett, 2024), which begins with the assumption that 'no-one stands nowhere' and therefore every child comes to education with values and beliefs that should be acknowledged, is one example of what a person-centred religious education could look like, although there are others. There are examples from each region in the UK and in Ireland in recent years of policies and practice that attempt to develop person-centred inclusive forms of religious education. It will be valuable for educators in Northern Ireland to consider these, but it is also clear that a region-specific response will be needed. It should not only comply with relevant standards in relation to human rights but also be responsive to the particular issues in the Northern Irish context, including religious division and prejudice as well as examples of reconciliation and religious peacebuilding.

Religion and Worldviews Education: the potential to make a social difference

There is a view articulated by scholars in religious education that because differences in religion and worldview can act as a barrier to inclusion or be a source of conflict, public education ought to counter this through a religious education aimed at social cohesion. This typically involves the development of reasonable citizens who can engage in dialogue across differences and cultivate shared values while maintaining commitments to their own particular religion or worldview (Boehme, 2024; Grimmitt, 2010). The results from our survey suggest there is support in Northern Ireland for such a type of religious education in primary schools which not only develops knowledge of different religions and worldviews but also facilitates positive relations between people of different religions and worldviews through fostering skills of peacebuilding and respectful dialogue.

This is further supported by teachers in our focus group, who could see social divisions around cultural and religious identity manifested in their environments and wanted to use religious education as a vehicle to address negative perceptions, challenge prejudice and build greater tolerance and inclusivity. Members of the dialogue group believed, for example, that an inclusive religious education or religion and worldviews education should aim to tackle sectarianism, racism and Islamophobia.

There is a counter view which is concerned that any religious education aimed at developing the 'right' kind of views could become politicised or 'securitised' (Gearon, 2013; Moulin, 2012) and so distort the wider purposes of the subject. That may be a reasonable concern if religious education were reduced to this aim alone (Orchard, 2015), but the survey shows support for a balanced perspective on the aims of the subject; there is also agreement that it should develop pupils' self-reflection (72%), moral education (71%) and philosophical thinking (72%).

Towards a new settlement: consultation and leadership

It is important to note that similar questions facing educators, parents and policymakers in Northern Ireland relating to religion and education are shared in other contexts (Rothgangel et al., 2014). While each country or region will have its unique elements, there are common issues when dealing with increased diversity in an education system where churches have previously taken the lead in religious education in publicly funded schools. What were once taken-for-granted 'settlements' (Clarke & Woodhead, 2015) between church and state have needed to be rethought and renegotiated. Where reforms have been undertaken, it has been generally noted that sensitive consultation with stakeholders, as well as constructive leadership from education authorities, has been essential. From our evidence above, participants were keenly aware of the significance of consultation and leadership as well.

All participants, for example, were aware that opinions are divided on teaching about religion in Northern Ireland and this was confirmed in the survey. While the survey results show there is an appetite for reform, a sizeable group are happy with the status quo or do not express an opinion either way. This indicates that care is needed when moving forward on these issues in Northern Ireland and that effort is required to create inclusive and respectful processes. Consultation therefore means providing space for a wide range of stakeholders to be heard and building opportunities for learning about the various ways that religious education can be handled in plural societies. In our focus groups participants also identified the importance of leadership. Leadership means the provision of clear guidance for teachers and schools on how to handle personal commitments when teaching religious education; on advice to visitors who come to speak about religion; on making clear what a positive vision for inclusive education looks like; and highlighting what benefits inclusive religious education has for learners and the wider community.

Conclusion

We noted in the introduction that it is commonly claimed by the majority of schools in Northern Ireland that they are 'open to all'. This may be true in relation to admissions criteria for entry to primary schools; however, this report highlights that an inclusive admissions policy is no guarantee of an inclusive learning environment when it comes to religious education. This confirms what has been made public through the case of JR87 that the Christian-centred religious education curriculum is not suitable for plural environments, especially where it overlaps with collective worship (Nelson & Richardson, 2025). Indeed, there is evidence of evangelisation in schools which can include messages that make children uncomfortable or fearful. In addition, the needs of minorities are not well understood, and the Christian-centric curriculum can make families from minority faith or non-belief backgrounds feel invisible or marginalised. Teachers, too, find that they are often caught in a dilemma between competing requirements and expectations when trying to manage pupil diversity in respect of religious education, and they often feel vulnerable and under-resourced when trying to do so.

The option to withdraw from religious education and collective worship is available in all schools but its use, in practice, is regarded as unsatisfactory by many parents and teachers. For parents who have chosen it, the alternatives offered are often inadequate. Others, however, do not choose it even though they are unhappy with the religious education in their child's school. They regard withdrawal as a form of 'othering' which could leave their child with a sense of inferiority. It is, therefore, considered by parents as a worse option than their child being taught religious beliefs with which they do not agree. Withdrawing children from religious education lessons also creates significant challenges for teachers who, despite what the term 'withdrawal' suggests, may be practically required, due to staffing constraints, to keep all pupils in the classroom while religious education is being taught.

Despite these many challenges, we feel there is reason to be hopeful about the future. The purpose of this research project was to consider possibilities for change, and we can see that there is both an appetite for change and emerging ideas for inclusive and shared forms of religious education.

Our survey provided a broad overview of attitudes to religious education and from that we can see there remains widespread support for religious education in the curriculum and for a Christian influence in schools, although church control of religious education has less support. Yet there was also support for a form of religious education that increases pupils' understanding of religious and non-religious worldviews and helps them to think philosophically and morally. Notably, people of no religious affiliation and people from religions which are minorities in Northern Ireland are supportive of religious education in primary schools, as long as it is inclusive. From our focus groups we saw that an important step in making religious education inclusive is to make it person-centred. This means creating an environment in which all pupils have equal status and no pupil is regarded as less important because their beliefs differ from the majority. Taking seriously the beliefs that children bring with them to the classroom can also open the possibility of learning about religion and worldviews from different perspectives and 'ways of knowing' (for example from historical, philosophical or sociological disciplines).

It is possible to see inclusive forms of religious education gaining support, and an aspiration was expressed by many participants for a religious education from which no-one needs to withdraw. Nonetheless, there were those who expressed a desire for forms of belief-specific teaching to remain in schools, even if that requires an element of separate provision for different groups of pupils. However, in such a situation it is clear that there should be adequate alternative provisions for all pupils, including those who have been withdrawn from confessional religious education. Furthermore, where visitors or outside agencies are used to deliver religious education, there is value in building their capacity to do so and providing them with guidance about what is suitable when speaking in plural environments.

Looking ahead, this research highlights that if transformation is to be successful, there needs to be a carefully planned consensus-building process with a view to achieving a syllabus that meets human rights standards and has broad community support. This will involve shifting control of the subject from the exclusive responsibility of churches and could be achieved by including the relevant curriculum authority, education professionals and a range of faith and belief groups. The Supreme Court decision in the case of JR87 demands government leadership in relation to designing a new syllabus, providing professional learning for teachers and setting protocols for religious practice in schools. Further, a system of inspection for religious education will be required to ensure that changes are applied with consistency, transparency and fairness.

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Appendix 1 – Survey questions

Q1.

At present, all Primary schools are required to teach a Core Syllabus for Religious Education which has been written by the 4 largest Christian churches (Catholic, Presbyterian, Church of Ireland, Methodist). It contains three main topics: The Revelation of God, The Christian Church and Christian Morality.

On the scale below, please indicate how satisfied you feel about each of the statements regarding these current arrangements for religious education in Northern Ireland from 1 (Completely Dissatisfied) to 5 (Completely Satisfied):

- [ ] Religious education is compulsory for all children.
- [ ] Churches are responsible for writing the religious education syllabus.
- [ ] Primary school children are only required to learn about Christian beliefs and practices.
- [ ] Teaching about morality is done in the context of Christian beliefs.
- [ ] The same syllabus is taught to all children, irrespective of their beliefs.

Q2.

In other parts of the UK children learn about a range of religions and worldviews in religious education in primary schools. It is claimed that this has positive social benefits.

In the context of Northern Ireland, to what extent do you agree that learning about a range of religions and beliefs in Primary schools would contribute to the following social benefits...

Please score from 1 (Completely Dissatisfied) to 5 (Completely Satisfied):

- [ ] Building a more peaceful society
- [ ] Creating positive relations between people of different religions
- [ ] Creating positive relations between people with a religious worldview and people with a non-religious worldview
- [ ] Improving recognition of minority religious groups
- [ ] Improving recognition of people with non-religious worldviews
- [ ] Encouraging respect towards places of worship
- [ ] Highlighting freedom of religion and belief as a fundamental right in our society
- [ ] Reducing prejudice
- [ ] Encouraging respectful debate about beliefs

Q3.

Thinking about how religious education should develop pupils' knowledge, values and skills, rate whether you agree or disagree with the following statements. The purpose of religious education should be to help primary school pupils…

Please score from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree):

- ☐ understand different religious worldviews (e.g. Muslim; Buddhist; Jewish)
- ☐ understand different non-religious worldviews (e.g. Humanist; atheist)
- ☐ accept or deepen Christian faith and beliefs
- ☐ understand their religious or non-religious background as one among many reasonable worldviews
- ☐ Examine and reflect on their own beliefs
- ☐ Examine and reflect on the beliefs of others
- ☐ learn about ways religions have contributed positively to cultural and political life in Ireland and the UK, including peacebuilding and reconciliation
- ☐ learn about negative aspects of religious history such as links to colonialism, conflict and abuses of power
- ☐ ask questions and think in a philosophical way
- ☐ learn to act morally

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