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Religious Education in a Multi-Cultural Society: Scotland National Report

**Sheila Riddell, Linda Ahlgren, Gillean
McCluskey and Elisabet Weedon**

**Centre for Research in Education Inclusion
and Diversity,
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Structure of presentation

- Methods and the Scottish Context
- Approaches to RME in Scottish primary schools
- Congruence between home and school values
- Parents' and children' rights
- The position of faith schools – ongoing debates
- Conclusion



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Key questions

- What is official policy in relation to the place of religion in Scottish schools and how does this play out in different settings?
- How do key actors view the teaching of RME in different settings?
- To what extent do parents believe that there is congruence between home and school values in different settings?
- How does policy on religion in education interact with other aspects of education policy, e.g. promotion of parents' and children's rights?



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Methods

- Part of EU 7th Framework project on Religion in Multi-Cultural Societies – involves comparative qualitative work in Scotland, Ireland, Germany, Flanders and Malta
- Review of literature and statistics on position of religious groups in Scottish society
- Review of literature and policy on treatment of religion in schools
- Analysis of perceptions of Scottish policy makers (11 key informant interviews) with regard to the position of religion in education
- Case studies of 21 families in 5 Central Belt primary schools



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The Scottish Context

- Since 16th century Reformation, the established church, the Church of Scotland, has been Protestant – from end of 17th century, Presbyterian
- From latter part of 16th century until 1872, Church of Scotland was responsible for elementary education.
- From late 1800s onwards, religion was responsibility of central government, but Church of Scotland dominated school boards, until they were replaced by Education Authorities in 1918.
- Church of Scotland still has right to be represented on Education Committee of every local authority.



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Roman Catholic Church & Primary School Education



- Most Scottish Catholics descended from 19th & 20th century Irish immigrants – concentrated in urban areas around Glasgow and Central Belt
- Until 1918, RC Church had its own primary & secondary system
- After Education Act of 1918, state took over RC schools, on the understanding that they would remain denominational
- RC Church has considerable influence in appointment & promotion of staff, teaching of religious education & ethos of schools
- Has right of representation on LA Education Committees



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Religion of current identification Scottish Census 2001



Church of Scotland	42%	Buddhist	0.13%
Roman Catholic	16%	Hindu	0.11%
Other Christian	7%	Muslim	0.84%
Another religion	0.53%	Sikh	0.53%
All religions	66.96%	No religion	27.55%

- Decline between religion of upbringing and current religion amongst all Christian groups;
- Growth in those reporting no religion



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The Scottish Education System



- Reflects principles of ‘democratic intellectualism’ (Devine, 1999) - belief that all children should have access to universal high quality education.
- But significant differences in attainment reflecting social class differences (OECD, 2007)
- About 5% of children in independent schools – but in Edinburgh, 25% of secondary school pupils in independent sector
- 80% of children in non-denominational schools
- 20% in Catholic schools (40% of Glasgow children in Catholic primary schools)
- 1 Jewish, 3 Episcopalian primary schools



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Sectarianism



- Sectarianism (tensions between Catholics and Protestants) recognised as a problem by Scottish Government.
- Quantitative sociologists report narrowing of gap in educational & employment outcomes
- Some qualitative work suggests perception of discrimination continues.
- Far less focus on experiences of ethno-religious minority groups



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R(M)E in Scottish curriculum



- Children must spend minimum of 10% of time on RME – 15% in Catholic schools
- Teaching of R(M)E in Scottish schools covers all world religions – more extensive coverage in non-denominational schools
- In Catholic schools, RE teaching follows syllabus approved by Bishops.
- Recent decision by Scottish Government that religious observance may now address general moral, rather than religious themes.



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Approaches to RME in Scottish schools: non-denominational schools



- Barnes (2006) – general shift from confessionality to neutrality and from indoctrination to education.
- Shift evident in non-denominational schools – Christianity prioritised (but emphasis varies). Also, focus on world religions & recognition of secularism.



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Teachers' views in non-denominational schools



Well they [non-denominational schools] are not Christian schools in the sense that ...there's no preaching of the Christian faith.... But the Scottish education system comes from that. So I suppose there's all these underlying, you know, sort of expectations, that the roles have been set already. (Class teacher, non-denominational school)

My assemblies tend to be more moral assemblies about how to behave and to treat each other rather than either Christian or [other] religions, although we do celebrate Eid and Divali and other [religious festivals] as the year goes on. (Greenhill, head teacher)



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Approaches to RME in Scottish schools: non-denominational schools

Majority of teachers supported approach (Christianity in context of other world religions). Minority view that Christianity downplayed:

One of the problems I find about the whole religious education thing is that we are very...strong in making sure that our children know about all the different world religions. But I think a lot of people, this is my own personal opinion, the attention to the Christian faith has been demoted.It doesn't get the same amount of attention as the other faiths because ...we really bend over backwards to make sure that everybody understands and tolerates all the other religions. And sometimes I think Christianity has taken a back seat in some ways. (Class teacher, North Winterton)



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Approaches to RME in non-denominational schools: parents' views



Broadly, parents content – but particular questions and challenges raised from different angles:

I am satisfied with what they do now which is to cover a range of religions, and teach the kids about what the people of those faiths believe and the customs that they follow. But as far as I know they don't prescribe a particular faith to any of the children, and they don't teach religions as a faith, they teach it as a school topic. (Greenhill, Mrs. MacLeod, non-believer)



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Approaches to RME in non-denominational schools: parents' views



Well I know they do comparative religions. And I don't really mind that because I can view religion as a cultural phenomenon. I am a little disturbed when they try to pass off Christianity as a fact. And sometimes they do that and we've had to correct him [referring to her son]. You know, in that claiming, you know, that there is a god. And that's a certainty. And if a teacher says that that's a disturbing thing for a parent, you know. (Mrs. Milne, Greenhill, non-believer)

What can be a concern is if they start having particular interpretations of texts, because Christians and Jews share common texts. And Muslims to a more indirect degree because the Koran is based on a lot of Jewish characters. But the stories are actually not the same thing, not identical stories. ...But...my ongoing concern is that they will teach particular interpretations of stories from Jewish origin and not the Jewish interpretation. And that will leave her confused. (Mr Sandberg, North Winterton, Jewish)



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Approaches to RE in Scottish schools: Catholic schools



Explicit focus on education within belief system of Roman Catholic Christianity, with some education about other world religions.

We wouldn't necessarily be saying 'Well, you know, all beliefs are the same' or 'all views are equally valid', but we would be, certainly, saying that all people are deserving of the same respect.' (Key informant, Scottish Catholic Education Service)

We identify ourselves as Christians and the school promotes the Catholic faith. So when we talk about other religions. We say, 'This is how members of the Islam faith...worship, this is how their faith affects their lives' etc. So...we're doing it from our position as Christians...We acknowledge Eid, but we don't celebrate, no, we don't celebrate other festivals. (Head teacher, St Helens Primary)



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Approaches to RE in Catholic schools: parents' views



Parents also broadly content, including parents who were not Catholics:

We chose for our children to go through the sacraments which was an option, but we chose for them to do that as part of their class which we liked the idea of for them to do it with their peers...[Reconciliation] was well taught and it was very good, and I actually passed it on to my church for the Sunday school (Mrs Forbes, St Helens, practising Episcopalian)

But also minority view that RE teaching not sufficiently traditional & rigorous:

He's not encouraged to go to confession as often as maybe he should. ...they're not feared into going to Mass. (Mother, St Patrick's)



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Congruence between home & school values: non-denominational schools



- Generally parents believed that values taught in school were reasonable well aligned with values at home:

I don't think in fact the values which we want to give our children are in any contradiction to the school....because the Christianity also speaks the truth. So the minor, minor differences you know...They are just ignorable. But the values are almost identical, they are not contradicting each other (Mr Patel, Muslim, Meadowview)



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Congruence between home & school values: non-denominational schools



- But minority view that school too permissive in certain areas:

For me, unfortunately, you know, I'm very, not very tolerant about homosexuality. So I can't help that, that's the way I am, that's my principles. That is the one area I would try to influence my son on. But I wouldn't, not to the point of beating him over the head with it, but I would certainly try to get that basic principle there. Because I feel that there are, again, certain values and things that I believe in that I think are right. (Mr Green, Church of Scotland, North Winterton)



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Congruence between home & school values: non-denominational schools



Some parents believed that school should teach common values, but faith formation was private matter for family:

Outside of the RME class I'm not sure they really should do anything. I don't really see the need to send children to church services in school. ...If the parents want to take them to church services they take them to church services. I don't see why the school should have to do that.... I don't really like the nativity plays. They can do school plays, they have some moral lessons but I don't think that's the motivation. It's just a residue from what they used to do. (Mr Sandberg, Jewish, North Winterton)

It is very important that whatever we share, the children should also follow that. I mean we are here so we keep on reminding her, 'Remember that we're Muslims. So don't forget that' (Mrs Patel, Meadowview)



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Congruence between home & school values: Catholic schools



General sense of congruence. Some parents wanted school to play major role in faith formation:

*This is going to sound really bad, but it takes a bit of pressure off us as well, because we know he is going to get that [religious education and Catholic values] from the school, then he can make his own mind up as he gets older, whether he wants to pursue that himself, if he wants to go to chapel or not.
(Mr Calder, Catholic, St Helens)*

*I feel what he gets at school is enough for me that I don't feel that I need to take him to church every Sunday. I think he's getting a grounding here that will be enough that he can make up his own mind once he's a bit older.
(Mrs Peterman, no religion, St Helens)*



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Congruence between home & school values: Catholic schools



Some parents felt that Catholic values were more traditional than their own:

Mrs Calder: There is quite a lot in the Catholic religion faith that's taught in the classrooms..

Mr Calder: that we don't agree with and wouldn't follow exactly, so we try to help our kids to think for themselves, I don't think it's right to do whatever the Catholic Church says.

Mrs Calder: It's black and white with the Catholic Church, with the Pope, but it's not black and white in real life, sometimes you have to do things that maybe..

Mr Calder: It would be great if we could update the Catholic Church, but it's better to have than not at all... we are religious people, we probably don't believe everything that the Catholic Church says. (Mr and Mrs Calder, Roman Catholic, St Helens)



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Parental voice – parental power to withdraw child from RME

- Very few children withdrawn from R(M)E or religious observance – taken as sign of parental contentment.
- In Catholic schools, although parents have power of opt out, children of other/no religions expected to participate in Catholic religious education.
- Humanist respondent – parents don't want their children to be seen as different, but far greater efforts should be made to find out parents' views – Parents should have power to opt in rather than opt out.



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Children's rights

- Key informants & teachers generally uneasy about allowing children to choose whether to participate or not in RME

I don't think children should be opting out of anything in schools without some discussion with their parents...If RE is being taught in a way which is encouraging children from all backgrounds, and children of faith and children of no faith, to share their views, ...I would see no reason for any child to be opting out or withdrawn from RME. (HMIE)



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Children's rights

Humanist perspective – children should have much greater power to choose:

There is no point in telling me, when I am 12, that I have the right to be consulted if you've indoctrinated me for the seven years prior ... I think there needs to be recognition that the notion, really born of the 19th century in Scotland, of a predominant religion having greater legitimacy, greater moral position, is no longer applicable. Society is no longer like that. The notion that there's some sort of hierarchical order is really an untenable position,



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Children's perspectives on choice of religious identity



- Generally believed that they should have a choice – but at a later point. For the present they accepted their parents' position:

Well me and my mum and dad don't really have a religion and Mum says that when I grow up I can decide which religion I want to be, if I want to be a religion, but I can just stay what I am at the moment. (Alison, Greenhill)

Well my mum and dad chose [for me to be a Catholic] because all my mum and dad's family are Christians and I'd be like the odd one out and ...I wouldn't be able to go to church, so I would have to get somebody to look after me. I would have to grow up and they would say, 'You're not Catholic'... They would know more about Jesus than I would and I would have to go to another school because this is a Catholic school. (Cara, St Patricks)

... You should be able to choose at any part of your life but when you're leaving high school some people think Mass isn't that fun and boring and when you're 15.... Then you start to be not a Catholic probably. (Mungo, St Patricks)



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Most people accept status quo – but on-going debates about position of faith schools



I don't see any downsides at all. I think that the upsides are that faith school contribute massively to the educational provision in Scotland and the UK. Without doubt, state-funded education would be significantly worse off if you closed all faith schools tomorrow. (Scottish Catholic Education Service respondent)

I think there are no benefits at all, none, I'm quite categorical on that. If I had power, I would close them all tomorrow, every one. If we're serious about being one Scotland, then let's be one Scotland' (Association of Headteachers and Deputes in Scotland)

I suspect most parents in Scotland who are not religious would be reassured if they thought that RME was intellectually rigorous, diverse, comprehensive and was not presenting any position as a preferred position...I think the big problem, and this is very, very particular to primary schools, is the dangerous elision between religious and moral education and religious observance' (Humanist respondent)



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Conclusion



- **Arrangements for R(M)E in Scotland reflect historical compromises and accommodations between dominant & subordinate Christian churches.**
- **New challenges arise from growing diversity of Scottish population – increase in proportion of minority ethno-religious groups, but also in proportion of people who do not identify with established religion.**
- **Growing focus on children’s rights to forge their own identity, and extent to which they are inheritors of their parents’ choice of religious identity.**
- **Catholic & non-denominational schools adopt different positions in relation to teaching of RME & religious observance.**
- **Most people broadly content with status quo.**
- **But on-going debates about position of faith schools, and approaches to RME, in Scottish society.**