



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Education

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Integrated Education Bill: Northern Ireland
Humanists; Humanists UK

21 October 2021

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Chris Lyttle (Chairperson)
Mr Pat Sheehan (Deputy Chairperson)
Ms Nicola Brogan
Mr Robbie Butler
Mrs Diane Dodds
Mr Justin McNulty

Witnesses:

Dr Ruth Wareham	Humanists UK
Mr Boyd Sleator	Northern Ireland Humanists

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I give a warm welcome to Boyd Sleator, coordinator of Northern Ireland Humanists, and Dr Ruth Wareham, education campaigns manager for Humanists UK. You are very welcome, folks. You have up to 10 minutes, if you need that time, to make an opening statement before questions from members.

Mr Boyd Sleator (Northern Ireland Humanists): Thank you very much, Chris. We welcome this opportunity to give oral evidence to the Committee on the Integrated Education Bill.

Northern Ireland Humanists is part of Humanists UK, which is the national charity working on behalf of non-religious people. We advance freethinking and promote humanism in order to create a tolerant society where rational thinking and kindness prevail. Northern Ireland Humanists is the fastest growing section of Humanists UK. We provide weddings, funerals and baby-naming ceremonies. In 2018, we won the right for humanist weddings to be legally recognised in Northern Ireland. We also offer non-religious pastoral care in Maghaberry prison. One of our volunteers recently became the first non-religious chaplain of a sports club in the UK. We participate in a range of dialogue activities with other religion and belief groups, and we are members of the Northern Ireland Interfaith Forum. With respect to education, we train and provide accredited school speakers. As well as training teachers, our resources include our Understanding Humanism website and Assemblies for All, which is our inclusive assemblies resource hub. Our education and support services benefit over 1 million people every year.

Dr Ruth Wareham (Humanists UK): We have a long history of work in education, children's rights and equality, with expertise in the religion or beliefs strand. We have been involved in policy development in schools and the curriculum for over 60 years and have made detailed responses to all recent reviews of the curriculum in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. We regularly submit memoranda of evidence to MPs, MLAs, civil servants and parliamentary Select Committees on a range of education issues. We are an active member of many organisations that work in education in

the UK, including the Religious Education Council of England and Wales, of which we are a founding member; the Sex Education Forum; the PSHE Association ; Rights of the Child UK; and the Children's Rights Alliance for England.

Mr Sleator: Northern Ireland Humanists advocates for schools that educate children from different religious and belief backgrounds together and has long campaigned for a single system of education in Northern Ireland. On that basis, we support the forthcoming independent review of education, which is scheduled to begin this year.

In addition to our work on desegregating the education system, we advocate for a fully inclusive curriculum that is objective, critical and pluralistic, particularly with respect to religions and humanism. We do so because we support freedom of religion and belief, including for children.

Dr Wareham: We firmly support the Bill's overarching intention to further expand integrated education and to introduce a presumption that all new schools should have integrated status. At present, most children from Catholic and Protestant backgrounds are educated apart. For example, recent government data shows that less than 1% of pupils classified as Protestant attend Catholic maintained primary schools, and just 8% of pupils in controlled primaries are classified as Catholic. By contrast, as the Committee will be well aware, integrated schools work hard to balance the proportion of pupils from each community that they serve. They aim to have 40% of pupils from Catholic backgrounds, 40% from Protestant backgrounds and 20% from other backgrounds, including the non-religious and minority faiths. However, according to school enrolment data published this year, at present, 29% of pupils attending integrated schools are actually from backgrounds other than Protestant and Catholic. That number rises to 34% at primary level.

Integrated education seeks to address the harms caused by segregation. There is a wealth of robust evidence to suggest that positive contact of the kind that happens in schools with diverse intakes is pivotal to community cohesion. For instance, research conducted by Professor Miles Hewstone and a team from the University of Oxford found that pupils in mixed schools are more trusting and have more positive views of children from different backgrounds than do pupils in segregated schools. Elsewhere, the authors of the same study argue that segregation deprives young people of the opportunity to mix across ethnic and religious lines in a way that thwarts positive attitudes to members of so-called out-groups.

As the Committee has heard in other evidence sessions, integrated schools, perhaps because of the positive contribution that they make to social cohesion, are popular among parents. A 2018 poll showed that 67% of parents would support their child's school becoming integrated. An attitudinal poll conducted this year found that 71% of the wider population think that integrated education should be the norm. Previous research also suggests that 91% think that those schools are important for promoting a shared and better future. However, just 7% of Northern Ireland's schools have integrated status, meaning that that option is simply not available to large numbers of parents. A recent report by Ulster University's UNESCO Centre concluded that the choice of integrated education is illusory for many families.

By comparison, the mixed community ethos sector in other UK countries is far higher: it is 76% in England, 85% in Wales and 86% in Scotland. Even in Ireland, where 95% of schools are denominational, the Government have made a commitment to divestment and to expand the number of Educate Together schools.

Mr Sleator: The evidence shows that the expansion of the integrated sector outlined by the Bill is a necessary and desirable solution to problems of integration, social cohesion and inclusivity for Northern Ireland. However, we are concerned that it is nowhere near sufficient. That is because it does nothing to address the extent to which the current system is biased towards Christianity. Therefore, it fails to adequately include or respect the freedom of religion or belief of children and parents who are non-religious or who identify with minority faiths. Clause 1(2) states that an integrated school:

"is a school which intentionally promotes, protects and improves an ethos of diversity, respect and understanding between those of different cultures and religious beliefs and of none".

To achieve that purpose, however, the Bill must further require the integrated school to promote the principles of equality, non-discrimination and freedom of religious belief laid out in the European Convention on Human Rights and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Dr Wareham: One reason that the Bill fails to do that stems from the way in which integrated schools teach about religion. At present, the law requires every grant-aided school to provide religious education and daily collective worship. In controlled schools, some of which have integrated status, RE is expected to be based on the Christian Holy Scriptures, although it is not permitted to be distinctive of any particular religious denomination.

In addition, the core RE syllabus, which was published in 2007 and which is used by integrated schools, was put together by the four largest denominational Churches in Northern Ireland and is almost exclusively Christian, save for one unit on world religions at Key Stage 3. Non-religious world views, such as humanism, are not covered at all. Unlike England and Wales, there is no legal requirement for collective worship in Northern Ireland to be Christian, but, because of the faith-informed nature of the system, that is invariably how it is delivered, including in integrated schools, which retain an exclusively Christian ethos. Of course, any form of worship can never be inclusive of pupils of different religions and non-religious backgrounds.

Mr Sleator: Parents do have the right to withdraw their children from worship and RE, but that can be difficult and isolating for the child. What is more, a meaningful educational alternative is rarely provided. That means that parents have to choose between subjecting their children to religious indoctrination by participating in worship and RE that does not reflect their deeply held beliefs or letting them be alienated from their peers with nothing of educational worth to do. Unlike in the rest of the UK, older pupils are unable to withdraw themselves from worship. In paragraph 35 of its 'Concluding observations on the fifth periodic report of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland', the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child recommended that worship laws should be repealed and that children should be permitted to:

"independently exercise the right to withdraw from religious worship at school".

However, to date, no action has been taken on that matter.

With all that in mind, the important aims of the Bill are at threat of being seriously undermined if they are not accompanied with provisions that ensure that integrated schools have a fully inclusive ethos. Without that, efforts to diversify pupil intake can never be fully inclusive because children from non-Christian backgrounds are being sent a clear message that their beliefs are not as highly valued as those of Christianity. The exclusion of non-religious and minority faith viewpoints also pulls against the Toledo guiding principles on teaching about religions and beliefs. The principles state explicitly that it:

"should be sensitive to different local manifestations of religious and secular plurality found in schools and the communities they serve."

Dr Wareham: Because of their underlying aims, integrated schools, in particular, must be allowed to operate without the discriminatory burden of collective worship and Christian RE. Instead, they should introduce inclusive assemblies and pluralistic RE that teach about religions and humanism in an objective way to fully support a fair and equal ethos in their schools. We work regularly with non-religious families who feel ostracised and excluded by the education system in Northern Ireland. Through our work with minority faith groups, we are aware that it is a problem for them, too.

Here, it is also worth noting that the law pertaining to Christian RE and worship in Northern Ireland is about to come before the High Court, after a non-religious parent and child won permission to judicially review the Christian-centric nature of the law on the grounds that it violates their human right to freedom of religion or belief. That landmark case follows a similar High Court case in England. In that case, which took place in 2015, humanist parents successfully challenged government guidance, saying that a GCSE religious studies syllabus that did not include the systematic study of the non-religious world view could satisfy the statutory requirement for RE at Key Stage 4. The court found that a curriculum that did not cover non-religious perspectives would not meet the legal standard of being objective, critical and pluralistic. That is because it would not afford such perspectives equal respect to religions.

This matters because the number of non-Christians in Northern Ireland is rising rapidly. The most recent life and times survey found that 27% of people in Northern Ireland now regard themselves as belonging to no religion. Amongst people who are aged 18 to 24, the figure is even higher, with 36% identifying as non-religious compared with 30% and 34% as Protestant and Catholic respectively. On the basis of that demographic data alone, the continued privilege afforded to Christianity in Northern

Ireland's education system is hard to justify. In the context of a Bill designed to help to integrate people from different communities, it is entirely indefensible.

To achieve the purpose of integrated schools that fully respect the freedom of religion or belief of children and their families, the Bill must tackle the Christian bias inherent in the system and provide for integrated schools that have an open and inclusive ethos. Thank you for listening. We welcome your questions.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Thanks very much for those opening remarks.

Ms Brogan: Thanks, Boyd and Ruth. There was a lot of information in that, so I will need to ask some questions. We agree with the concept of integrated education and want to see our children integrating. I am sorry to make you repeat yourselves, but can you briefly outline your issues with the Bill that is before us?

Dr Wareham: Yes. Our primary concern is that, although the Bill widens the definition of inclusive and integrated education so that it includes the non-religious and people of minority faiths — previously, it just referred to Protestants and Catholics, so it is very positive in that respect — it does not remove the fact that the schools have a Christian ethos, which means that they can never be fully inclusive or, really, fully integrated. They are supposed to be predicated on the attitude of mutual respect, but if you are primarily teaching Christian religious education, with an occasional module on world religions at secondary level and nothing on non-religious world views and if you insist that there are daily acts of worship, which in almost all cases are Christian acts of worship and therefore obviously not appropriate for non-religious people or people from minority faiths, what you have is not fully inclusive education. To achieve its aims and get fully integrated schools, the Bill needs to make sure that that is the kind of ethos that integrated schools have.

Ms Brogan: OK. I get you now, Ruth, that is fine. Thank you. We have been focusing on the duty in the Bill to promote integrated education above other sectors in the education system. That is slightly different from what you are talking about, but what are your views on that? Do you think it is fair for the integrated sector to be elevated above other sectors, despite your other concerns on the Bill?

Dr Wareham: Yes, we fully agree with the idea that there should be a duty to promote integrated education and that there should be a presumption that new schools be integrated. We do not see that necessarily as elevating that particular sector. It is worth understanding that, at the moment, all schools in Northern Ireland have a Christian ethos. We need more mixed schools that are less segregated and which have the inclusive ethos that we are talking about. In the presentation, we contrasted the proportion of schools in Northern Ireland that have that sort of ethos with the proportion that do in other countries in the UK: 76% of schools in England, 85% of schools in Wales and 86% of schools in Scotland are mixed-community ethos schools.

It is important to remember that it is possible to elevate those kinds of schools above other kinds of schools because although article 2 of the first protocol of the European Convention on Human Rights guarantees the right to education but does not give parents an absolute right to schools that completely reproduce and satisfy their educational preferences in all respects, such as faith schools.

Northern Ireland has decided to provide faith schools, but parents have a right to have their religious and philosophical convictions respected by the provision of education. So, it does not seek to impose that particular world view and is an education that is objective, critical and pluralistic, so it does not seek to impose, for example, a particular faith. So, the state is entitled to promote an education system that does that in law. It is also allowed to balance that out against the broader needs of the wider population. Most of the schools in Northern Ireland are segregated and it would be better, as all the academic evidence shows, if children were educated in mixed schools. Moreover because of the needs of wider society, we need to take that into account when we make decisions about which schools to prioritise.

Of course, prioritising does not mean that no other school can open. The Bill makes it clear that there are special circumstances in which other schools might open. The integrated schools movement is now 40 years old, yet only 7% of schools are integrated. Something needs to be done to manage that and push things forward, particularly in the light of the number of people who want those schools.

Ms Brogan: Thanks for that, Ruth. I still have concerns about the word "promote", especially in regard to the Irish-medium sector. The word elevates the needs of the integrated sector above those of the Irish-medium sector. That is where my concern lies.

Clause 7 presumes that all new schools will be integrated, except in special circumstances. I do not think that there is sufficient clarity in that. I suppose that we need to tease that out, as we go through the process in Committee. Is there anything you want to say, Boyd?

Mr Sleator: I agree with you, Nicola. Pat said earlier that we should make sure that legislation is clear, and that is one of the things that we are asking for. We must make sure that there is clarity. It is a bit fluffy around the edges, as it stands.

Ms Brogan: That is why it is so good to hear your perspective. That provision would have an impact on so many. Nobody wants to rush in with this type of legislation, as its implications are vast and will have a huge effect on the whole education system, without taking in everyone's views and understanding the wider implications. That is why these meetings are crucial and why we need to continue having these discussions. It was very interesting to hear from you, and I hope to meet you again.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Justin McNulty MLA.

Mr McNulty: One second, Chair.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): No problem.

Mr McNulty: Folks, I am sorry if I am repeating questions already asked. What challenges do you see with the current legislation?

Mr Sleator: The current legislation on schools in Northern Ireland promotes segregation. That has come up in the data that has been provided —

Mr McNulty: Forgive me. I am sorry to cut across you, Boyd. I am talking about the Bill, as it stands.

Mr Sleator: You are asking about our objections to the Bill. Our objection is that the Bill is not clear enough. It does not clarify how an integrated sector would be set up and what ethos the integrated sector would have. For us, there is huge concern over ethos. At the minute, there is no alternative for non-religious parents or parents of minority faith beliefs in Northern Ireland. Every school in Northern Ireland is of a Christian ethos. There are huge challenges in clarifying that and making sure that the integrated sector is truly integrated. The sector should not be integrated Catholic and Protestant schools. They need to be schools for everyone, where everybody is respected and diverse beliefs are respected. The curriculum, as well, has to reflect that.

Dr Wareham: I just add that, in previous evidence sessions, we heard people talking about how there is nothing in the Bill that removes the Christian ethos or Christian basis of all schools in Northern Ireland. For us, that is very problematic. Saying that all schools in Northern Ireland have a particular religious ethos, when not all the people in Northern Ireland have that particular religious belief, is really problematic.

If you are pushing a particular faith as the primary one in schools, that threatens the freedom of religion or belief of all the children and their families who do not share that view. It seems bizarre that, in the 21st century, there are no opportunities for people who do not want a religiously informed education to choose a school where that is possible, particularly since the schools that human rights laws guarantee are ones that are critical, objective and pluralistic in this way and free from religious indoctrination. It is hugely problematic, and we would want to see, in a Bill that intends to promote mutual understanding between different groups, that change happening.

Mr McNulty: Ruth, strong words, "Religious indoctrination". I would not describe my education as having indoctrinated me with any religion or none. You must recognise, Ruth, that that is strong terminology. What is the humanists' skin in the game here?

Dr Wareham: Just to pick up on the terminology: "indoctrination" is actually the legal term. I know that "indoctrination" gets used as a pejorative term for people teaching things that I do not like, and lots of

people might throw that around as a pejorative term. In legal cases and in legal language, indoctrination is just when you impose or prioritise a particular world view. It would not necessarily have to be a religious world view. If you opened a school and imposed humanism on everybody, that would count as well.

It is basically a legal term that points out that the state does not have a right to impose a particular perspective on children and their families. It is not pejorative in the way that it gets used colloquially. I would like to make sure that that is clear.

In terms of what our skin in the game is, we work with hundreds of non-religious parents every year who are struggling in the Northern Irish school system. They cannot choose a school that does not promote Christianity or have Christian worship. They can withdraw from those sessions. However, nothing of meaningful educational worth is offered as an alternative, so children spend a lot of time sitting in hallways waiting for their peers to return. It is isolating and singles them out as different.

There should be an option for the non-religious, people of minority faiths, and, indeed, Christians who, perhaps, just think that children and young people ought to be able to make up their own minds about these things, to have schools where their views are respected in the sense that you are not trying to teach a particular perspective as true. That is the issue for us, and it is a problem that we are encountering more and more as more and more people in Northern Ireland identify as non-religious and get in touch with us.

Mr McNulty: I would refrain from using the word "indoctrinated", legal term or not; it only serves to get people's backs up. I went through a Catholic-ethos education, but I certainly was not indoctrinated. Whether that is the Government's position, the legal position, or any other position, I was not indoctrinated.

I hear your perspectives. Very interesting views, and you have made your cases strongly. Thank you very much for your evidence, folks.

Dr Wareham: Thank you.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Thanks very much indeed, Boyd and Ruth, for your presentations. The Committee Stage will complete on 24 November, which is when I think that we report, so if you have any specific amendment suggestions, in addition to your evidence today, feel free to make those known to the Committee. There is a wide range of additional issues that may or may not be covered by the Bill that we would be glad to engage on with you in future. Hopefully, that is helpful.

Mr Sleator: Thank you very much, Chris.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Thank you.