

SUBMISSION FROM THE CHURCH OF SCOTLAND



The Church of Scotland

Church and Society Council

Official Response

SUBJECT: Bullying and harassment of children and young people in school
REQUESTED BY: Scottish Parliament Equalities and Human Rights Committee
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Introduction

The Church and Society Council of the Church of Scotland is pleased to participate in the Equalities and Human Rights Committee inquiry into prejudice based bullying and harassment in the school system. The Church of Scotland has a longstanding involvement in education in Scotland, and although the Church of Scotland, since 1872, is no longer directly involved in the delivery of state education it does retain an interest in the wellbeing and flourishing of young people. At the heart of the work of the Church and Society Council of the Church of Scotland is the intent to enable people with lived experience to share their stories of the issues at hand. For this reason we invited a small group of young adults to respond to the Church and Society Council with their experiences and reflections around bullying and harassment of young people in relation to faith. This will be the focus of this submission.

Church of Scotland involvement in education

The Church of Scotland has a longstanding involvement in education, "A school in every parish," was part of the Church of Scotland's founding aims. Today the Church of Scotland has long since passed on the direct running of Schools to the state. Nonetheless, the Church continues to take an interest in education and its role in investing in Scotland's young people. Similarly through the work of school chaplains, representation on Local Authorities, and support for Religious and Moral Education the Church has a continued role in serving local schools and communities.

The Church and Society Council have made a commitment to the flourishing of our young people. We live in a pluralist, multi-cultural society, and many in

the Church of Scotland welcome an emerging role for the church that has more to do with helpful presence, support and nurture than an historic situation that had much to do with power and influence in a society that was much less diverse, both in terms of background and belief.

The Council is committed to promoting tolerance, understanding and respect. The resources now produced for school chaplains reflects this emerging commitment to respectful, tolerant and open minded exploration of faith and spirituality as a central aspect of the lives of many of our young people. The Council believe that the strength of Scottish society comes from the weave of diversity that creates a rich tapestry of difference, but within the context of shared values about tolerance and respect, the preservation of human rights and the right for all children to live without fear or intimidation, whether they have faith or not.

Bullying, harassment and faith

While there is not a clear cut legal definition of bullying or harassment within the UK, in line with Scottish Government publications we would understand bullying and harassment to be repeated behaviour by an individual or group that is intended to emotionally or physically hurt another individual or group. While some of the stories contained within this submission do clearly fall within this category, others perhaps lack the intentionality required to be understood as acts of bullying. We have nonetheless included these stories as we feel it is important that the Committee are made aware not only of examples of exclusion within Scotland's education system, but also of instances in which people of faith are made to feel less included than they might. Our hope is that in its work the Committee would not just seek to do more to eliminate instances of bullying and harassment within schools but would positively seek to build an inclusive and positive educational environment within Scotland.

Voices of young people

In a series of informal conversations three young adults, who are active members of the Church of Scotland spoke about bullying and harassment in schools. These views are personal to the young people involved and do not represent a formal Church position.

The young adults spoke about their experiences, or those of their friends, of feeling bullied or harassed during general conversation as a result of their faith. Those sharing with us indicated that they did not think that the other person always realised the impact of their behaviour within these conversations. Examples given focussed on the other person aggressively questioning or belittling their faith.

One written contribution said:

“My experience with bullying about my faith is that when I was secondary I was bullied for various things faith being one. I was picked on for going to church on a Sunday and being a part of the after school club that was about faith. It went on for a while and it got a point where I stopped going to church as felt like it was easier and being the awkward age of 13-14 it wasn't seen as cool. But then someone reached out and said God is there. The bullying stop for while then it got worse but as I got older God was/is there and I realised that no matter what he was there.

Bullying takes many different forms like banter can be a type of bullying as it can take the form of little digs that can mount up to making the person feel uncomfortable.”

For some these situations were perceived as being at least partly a consequence of religious illiteracy and the absence of a more appropriate way to explore what others believed. One person suggested that there was a need for schools to do more to provide safe space for young people to talk to each other about faith. It may be the absence of such space that leads to inappropriate questions and behaviour.

It was suggested that schools need to be more aware of the possibility of bullying around faith and actively look for the signs.

One example was given:

“There is a lot more schools could be doing especially about nipping it in the bud earlier and stopping it from happening. It could even be simple things like sharing it's nice to say nice things and learn about different faiths.”

This person spoke positively about the school's response, once action was taken, but emphasised the need to act more quickly.

The issue of identity was important to those consulted, it was suggested that schools could do more to teach primary age children to adopt non-judgemental attitudes and to accept different identities as being equally valid. One person commented that there is no correlation between intelligence and atheism but sometimes people acted as if there was.

One written contribution explained:

“I have been out of school for nearly 4 years now so my recollections are a bit distant. When I was in school I experienced bullying throughout my time in school both in Primary and Secondary. The bullying I experienced from fellow pupils was not generally motivated by the fact that I was an active churchgoing Christian. However there are some incidents that stand out to me from my time in school where I was singled out because of the fact that I went to church. In RME/RMPS class I felt that teachers had higher expectations of me than I could actually achieve. Although it was not directed personally

towards me I always felt that the class that was most disrupted by other pupils in school was the RME class. I regularly felt frustrated by the fact that other pupils did not show the RME teacher the same respect that they would show to other teachers. Another incident that has stuck in my memory was the fact that an RMPS teacher explicitly told those of us whom he knew to attend church not to answer certain questions in class discussion (these questions were mostly related to knowledge of biblical scripture).

I feel that the main point that I want the EHRiC to hear from my experiences is that I felt that I want people of faith to be treated the same as other pupils in RE class (they should not be singled out and treated as though they are experts on their particular faith in front of other pupils)."

Overall, the theme that emerged from the conversations was the need for greater religious literacy in schools, both for pupils and teachers.

It should also be noted that not all the conversation focussed on time spent in school. The value of discussions and activities around bullying taking place in girl guiding was also mentioned.

Conclusion

The young adults who spoke to the Church and Society Council were clear that being made to feel different or marginalised because of their faith was part of their experience of school and that at times this would take the form of bullying and harassment. Within this context we feel that there is more schools can do around increasing religious literacy and early intervention. There are also existing structures, such as Chaplaincy, where schools could seek support if they wished to do so.