

SUBMISSION FROM THE SCOTTISH SECULAR SOCIETY

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Tuesday 6 June 2017

The Scottish Secular Society thank the Equalities and Human Rights Committee of the Scottish Parliament (EHRiC) for inviting our organisation to give evidence on bullying and harassment of children and young people in our Scottish schools. This is a topic close to our hearts, and a regular issue we encounter from members and non-members alike, across Scotland. We also applaud the EHRiC in their inclusion of non-religious voices at the 15 June meeting. Scottish people reporting to have no religious affiliation has steadily risen over the years, with the last census showing an increase to nearly half¹, and the 2015 Scottish Household Survey reporting an upward trend of adults reporting not having a religion, from 40% in 2009 to 50% in 2015.² The inclusion of this growing majority's voices is appreciated.

The Equalities Act 2010 protects against religious and belief-related discrimination. This includes acts against those with a lack of religion or belief.³ We have encountered, unfortunately, repeated instances of not only this type of discrimination in schools, but intimidation and bullying tactics alongside such violations. Due the sensitivities of the students' identities, personal information will not be shared alongside the given evidence.

Throughout our findings there is a tacit assumption of religious belief as the norm, leading to a systematic, if unconscious, discrimination against a world view on non-believing parents and students. This has also led, at times, to discrimination against believers in minority faiths. Evidenced in the Jewish Community's response to PE01623, with one parent reporting:

"I went to see the Head Teacher when my son was called a "dirty Jew". The Head said, 'I don't think we should do anything about it, I don't want to make it worse'."⁴

¹2011 Scottish Census, Release 2A (p. 32, Table 7). 36.7% self-report having no religion, plus 7% who didn't state any religion. <http://www.scotlandscensus.gov.uk/documents/censusresults/release2a/StatsBulletin2A.pdf>

² Scotland's People: Results from the 2015 Scottish Household Survey (sec. 2.2) <http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2016/09/7673/3>

³ Equalities Act 2010, Section 10, protected characteristics, <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/uknsa/2010/15/section/10>

⁴ PE1623/S: Scottish Council of Jewish Communities letter of 4 January 2017 <https://www.parliament.scot/GettineInvolved/Petitions/ChurchAppointees>

From our consultations with parents and students, it is often the case that students experience such religious-based discrimination and bullying through the mishandling of Religious Observance (RO or TfR) and Religious and Moral Education (RME). The guidelines for RO activities state that it should reflect and understand the increasingly diverse range of faiths and belief traditions represented in Scotland.⁵ However, there is an almost universal failure to follow RO guidelines. Some schools observe a Christian-only practice in RO. Most of the schools parents have discussed with us observe a Christian-majority practice in RO. These schools stretch from Edinburgh to the Western Isles.

We have heard from parents whose children were at the receiving end of intimidation tactics by their teacher and other students (often following the teacher's lead) to attend RO and other religious activities when they expressed their wishes to withdraw. These tactics included the "damage" that could be done to the student's immortal soul, shame, and a general *wrongness* with not wanting to follow along with the rest of his/her classmates. We have heard parents explain the details of how their children were left feeling singled out, by their teacher or the visiting religious body, when they were removed from the group for their opt-out activities. One parent, who has had to repeatedly ask for his son to be withdrawn from RO and related activities, reported:

"In his P2 year, he was asked to participate in nativity, I requested opt out, the school agreed but gave him no alternative activity, they then sat him next to a glass partition where all the kids rehearsing could see him and he could see them. As the next few days went on [my son] became more and more isolated and distressed, other kids started to bully him and saying he was an "idiot" and "bad boy" as they couldn't understand why he wasn't participating in the religious activities - the school did nothing, it was as if they were passively bullying him into participating! He also started wetting the bed at this time."

In many cases we understand it was not the intention of the educator to embarrass or intimidate the student, but a lack of awareness to the needs and perspective of the student has led to this happening on numerous occasions. Whether intentional or unintentional, this treatment towards the students is unacceptable.

The guidelines for RO and RME state that school handbooks should describe the provision⁶, to explain the parent's legal right to withdraw their children from RO/RME and also explain arrangements for those who wish to exercise the parental right to withdraw their children. Again, it is our experience that these guidelines are widely ignored. RO/RME is too often either not mention in school handbooks or is mentioned, but without inclusion of its rationale, the curriculum, or the parent's right to withdraw their child. Many parents are not even aware they have the right to withdraw their child. We have no doubts this is precisely why Educate Scotland reports that "In practice, very few parents feel the need to [withdraw their child]."⁷

One nondenominational school in Edinburgh makes no mention of RO in their handbook, and when approached about traumatising religious teachings their child received, with the request to withdraw, the parents were told by the head teacher that they could not fully withdraw

⁵ Curriculum For Excellence - Provision Of Religious And Moral Education In Non-Denominational Schools <http://www.gov.scot/Topics/Education/Schools/curriculum/ACE/ReligiousMoralEducation>

⁶ School Handbook Guidance <http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2012/09/8694>

⁷ Educate Scotland, RME, <https://education.gov.scot/parentzone/learning-in-scotland/curriculum-areas/Religious%20and%20moral%20education>

because Christian-based RO lessons were integrated into many non-RO lesson plans, and *all* assemblies.⁸ The school seemed unaware that it was in violation of the guidelines, and reacted as if the problem lay with the parents for seeking to withdraw their child.

This family's case is representative of one of the biggest violations of RO policy that has led to many students being traumatised. For the younger students in particular, some religious stories are quite overwhelming. They include retellings of death, torture, blood and murder. We, as adults, may not see the Easter story, for example, in this light. However, the Easter story, as heard by a P1 student not brought up in a Christian household, from an adult not versed in the appropriate manner with which to tell this story, can and has taken in the Christian story of Easter in just such this way. These story tellers have included both the student's own teacher as well as church representatives. We presently are working with two families who each have a young child experiencing nightmares, fear of nails through their body, fear of their parents' death, and distress over their own potential eternal torture, due to highly inappropriate Biblical stories being told in school. One parent stated:

"My 5 year old came home very worried after learning about Christian Easter beliefs as crucifixion was discussed in detail and he kept repeating certain sentiments such as: there was blood (he is frightened by blood), a thorn of crown that hurt Jesus as it was pressed really hard into his head, they put nails into his hands and his feet - right through them and he was in horrible pain because he died for us and because he loves us."

And yet, these are the lessons parents and students are being pushed to attend on the assumption that they create "a successful learner, confident individual, responsible citizen and an effective contributor."⁹

There are nondenominational schools that require the Lord's Prayer at the start of every school day and before every meal (lunch and snacks), in Gaelic in one region. When the students, at their respective schools, didn't want to join, they were made to feel *different* and coerced into praying. Many students and parents are reluctant to speak up about their wishes to not participate in religious practices in school for fear of further bullying in and out of school. After attempting to remove her daughter from religious practices, one parent recently stated:

"I did exactly this with my daughter who found school became increasingly intolerant towards her not, primary but secondary. Religious teachers singling her out and placing her on her own at the back of a class and often she would come home in tears."

Parents are regularly victimised and demonised outside the school system, too. One parent even received public attacks from her MSP for inquiring about the mandatory Christian practices in her child's school.

Parents also report discrimination based on combined/dual characteristics in school.

"My daughter was bullied at primary school here and when I started to get to the bottom of it, it was largely because she didn't speak Gaelic but mainly because she

⁸ Curriculum For Excellence, Paragraph 14.

⁹ Curriculum For Excellence, Paragraph 10.

didn't go to a church & Sunday school. We started going to church at her request to fit in but it was soon after my daughter said she didn't want to go. She continued to be bullied and more so as she then declined to go to the Challenger Bus after school.”

Evangelising organisations (e.g. People with A Mission Ministries and their Challenger Bus) offer ostensibly educational or play activities that turn out to be proselytising (e.g. advertised sing-songs that turn out to be hymn singing). The literature is too often reflective of a literalist, fundamental interpretation of the Bible, and several publications have openly pushed for discrimination against non-believers and LGBT+ students and parents. Some cases include the Challenger Bus¹⁰, the evangelising organisation Church of Christ in Kirktonholme Primary in East Kilbride¹¹, and Durham Free School¹². Most recently at St. Mungo's High School, flyers were displayed for students to take home that pushed an anti-LGBT+ message.¹³

We believe all these issues, and more, do not arise from the presence of religious education in school, but rather from a system that allows for a lack of accountability in some areas, and poorly defined roles and collective responsibilities. Students and parents are being failed by our school systems every year, across Scotland. This does not need to be the case. However, to improve the situation requires serious and comprehensive addressing of a number of fundamental aspects.

1. Educators must avoid the implicit message that Christianity is the 'right one' amongst 'others'. This alienates all non-Christian students and families immediately. As it is, this holds true for any religious teaching in RO/RME. No single religion should be held out as the 'right one', as this will always lead to alienation of non-practicing students and families.
2. RO and RME must be taught with a balanced curriculum of several religious and moral views, and not (as is often practiced) by a proportional representation of the community. This is endemic across the Scottish school system, and has resulted in a Christian-majority teaching environment.
3. As stipulated by legislation since 1872, students who are withdrawn from religious teachings in school *must not* be made to feel they are different from the other students, nor be disadvantaged. They also must be given quality activities to enjoy during their opt-out time, as is stipulated in the RO guidance.¹⁴

We hope this response will help shed a much needed light on the situation for students in our schools. Scotland has a leading record for education, and we want to support the continuation of this success. We believe that secular, religious and interfaith organisations working together with the EHRiC is the best way to ensure preventative measures are in place to avoid potential alienation of students, and comprehensive guidelines are in place to swiftly and effectively address any bullying and harassment.

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¹⁰ Including 'Puppets With A Mission', <http://www.pwamm.com/challenger-community-buses/>

¹¹ <http://www.scotsman.com/news/education/creationist-row-headteachers-removed-from-school-1-3091562>

¹² <https://paulbraterman.wordpress.com/2015/03/02/creationism-in-schools-the-myth-of-the-isolated-incident/>

¹³ Catholic Truth Society, 'The Church and same sex attraction', <http://secularsociety.scot/st-mungos>

¹⁴ Circular 1/2005, Parental Right to withdraw, Paragraph 3 <http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2005/03/20778/53820>