

Student Teachers' Perceptions of Primary Religious Education in Northern Ireland Schools

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Research Resources for RE



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Occasional Paper No. 5

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Research Resources for Religious Education is part of the Religious Studies subject area in Stranmillis University College. Its aims are to:

- support teachers in the delivery of Religious Education in Primary and Post-Primary schools
- stimulate discussion and debate around key issues in relation to Religious Education
- increase awareness of issues of diversity, spirituality and values in the curriculum
- disseminate creative research and writing on Religious Education

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Edited by: James Nelson

Cover Design: James Nelson

Published by:

Research Resources for Religious Education
Stranmillis University College
Stranmillis Rd
Belfast BT9 5DY

First Published: 2009

A version of this paper was first presented at the annual conference of AULRE, at Homerton College, University of Cambridge, July 2008

Abstract

Using observations of Religious Education by student teachers from Stranmillis University College on placement in Northern Ireland primary schools, this paper examines some of the concerns and issues that their experiences raise. Significant discontinuity is evident between the practice that is recommended to students in their initial teacher education courses and the situation that many of them find in schools. The students' concerns focus on the absence or limited treatment of RE in many schools and the narrow approaches in terms of both content and pedagogy that are often evident. Particular concerns are expressed in relation to the way in which RE often fails to address issues of religious diversity. A smaller number of students also found evidence of good practice, some of which was inspired by their own work with pupils. The paper concludes with some reflections on findings from outside Northern Ireland that suggest that these issues are not unique to that particular region.

For over a decade I've engaged in regular discussions with student teachers – primary RE specialists and non-specialists – about their experiences of Religious Education in their placement schools, sometimes in a seminar-type context and sometimes as placement tutor. It wasn't long before I became confident in predicting the range of comments and observations, a very large number of them discouraging both to the students and to me. For example:

My class teacher doesn't do RE!

My class goes to another teacher for RE.

RE is on the timetable, but I didn't see any evidence of it being done.

The teacher just reads a Bible story and then they fill in the missing words or do a word-search.

There have been positive experiences too, mostly because of the interest and initiative of the students themselves, sometimes surprising class teachers with the possibilities, but accounts by students of seeing good quality or inspiring work in RE by serving teachers are very rare. This becomes even more depressing when you realise that some of the teachers in question are one's own past students!

Let me offer an anecdote about two first-rate Religious Studies primary specialists who graduated in the summer of 2007. Both gained very good classifications in their B.Ed degree, both had completed excellent A grade final year dissertations focusing on different aspects of the importance of RE in the primary school and both had confessed themselves “fired up” about the importance of good quality, broadly-based

RE for primary aged children. Jobs for beginning teachers are very difficult in Northern Ireland, but one (who I'll call Emily) had got a one-year post in a small rural state controlled primary school, which has now been renewed for a further year, and the other (I'll call her Judy) worked for the past year as the primary schools worker for a cross-community educational programme and has now been appointed to a full-time teaching post in an integrated primary school. One year on, I met up with both of them and heard how things were going. Emily said that everything was going really well but almost apologetically explained that she wasn't teaching any RE because her class went to another teacher at the end of an afternoon and that she didn't want to interfere with this arrangement because it gave her time to deal with all the other priorities of the job. Judy, on the other hand, told me that the integrated school where she will shortly be employed wanted her particularly because of her broadly-based inter-faith involvements and her cross-community experience over the past year. I'm fairly confident that both will do well, but Emily's situation is, in my experience, far more common. I wonder just how many enthusiastic primary specialists in RE have been swallowed up in this way, and ultimately become lost in terms of their student-gained ideals for teaching quality RE.

A great deal of writing and research on RE understandably focuses on the post-primary school, where specialists can, on the whole, be just that, and develop their awareness and skills. For a whole raft of reasons it is much harder for RE specialists to make their mark in a primary setting, despite the undoubted importance of work in the primary years. Research tells us what we instinctively knew - that good foundational work in the early school years is crucial to development in religion as in almost any area of learning; that children learn from positive adult role models; that they learn that it's okay - or not okay - to talk openly about religion based on what they experience in the classroom (and, of course, at home). When it comes to attitude formation in relation to the intercultural dimensions of religious understanding, research further reinforces the importance of the childhood years in helping children to deal with difference positively or negatively. Work by Paul Connolly and associates (Connolly, 1999; Connolly & Keenan, 2001; Connolly et al, 2002) in Northern Ireland over recent years has shown how racist and sectarian awareness can become evident from age 3 and that if these trends are not countered, if no positive interventions are made by parents and teachers, this can lead to much harder attitudes

developing by mid-childhood and beyond. The comments that I still sometimes hear about leaving anything contentious or potentially confusing about religion until pupils are in their mid-teens simply do not stand up to scrutiny if we take the work of Connolly and others seriously.

John L'Anson (2004) has written about the discontinuity between how student teachers perceive and study religious understanding at university as compared with their experience of how it is understood in schools, although his work related to students focusing on post-primary RME in Scotland. Nevertheless he notes the difficulties for ITE students who are beginning to find “their own characteristic voice and pattern” (p.56) when it comes to being able to express this in a school placement or in a first teaching post where the expectations of established teaching staff are very different. This is an even sharper issue for us in Northern Ireland, where the official Syllabus for Religious Education is extremely narrow and conservative, contrasting markedly with the broader and more challenging insights that the students have gained from their university course.

These student impressions of RE in their schools raise many issues – not least in relation to the poor quality of what is being provided in some schools and the extent to which educational legislation is being disregarded. This requires a substantive research project which may be hard to set in motion. In the interim I wanted to get a clearer picture of these student perceptions and experiences, hopefully as one way of promoting the possibility of a future in-depth survey of primary RE. So I invited both specialist and non-specialist students to record their impressions in various ways, including direct observations while they were out on their placements supplemented by references to professional experience from their assignments. At this point my survey has been limited to students in my own university college, and therefore because of the way teacher education is currently organised in NI most of them are from the protestant community. We do have a small number of Catholic students, including those who take RS as their main subject, but almost all the observations recorded here focus on the experiences of ITE students in state controlled schools, which are open to all but serve mainly the protestant community, and in integrated or shared schools which aim to cater for a balance of protestants, catholics and others. I have gathered and analysed the students' responses, most of which have been made

during the past six months, and have categorised them according to some of the key emerging themes. At the end I will draw a few parallels with what I know of the situation elsewhere in the UK, and I have no doubt that those present will be well able to spot their own points of relevance.

It may be important first to add a few words of context, however, about RE in Northern Ireland. The Religious Education “Core Syllabus”, as recently revised, is the responsibility of the four largest Christian denominations (Catholic, Presbyterian, Church of Ireland and Methodist) and they do not involve any other faith communities in the task, despite many protests from the various faiths and from human rights and other groups. The Syllabus is described by the Churches as “essentially Christian” and until last year made no provision for the teaching of any other faiths. This is now included only for Key Stage 3 – the primary school syllabus (and even Key Stage 4) remains exclusively Christian. As a “Core Syllabus” schools may teach other material if they wish, so long as they cover the Syllabus; many teachers say that they have no time even to teach the core, let alone anything else. Many of the integrated schools and a few state controlled schools do offer broader programmes, but this is still unusual. Catholic maintained schools include some references to other faiths within their catechetical programme. The Core Syllabus simply lists content to be covered and there is no sense of a pedagogy based on educational aims; concepts such as “learning about religion” and “learning from religion” simply do not feature in the discourse in Northern Ireland. Inspection of RE is the responsibility of the Churches, which to a very considerable extent means that there is little or no monitoring of any kind. This background certainly increases the potential for conflict between student aspirations based on their ITE course and the actual situation in schools.

The key areas on which students commented were:

Poor or limited pedagogy and co-ordination

The limited practice – or even absence – of RE

Teacher-swapping for RE

Teacher attitudes, both positive and negative

Children’s attitudes

Proselytisation in RE

Lack of broader provision in RE

and also:

Separation and opting-out in RE

Links between RE and Assembly

The role of clergy.

Although many of these observations were critical of the practice found in schools there were some examples of more positive approaches, and I'll try to reflect these as we look at each area.

Poor or limited pedagogy was the most frequently commented-on issue in this set of responses. Students expressed their awareness not only of what was wrong with the practice but noted with regret what the pupils were missing out on:

[The Teacher] showed me what she would have been doing were I not there and her R.E. lessons consisted of colour the Easter picture and do the Easter word search worksheets. (3rd Year specialist)

[the lesson] was more information story telling [with] little room for discussion or application to our lives ... (4th Year non-specialist)

The pupils [in an integrated school] carried out a quiz of finding books within the bible and filling in missing letters. The approach did not allow for pupils to share or relate experiences regarding their traditions. ... [This] meant that pupils did not become involved in communication and it seemed a shame ... [because] by providing a more integrative approach pupils could have learned from each other. (3rd Year specialist)

One student noted how RE was done with a Primary 2 class “as a worksheet during guided reading once a week”, commenting that “it was evidently just a convenient way to claim RE was being done”. Several students noted lessons that involved simplistic worksheets, with missing words, word-searches, crosswords or a story-and-picture format, and also the use of inadequate videos:

all that the teacher did was to put a Christian related video on once a week which lasted about half an hour, then gave the children a worksheet based on the video. The videos were of poor quality and were not interesting at all, so all of the

pupils were bored. No explanation was given either. They were just told what the video was on, then left to it. The worksheets were then collected in and marked, with no one being given the opportunity to discuss what they wrote, what they were learning about, or why it was significant. (3rd Year specialist)

A number of students did record what they regarded as **good pedagogical practice** – the use of interactive approaches, discussion, research about artefacts and symbols, games, drama, role-play, use of Circle Time or the Community of Enquiry to relate religious learning to children’s own experience, allowing children to articulate their own questions, and so on. The striking factor about this, however, is that in almost all these cases the good practice was as result of the students’ own initiatives in introducing topics and creative approaches that were previously unfamiliar to the classes and their teachers. One student, working with an able P7 class, described how she took the opportunity of topic work on India to include some lessons on religion there. She started with Islam, with which (unusually in Northern Ireland) she already had some familiarity, but had to extend the work to look at Hinduism and Sikhism:

Pupils were extremely enthusiastic about the topic from the very beginning and enjoyed looking at video clips and pictures and discussing recent news activity. Pupils asked seemingly endless questions which were thoughtful and reflective, however this meant that in order to teach the topic and answer the questions I needed to use my own knowledge and build upon that. (3rd Year non-specialist.)

She noted that the class teacher was initially very sceptical about the lessons and the questions the children might ask, but was ultimately very impressed by the pupils’ responses. At the end of the placement she asked the student for her resources so that she could do this work herself with future classes.

Despite the superficial impression of Northern Ireland as a very religious society one of the other main concerns of students was the way in which RE was **neglected or avoided** in many schools:

I didn’t see any Religious Education being taught in class, no classroom displays or evidence of the subject being taught ... This gave me the impression that the school didn’t have a very high regard for Religious Education. (1st Year specialist)

This comment about “lack of priority for RE” was very common. Students felt that many teachers made little or no effort to include it, even when it was timetabled, normally citing higher priorities in other areas of the curriculum as their reason or excuse:

... if time didn't allow R.E. was just dropped from the week. (3rd Year specialist)

... it appears RE is regarded as the least important subject and therefore it can be dropped. (1st Year specialist)

In Key Stage 2 ... we didn't get to teach RE at all. The teachers told us... there was an inspection coming up [and] we had to stick to what they wanted covered. (two 3rd Year non-specialists)

If the 'normal' lessons for the day ran over then RE was just cancelled. (3rd Year non-specialist)

Another way in which some teachers avoided teaching RE was through what seems to be the extremely common practice of “**teacher-swapping**”. For some teachers this is a far easier way of standing aside from their discomfort with a “difficult” subject than going through the legal process of requesting an opt-out on grounds of conscience. This can be particularly convenient if a Key Stage 1 teacher has no class for the last hour of the day: “I’ll take your PE if you take my RE” seems to be a common formula:

... in KS2 my teacher brings the children down to a KS1 teacher in her classroom where she teaches them RE. (1st Year specialist)

In some situations this might be assumed to be quite helpful if the replacement teacher is more enthusiastic or better skilled, though this did not seem to be the basis on which the swap was arranged – it was much more to do with convenience and availability. One student remarked that:

... with a different teacher taking the class, the children seemed to be not as focused or as settled as they may have been in their own classroom environment and with their own teacher. (1st Year specialist)

The **absence of RE co-ordinators** in some schools was another cause for concern among the students, along with what they felt was a **lack of awareness of subject-knowledge** on the part of some teachers. One student noted how a teacher who ensured that the children always said grace before break and lunch had naively insisted on a Muslim child “praying to Allah at the same time”, without any apparent sense of the conditions for Muslim prayer or the importance of facing Mecca. Another commented disapprovingly on the negative attitude expressed by a teacher to a Primary 7 class about atheists and agnostics and how the teacher clearly did not know the difference between the two positions, eventually having to ask the student to clarify this. The same teacher tried to avoid responding to a pupil’s question about “Who made God?”

Students also expressed concerns about the attitudes of **wariness or reluctance** that some teachers evidently felt in relation to RE:

Religion was regarded as a subject that was not easy to discuss, and there seemed to be a sense of not talking about or sharing personal experiences. ... By neglecting the subject pupils may find it hard to discuss religion and become more open to diversity.

the teacher of Primary 6 made it clear that she felt uncomfortable doing RE because of her own viewpoint - she claimed to be an agnostic. (3rd Year specialist)

In KS2, a different teacher came in for one hour each week to teach religion, and the main teacher just went to the staff room. She told me that the class did not like learning about RE so she choose not to do it, even though she was supposed to. (3rd Year specialist)

One teacher put her wariness down to the narrowness of the curriculum:

She said that she would teach it more if there was more about other religions because she doesn’t think it’s fair that she should only teach them about Christianity. (1st Year specialist)

In other cases, however, there was a very evident **antagonism** towards religion itself:

[Another] teacher said that he doesn't believe in God so he can make up his own fairytales and tell them to his class because it would be the same 'nonsense' as RE. (1st Year specialist)

In an integrated school a student recorded that:

The teacher told me that he did not like teaching RE and did not see the point of it himself. He also said the children didn't seem to like it either. There was no emphasis on any other religions, and nothing else related to religion or diversity was taught. (3rd Year specialist)

At a very different extreme some students stated their concerns about what they regarded as the unprofessional practice of **proselytisation** on the part of a few teachers. Some references to this have already been made – the teacher who insisted on all her pupils saying grace; the teacher who sounded disapproving of atheists and agnostics. In another school, where the children are from a very diverse range of religious and cultural backgrounds, the proselytising ‘culprit’ was actually the classroom assistant – a member of a fundamentalist protestant denomination – to whom the Primary 1 teacher had handed over the task of giving the weekly RE lesson. She was, according to the student:

... a lovely lady who has a good rapport with the class, however I find her approach somewhat inappropriate for children of such a young age and diverse background. She is very learned about all aspects of the bible, and this is transferred in her teaching in which she expects children to remember each of the specific towns mentioned in the bible and things such as how many fish were caught in the fishermen's nets. ... She also takes assembly for the lower key stages, and I observed a similar approach to her discussion of the Easter story ... the concluding song echoing the details of the crucifixion. She also sang the song 'I'm In-Right Out-Right Up-Right Down-Right Happy all the time', which children loved, as the words and actions become quicker with every repetition. I have to admit that she makes me feel rather uncomfortable in her approach ... (4th Year non-specialist)

In another school:

The Primary 5 teacher, being the daughter of a minister, felt particularly eager to try to resolve the problem of the lack of RE within the school week and

encouraged the members of her class to attend Scripture Union. (1st Year specialist)

This is an issue that quite a few students initially struggle with themselves, though most seem to work through it and find an appropriate professional balance between personal faith and the role of RE teacher. For some, however, this approach continues to conflict with their faith ideals, like the anonymous student who had a sudden outburst at the very end of an exam question on the use of story in RE:

the main focus for telling a Biblical story can only be to tell what Christ did for each of us at Calvary and of the love He showed towards us. That is how Religious Education initially began to be taught in schools and should now be the same focus although the Revised Northern Ireland Curriculum has diminished this to nothing and has forgotten its main purpose. (1st Year non-specialist)

In another school, where a group of Japanese visitors had made some mention to the children about their Buddhist faith and practice, the student had greatly valued their visit because of the focus on learning about difference. She noted, however, that:

The teachers in this particular school ... were not impressed that the group talked about Buddha and believed it was going against their Christian school ethos. I disagreed with their interpretation because upon returning to class the children were fuelled with curiosity and eager to ask questions. They had been introduced to a small helping of a world religion and gained insight into something new. (1st Year non-specialist)

This **lack of a broader dimension** to much RE – fuelled by the narrow “Core Syllabus” – was also commented on by a significant number of students:

There was no evidence at all of World Religions being taught despite the fact that there was a ... classroom with many different Cultures. (two 3rd Year non-specialists)

... the teacher did teach religion on a weekly basis [but] it was only Christian orientated. (3rd Year specialist)

There is no diversity in the RE ... and the fact that there is no RE co-ordinator means that there is no-one to promote diversity and push for more cross-community activities. (1st Year specialist)

The assemblies in this school were very confessional and Christian, with speakers most weeks ranging from ministers to pastors to missionaries. This school was fairly multicultural, but it was clear that the attitude was that this was a Christian-ethos school and if you come here you will simply accept that and be part of it or opt out. (3rd Year specialist)

Nevertheless, and despite the constraints of the Core Syllabus, some of the most positive of the student comments related to their experiences of good practice in relation to **diversity education through RE**:

I found that the teaching of RE in [this integrated] school was extremely inclusive and paid a lot of detail to the individual needs of the pupils. ... While for the most part [the RE] does focus on Christianity for the second half of P7 the students look at Judaism. ... This study culminates in a visit to the Belfast Synagogue. (1st Year specialist)

Another student described an integrated school Primary 7 project on Judaism and Islam involving research, sharing, a question box, hot-seating and group work:

This lesson hoped to welcome, alongside critical thought and mutual respect, openness to learning about other faiths, as Christianity was the only faith practised in the school. It proved effective and the pupils enjoyed these stimulating activities, allowing them to 'think outside the box'. (3rd Year specialist)

In the same school, perhaps not surprisingly, there was also a positive focus on Catholics and Protestants learning about each other's traditions.

Several other students recorded positive experiences, in many cases due to their own interventions, in relation to broadly-based RE. In some other instances, however, the presence of diversity in the classroom was seen as **a problem to be avoided** rather than as an opportunity:

Within the multi-cultural private school where I had my teaching practice, the attitude especially in KS1 was to include everyone, [so] instead of doing inclusive R.E [they said] 'we don't do it at all.' Therefore [the assumption was that] no one would be offended. (3rd Year specialist)

One of our small number of Catholic students, on placement in an integrated school, noted that when the Catholic and Protestant pupils were taught RE together the school preferred to define it as 'religion without God' – basically moral education, avoiding anything religiously controversial!

Other observations recorded by students included the issue of **Assembly** being regarded, erroneously, as a way of providing RE, and the **involvement of clergy** in taking lessons and assemblies. Another issue of concern in some cases was the practice of some integrated schools (and in one case a significantly mixed controlled school that was not officially integrated) of **separating Catholic and Protestant pupils** for some or all of their RE even though they are taught together for all other subjects. The students found this both surprising and disappointing. **Pupil attitudes** were also commented on by several of the responding students, not least in relation to the pupils' pleasant surprise when they found that they could do something interesting in RE and actually enjoy it.

The concerns that have been reinforced by this small-scale study centre on two key areas – the low status of, and poor practice in, RE in too many schools; and the difficulties for students whose professional skills and aspirations have been raised by their ITE course only to find that the situation in many schools does not allow them to fulfil their ideals.

While the Northern Ireland situation has its distinctive features and particular limitations, I did discover some parallels indicated in various official reports here in England. Reviewing some material from inspection reports and from QCA, I note that similar issues occur in relation to the time and priority afforded to primary RE and also in relation to limitations in the breadth and balance of the curriculum (QCA, 2005). In the Ofsted *Making Sense of Religion* report (2007), the following points all bear some degree of relationship to the Northern Ireland findings indicated above:

- *whole-school development rarely focuses on RE*
- *the subject depends heavily on the expertise and enthusiasm of individual teachers*
- *primary teachers' lack of secure subject knowledge is a key factor limiting the amount of good and outstanding teaching in RE*
- *the curriculum and teaching in RE do not place sufficient emphasis on exploring the changing political and social significance of religion in the modern world. As a result, the subject's potential to contribute to community cohesion, education for diversity and citizenship is not being fully realised.*

The Ofsted report also pointed out that *“Primary ITE courses provide very little training about teaching RE; later professional development does not compensate for this”*. The latter statement, about Continuing Professional Development, is certainly also true in Northern Ireland, and there are now also plans afoot to remove the primary B.Ed as a subject-based degree in my own institution – following patterns that have already been in place for some time in many parts of Britain . The very real question is, therefore, where and how will we be able to develop the capacity to improve primary RE?

Let us hope that the aspirations of students like the 3rd Year primary RE specialist, with whose quote I will close, can somehow be sustained:

In my 3 years of experience of RE in schools, the standard has been very poor in that it has been seen as an "extra", not important and generally nothing to get too concerned about. It is concerning that so much bad practice seems to take place. I hope I will be able to make even a small difference if I ever get a job (fingers crossed)!!

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