



Knowledge Exchange Seminar Series (KESS)

...is a forum that encourages debate on a wide range of research findings, with the overall aim of promoting evidence-informed policy and law-making within Northern Ireland



Diversity, anti-racism and school curricula in religious education

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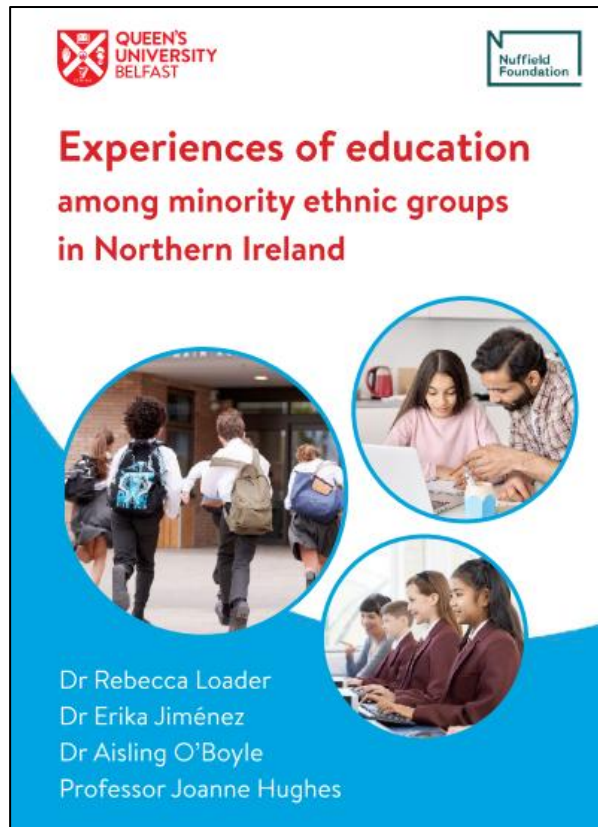
Religious education and racial equality

Recent policy documents have recognised the pivotal role of education in tackling discrimination, fostering intercultural awareness, and challenging racist stereotypes (The Executive Office, 2024; The Executive Office, 2026; Zazai, 2024).

Religious education has a specific role in these tasks:

- Research highlights the racialisation of religious identities and the likelihood of racism and religious prejudice occurring together (Bergh & Akrami, 2017; Husain, 2017).
- Religious education has been recognised as key to reducing prejudice and promoting understanding of diversity (DENI, 2026; The Executive Office, 2024).

Our research



Study comprised:

- Analysis of NI policy, curriculum and educational data.
- Qualitative interviews with 62 children and 53 parents across NI.
- Interviews/ focus groups with 43 stakeholders from education and community organisations.



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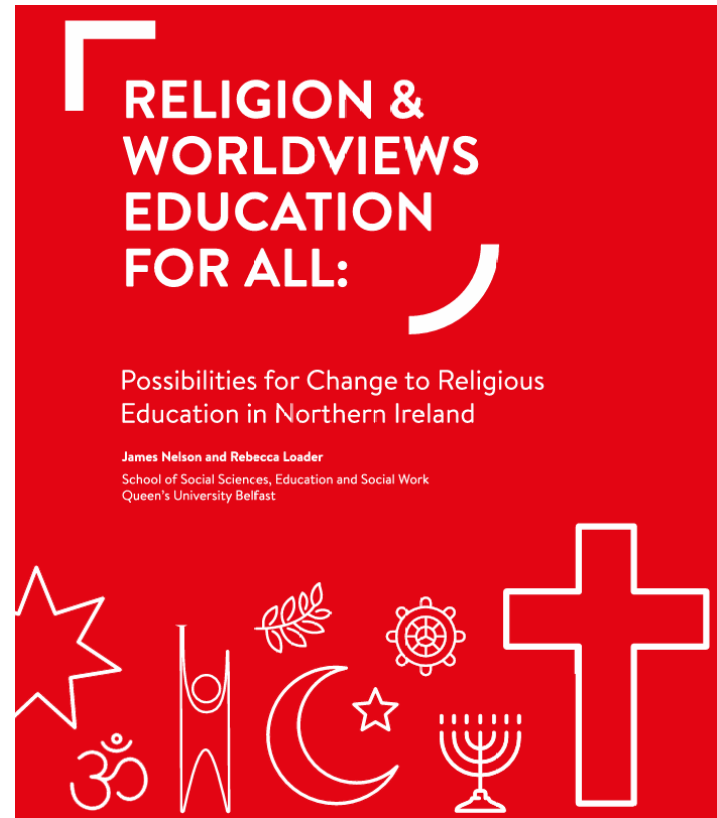


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Our research

Study comprised:

- Representative survey of the NI population (n=1,051).
- Dialogue Group meetings involving 19 community representatives over six months.
- Focus group with seven primary school teachers.



The Core Syllabus for Religious Education (2007)

At Key Stage 2, pupils should:

- “develop an awareness, knowledge, understanding and appreciation of the key Christian teachings” (DENI, 2007, p.13);
- become “aware of and have respect for differing cultures and faiths” as a manifestation of “Christian moral principles” (DENI, 2007, p.19).

Supreme Court (2025, p.22): “Teaching...in accordance with the core syllabus did not convey information or knowledge in an **objective, critical, and pluralistic** manner.”



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Challenges for racial equality

1. Positions other belief systems and identities as less important or valid.
2. Fails to provide children with knowledge of the beliefs and practices of their non-Christian peers.
3. Offers withdrawal as the only alternative to Christian RE, with low educational value.



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Positions other beliefs and identities as less valid

Beliefs and practices of children from minority faith backgrounds were often marginalised or taught in a fragmentary and superficial way.

'I think we should have a fundamental review of collective worship and religious education in schools ... It must be welcoming to all, even if you don't have any ethnic minorities in your school. And I think that's the misconception. "Oh, we don't have any ethnic minorities in this school. It doesn't matter therefore that we only do this." Yes, it does. Because you're giving a message to the young people who are in your school. You're actually devaluing everything else.'

Fails to develop children's knowledge of non-Christian traditions

The syllabus limited children's understanding of the lives and experiences of their classmates.

In the absence of critical and objective teaching, there were reports of children drawing on biased sources for information about other faiths.

'...[T]he children said, "Everybody celebrates Christmas." And I said, "Well, actually, they don't." They went, "What? What do you mean they don't?" You know, this is a simple thing that they don't understand. A Muslim child, a Bahá'í child does not celebrate Christmas, that there are other holy days that they celebrate.'

Offers withdrawal as the only alternative to Christian RE

Withdrawal was perceived as exclusionary and punitive.

Alternative provision typically lacked structure and educational purpose.

'I don't want her feeling like she's the odd one out. There's enough challenges when you're a kid going to school like that.'

'So, we did initially try and take her out, but with it being a small school we did not have... it was literally just colour-in sheets at the back of the classroom.'

Building racial equality through religious education

1. Aim to make a social difference
2. Adopt an anti-bias approach
3. Be person-centred
4. Support teachers



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Make a social difference

Results from a region-wide survey showed support for the aims of religious education to include:

- reducing prejudice (65% agreement),
- creating positive relations between people of different religions (66% agreement)
- improving recognition of minority religious groups (60% agreement).

Respondents understood this could be achieved through religious education by:

- respectful debate about beliefs (70% agreement),
- learning to understand different religious world views (65% agreement)
- learning to understand different non-religious world views (59% agreement)



Adopt an anti-racist approach

Pupils should learn about negative aspects of religious history in religious education, such as links to colonialism, conflict and abuses of power (57% agreement)

'The school is doing it as an add-on, so they'll learn about Buddhism, because people will come into the school, they'll do all about the celebrations, they do Eid every year... So, it's a very different approach, as well, to the extent that you're almost othering the religion in the teaching of it, because there's a depth to how they teach Christianity but not a depth to how they teach a lot of the other faiths.'

Person-centred (content and resources)

1. Wangari Maathai, climate activist (Kenya)
2. Leymah Gbowee, peace activist (Liberia)
3. Tawakkol Karman, human rights activist (Yemen)



Person-centred (processes)

'I do think it's important that the curriculum is informed with authenticity from people who have beliefs or have Humanist beliefs or whatever the curriculum is going to involve, that it's really informed by real-life experience and it's brought to life by those communities specifically in Northern Ireland, as well, so that all children are aware that, for example, being Sikh isn't something that only happens in India. We have Sikh people in our country and our society and our culture.'



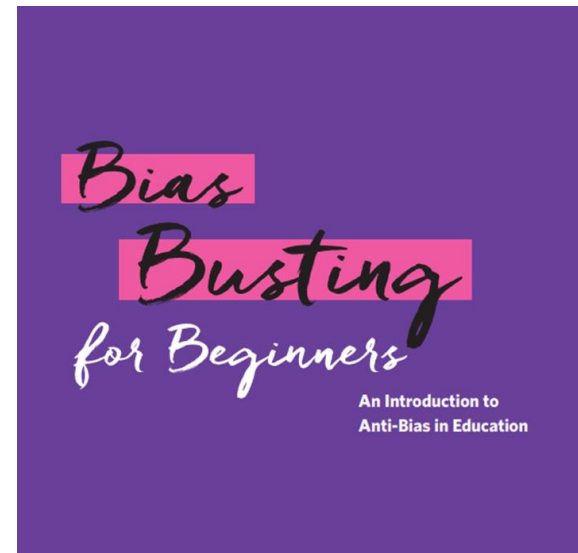
Person-centred (processes)

A strategic approach for *'meaningful engagement of people with lived experience'* (Zazai 2024, p.20) in the design and implementation of race relations work in Northern Ireland

'You could put a bunch of educational professionals into a room and say, 'Could you write us an inclusive curriculum?' And they'd have a really good go at it, I'm sure. But it's about having those real-life experiences and the knowledge of people who actually are from faith or non-faith belief backgrounds.'

Teacher Support

'[W]e have to start with the teachers, educate them, whatever way they need to be educated in a multi-faith and non-faith way. So they can then permeate that down to the children in whatever way they have to do that.'



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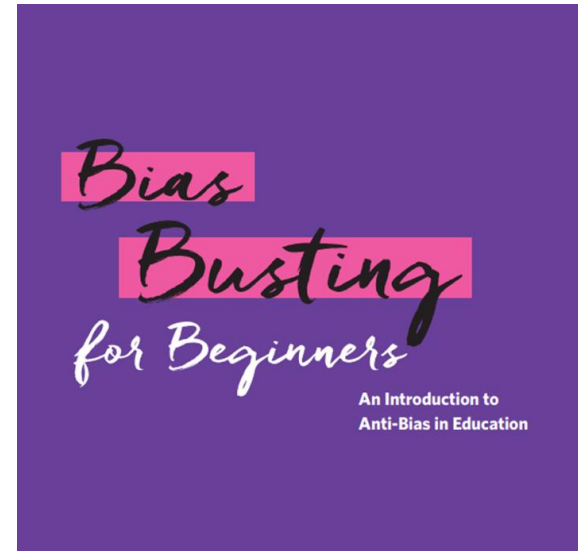
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Teacher Support

I think that, if we are more confident and comfortable talking about it and answering questions and promoting that learning, I think that the children will... I think you'll see that they'll be really receptive to it because they do have questions and their peers and their friends and, maybe, even family have different beliefs and different ways of doing things. I think it would really promote that even more if we were more comfortable in talking about.



Comparison of the Draft Framework for Race Relations with our research evidence

DRAFT Framework for Race Relations Interventions	Research findings on Religious Education
Enhance communications and education to dispel myths and stereotypes.	1) Develop a <u>person-centred religious education curriculum</u> and resources that convey religion and belief in living ways, reflective of the richness and diversity of how beliefs and values are expressed through people's everyday experiences; 2) Adopt an <u>anti-bias pedagogy</u> to challenge prejudice and dispel myths/stereotypes
Expand educational opportunities to reflect diverse histories and cultures,	3) Draw upon a wide range of faiths and traditions from <u>diverse cultures</u> ; 4) Include <u>global examples of Christianity</u> , including African and Asian churches; 5) Build <u>critical awareness</u> of negative aspects of religious history;
Embed cultural awareness and anti-racism training across public services.	5) Create professional learning opportunities for all Primary teachers to receive <u>anti-racism training</u>
Enhance capacity building initiatives to strengthen grassroots leadership.	6) Provide opportunities and support for minority religious and ethnic groups to be <u>fully involved in all aspects (drafting and consultation)</u> of curriculum design for the core syllabus for religious education.



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Read more...

RELIGION & WORLDVIEWS EDUCATION FOR ALL:

Possibilities for Change to Religious Education in Northern Ireland

James Nelson and Rebecca Loader
School of Social Sciences, Education and Social Work
Queen's University Belfast



Experiences of education among minority ethnic groups in Northern Ireland

Dr Rebecca Loader
Dr Erika Jiménez
Dr Aisling O'Boyle
Professor Joanne Hughes





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