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## Knowledge Exchange Seminar Series (KESS)

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# Diversity, anti-racism and school curricula in religious education

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### KESS Policy Briefing

*...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*

## Key points:

- The current RE system often disadvantages children from minority ethnic and religious backgrounds through:
  - A hierarchy of knowledge. By focusing almost exclusively on Christianity, the curriculum risks creating a hierarchy where some beliefs are seen as more valuable than others.
  - "Othering". Non-Christian religions are often taught as "add-ons" or mere celebrations (like Eid or Diwali) without the same depth as Christian teaching, which can make these faiths feel foreign or "othered".
  - Systemic Exclusion. Despite calls for diversity, the current process for rewriting the RE syllabus still reserves decision-making power for the four largest Christian churches, pushing minority groups to the periphery
- Four Ways RE Can Advance Racial Equality
  - Prioritising Pro-Social Aims: There is broad public support (over 60%) for RE to focus on reducing prejudice and creating positive relations between different groups through respectful debate.
  - Addressing Racism Directly: A reformed curriculum should use anti-bias pedagogy, which involves recognizing "white Christian normativity" and teaching about the negative aspects of religious history, such as links to colonialism and abuses of power.
  - Adopting a Person-Centred Approach: Education should focus on "lived religion"—showing that being Sikh or Muslim is part of local Northern Irish culture, not just something that happens in other countries. Materials relating to Christianity could also include people from a greater diversity of racial backgrounds, such as highlighting faith-inspired social action in African and Asian cultures.
  - Providing Teacher Support: Many teachers feel they lack the confidence or "subject knowledge" to handle diverse classrooms. Our research points to the importance of anti-racism training to be embedded in professional learning for all primary teachers.
- Recommendations for enhancing the draft Race Relations Framework:
  - Increase the expectation for the inclusion of people from ethnic minorities in the review and design of policies. In the case of religious education by ensuring minority religious and ethnic groups have a central role in designing the curriculum would promote equality and enhance the curriculum's authenticity.
  - Strengthen requirements for educational policies to be explicitly anti-racist.
  - Recognise the importance of a diverse and inclusive education as an entitlement for all pupils, not just those in schools with a high number of minority students.

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## Introduction

Recent documentation on racial equality, including the draft Framework for Race Relations, has recognised the pivotal role of education in tackling discrimination, fostering understanding of diverse histories and cultures, and challenging racist stereotypes (The Executive Office, 2024; The Executive Office, 2026; Zazai, 2024). In this briefing, we consider evidence regarding the contribution of the curriculum to promoting racial equality, focusing on religious education. While 'race' and 'religion' are separate characteristics, research highlighting the racialisation of religious identities and the co-occurrence of racism and religious prejudice (Bergh & Akrami, 2017; Husain, 2017) suggests that religious education is a particularly important site for efforts to eliminate racism. The evidence is provided by two recent studies that we have undertaken: ['Experiences of Education Among Minority Ethnic Groups in Northern Ireland'](#) (Loader et al., 2023), funded by the Nuffield Foundation; and ['Religion and Worldviews Education for All'](#) (RWE4ALL) (Nelson & Loader, 2025), funded by Culham St Gabriel's Trust.

## Racial Equality and Religious Education - Challenges

The Core Syllabus for Religious Education in Northern Ireland was published in 2007. Written by representatives of the region's four largest Christian Churches, it focuses solely on Christianity at primary level and is largely confessional in nature; at post-primary level, children are introduced to at least two other major world religions (DENI, 2007). In a landmark judgement in November 2025, the Supreme Court ruled that the syllabus does not provide information in an "objective, critical and pluralistic" manner. Examining the implications of the syllabus for racial and religious equality, our research has identified three negative consequences.

The first is that the focus on Christian teachings and moral principles establishes Christianity as normative within the school and society and thus positions other belief systems as less important or valid. With no requirement to teach other traditions, research participants reported that the beliefs and practices of children from minority faith backgrounds were often marginalised, and the universality of Christianity could be assumed by teachers and other pupils. For those teachers who wished to acknowledge traditions other than Christianity, the lack of defined space in the curriculum meant that it was possible only to do this in a fragmentary and superficial way. This could reinforce the "otherness" of non-Christian worldviews as the teaching lacked the depth and coherence of Christianity. Alternatively, in the absence of school-based learning about religious diversity, young people from minority faith backgrounds could themselves be forced into the position of teacher and ambassador for their faith – a burden not placed on their majority peers.

The second consequence of the current syllabus is that it fails to help children develop knowledge of the beliefs and practices of their peers from traditions other than Christianity. Several participants suggested that this impeded children's understanding of, and ability to engage with, the lives and experiences of their classmates and others in their community. As was evident in interview data, this could contribute to a sense of isolation among children from minority faith backgrounds. Moreover, in the absence of critical and objective teaching about faiths other than Christianity at primary level, there were indications that children were drawing on other, less reliable sources to evaluate these traditions. This could contribute to the development of negative attitudes towards these faiths among children by the end of primary school, before world religions were introduced as Key Stage 3 (see Nelson & Yang, 2022).

The third consequence of the current syllabus is that parents' only option, if they do not wish their children to receive Christian instruction, has been to withdraw them from religious education. Parents reported that this placed them in an "impossible" position and expressed concerns that withdrawal was exclusionary, could appear punitive, and could contribute to further "othering" their child. Where parents opted for withdrawal, our research echoed that of Richardson et al. (2013) in finding that alternative provision was not of equal educational value, typically lacking structure and purpose. We also found that, in some cases, withdrawal had not been offered as an option to parents; in other cases, it appeared that schools had withdrawn minority faith pupils from religious education without their parents being made aware. In such examples, parents were prevented from exercising agency over their children's religious learning.

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## Racial Equality and Religious Education - Potential

From our research we can identify four potential ways that religious education can contribute to building racial equality in Northern Ireland. Firstly, it should prioritise pro-social aims. The region-wide survey undertaken as part of the RWE4ALL research highlighted broad agreement amongst the wider population that the aims of religious education in primary schools should make a social difference by reducing prejudice (65% agreement), creating positive relations between people of different religions (66% agreement) and improving recognition of minority religious groups (60% agreement). Respondents understood that this could be achieved through religious education by respectful debate about beliefs (70% agreement), and learning to understand different religious (65% agreement) and non-religious (59% agreement) worldviews.

Secondly, it should address issues of racist prejudice and discrimination directly. Interestingly, a majority of survey participants believed that pupils should learn about negative aspects of religious history in religious education, such as links to colonialism, conflict and abuses of power (57% agreement). This suggests an awareness that addressing prejudice and building positive relations in contemporary settings requires some recognition of ways in which religious beliefs and institutions have historically been complicit in racism and racially-motivated violence. Indeed, some focus group participants advocated an anti-bias approach (Derman-Sparks & Olsen Edwards, 2019), a pedagogical method that aims to address issues of racism (and other forms of discrimination) through education in sustained and proactive ways. It involves seeing difference, recognising inequality, and taking active steps to address bias (NICIE, 2021). In religious education this means recognising the white Christian normativity of current practice and going beyond simplistic representations or celebrations of traditions and belief systems. A reformed curriculum should give appropriate attention to diverse traditions in ways that allow children from minority faith backgrounds to have their beliefs validated, rather than feeling “othered”, and reduce the need for withdrawal.

Thirdly, our evidence showed a preference for person-centred religious education. This has two aspects, firstly in relation to the content. The curriculum content and signposted resources should draw upon the experiences of people from diverse racial backgrounds within faith traditions at local and global levels. Take, for example, the issue of faith-inspired social action of Wangari Maathai (Kenya), Leymah Gbowee (Liberia) and Tawakkol Karman (Yemen). Second, research participants expressed a wish for a person-centred, rights-respecting approach to involving children, parents and stakeholders in the design and implementation of a religious education curriculum. This echoed a key finding from the Zazai (2024) review of the 2015-2025 Racial Equality Strategy, which identified the need for a strategic approach for “meaningful engagement of people with lived experience” (p.20) in policy development and delivery in Northern Ireland. Unfortunately, the current review of the core syllabus for religious education makes no requirement that there be representatives from minority religious or ethnic backgrounds on the drafting group (DENI, 2026).

Finally, teacher support was a key request from parents, grandparents and teachers themselves. There was evidence from our research projects of teachers innovating and creating inclusive environments for learning about diverse beliefs, and some were familiar with anti-bias training materials (NICIE 2021). However, it was clear that such practice was inconsistent across and within the main school sectors. Teacher Professional Learning for student-teachers and in-service teachers is crucial to address subject knowledge gaps, help teachers reflect on their position when teaching in plural classrooms and ensure they are provided with a strong educational rationale for religious education. Teachers reported that it had taken time for most of them to develop their own personal and professional positions on teaching religious education and, for some, this was an ongoing process.

## Conclusion

Our research has demonstrated that religious education in its current form in Northern Ireland can marginalise diversity and multi-perspectivity by creating hierarchies of knowledge, limiting pupils’ conceptual tools for understanding others, and leaving them dependent on biased resources. In this briefing, however, we have also shown how education may serve as a powerful vehicle for advancing race relations by promoting deeper cultural understanding, challenging stereotypes, and fostering inclusive participation.

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# Knowledge Exchange Seminar Series 2026

Looking to the draft Framework for Race Relations, our discussion has highlighted ways in which this document should be strengthened. The review process for the core syllabus for RE has underlined how systemic bias persists and how people from minority religious and ethnic groups are pushed to the periphery of decision-making processes, even when the issues at hand are their own beliefs and values. It would seem there should be much greater emphasis in the Framework on removing barriers to inclusion, strengthening grassroots leadership and setting stronger requirements for policies to be anti-racist in their design. Further, the draft Framework for Race Relations ties curriculum diversity to raising aspiration and attainment. However, our studies show that a diversified curriculum is important in its own terms for equality and inclusion, understanding of self and other, and preparation for a globalised society.

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