



Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action

Response to the Department of Education's Results of an EQIA of Proposals for a Revised Core Syllabus for Religious Education.

6 Dec 2006

NICVA is writing to express our opposition to the Department of Education's *Results of an EQIA of Proposals for a Revised Core Syllabus for Religious Education*.

We feel that the report does not adequately reflect our concerns or attribute sufficient weight to our opposition. Our comments are informed by NICVA's role as the representative body for the voluntary and community sector and by a vision of society where everyone is treated fairly, where sectarianism and discrimination are not tolerated and where respect for human rights and equality is regarded as the norm.

NICVA would argue that the decision to accept most of the four main churches' proposals for the revision of the RE syllabus represents a potential breach of human rights and equality legislation, runs counter to the vision of a shared society and undermines the purpose of education.

Under Article 2 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child member states undertake to ensure convention rights to every child without discrimination, thus all children are entitled to equal access to an effective education regardless of membership of a linguistic, ethnic or other minority. Moreover, Article 1 of the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) Convention against Discrimination in Education prohibits 'any distinction, exclusion, limitation or preference which, being based on race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, economic condition or birth, has the purpose or effect of nullifying or impairing equality of treatment in education.'

The report's mitigation suggestions, including an advisory group co-chaired by CCEA and the Churches to contribute to guidance materials, schools' discretion to offer more provision for world religions, the use of ICT and guest speakers and the right of parents to withdraw their child are inadequate. The exclusion of certain children from religious education would deny them a chance to learn about religion in school on an equal footing with their classmates, it would discriminate against non-Christian children and cannot represent a viable alternative. It could result in a potential breach of the Section 75 equality and good relations duties, Protocol 1 (right to education) and Article 14 (non-discrimination) of ECHR incorporated as the Human Rights Act and the Race Relations Order 1997 as amended in 2003. Furthermore, if schools are designated under Section 75, which is likely to be the case in the near future, schools could be faced with hundreds of complaints.

These are rights to protect non-Christian pupils who increasingly make up a large proportion of the school population. But the argument that the syllabus is appropriate because the majority of pupils are from a Christian background is also dangerously shortsighted. A recent report explains the limits of this kind of thinking.

The interfaith commission publication, 'Faithful Cities' alerts us to the importance of inclusive religious education. Initiated by the Church of England,

the report celebrates the growing diversity in Britain but warns against growing inequality, racism and religious intolerance.¹

At 2.69 the report states: ‘British societymight be regarded as increasingly post-Christian and post-secular. Although there is undeniable numerical decline among long-established churches, many other vibrant expressions of religion – including newer Christian expressions and the growth of other faiths – represent a significant and enduring public reality.’

At 3.4 the report acknowledges the scale of the challenge - ‘no one should underestimate the difficulty of the task, because living with what is perceived as difference challenges us all. We see the spectre of failure in political fanaticism, personal acts of racism and religious persecution, institutional practices of discrimination and, in particular, policies on political asylum in the United Kingdom.’

The report provides some reasons for the difficulty of living with difference at 3.16. The perceived threat of globalisation leads to an intensified search for security and certainty and what underlies the search for security ...is disorientation, fear, anxiety and aggression. ‘Its manifestations are found everywhere, from the affluent in their gated communities to marginalised poor people in decaying neighbourhoods, to the turf wars of gangs of young people. The deep-seated need for belonging and identity easily breeds a suspicion of the other. The more obvious the difference and the more easily identifiable the other is, the easier it is for antipathy to grow.’

At 3.60 the report acknowledges that religion exists in the same context of anxiety and uncertainty as everything else. ‘We have witnessed the growth of what has been called ‘furious religion’, provoked by the exposure of religious traditions to secularism and to other religions. ...This religious retreat into certainty can be read as a particular expression of the wider cultural uncertainty and anxiety and the search for a ‘safe haven’. Its capacity for creating destructive division and conflict is clear.’

To help counter this danger the report highlights the importance of religious education and at 3.60 states: ‘One of the most contentious areas of overlap between communities of faith in a diverse society is in education, particularly in relation to faith schools....As cities become more diverse, one risk is that different ethnic, racial or religious groups co-exist in parallel communities which have few points of contact or common ground.

It continues at 3.65: ‘We also contend that respect for different faith traditions in a diverse society is greatly enhanced by having an understanding of faiths other than one’s own. All schools need to encourage students to take seriously the

¹ Faithful Cities –The Report from the Commission on Urban Life and Faith 2006– an initiative of the Church of England. Membership of the commission consisted of 8 members of Cof E, 2 Roman Catholics, 1 United Reformed Church, 1 Methodist and 1 Muslim and was representative of age, gender and ethnic background.

relevance of the resources of faith and which aim to promote awareness and confidence in relation to faiths other than the student's own.'

NICVA would argue that the Faithful Cities report provides timely advice about the imperative of an inclusive religious education syllabus to enhance social cohesion. But there are also issues about the absurdity of legislating for a Christian instruction model when curriculum reform will introduce inter alia 'mutual understanding in the local and wider community' as part of Personal Development for primary school children. And if the imperative of A Shared Future and preparing our young people to deal with the challenges of life and work in today's global society mean anything, then it makes no sense to limit the scope of religious education.

NICVA welcomes the consultation with children during the EQIA but the report seems prepared to overlook its own conclusion at 5.11 that young people think RE could be improved if other religions were taught. Moreover the report quotes the aim of the statutory curriculum to develop young people as individuals, including spiritually and morally, and prepare them for life. Surely individuals from minority ethnic and religious groups count too?

We therefore call for the existing proposals to be withdrawn and for the establishment of a new inclusive working party to ensure that the syllabus can be provided in an unbiased and objective way, respectful of freedom of opinion, conscience and expression.

We will conclude with some wise words from the Faithful Cities report to underscore the need to rethink these proposals and produce a syllabus that is fit for purpose.

'The ability to celebrate and live with "difference" as a source of human enrichment is a key urban challenge. ...By making neighbours out of strangers we remove the spectres of fear and animosity that have dogged urban areas for centuries.....Social cohesion depends on the ability of people to live in harmony. Faith groups in particular must combat racism, fascism and religious intolerance at all levels of society.'