

## School Ethos in Northern Ireland

### 1. Purpose

Ethos is a term with Greek origins and, in relation to education, is often believed to refer to the morals, values, beliefs and philosophy of a school. However, precisely defining school ethos is a lot more difficult than this might suggest. For many years there has been significant interest from political quarters,<sup>1</sup> school leaders and other stakeholders<sup>2</sup> in the benefits of ethos to learning. To be successful and effective, it is argued, a school should have a 'good' ethos and the Department of Education's (DE) Policy for School Improvement, interweaving ethos, culture and community emphasises how

**“evidence suggests that schools that are performing well invariably have a strong ethos and a positive, caring culture, one that drives and motivates not just staff and pupils but also parents and the wider community served by the school. The importance of having a culture of high aspiration and achievement, where every young person is cared for, supported and encouraged to reach his or her full potential and where progress and achievement is acknowledged and celebrated cannot be overstated.”<sup>3</sup>**

Despite its apparent importance, the term 'ethos' lacks clarity. This briefing paper will examine what the ethos of a school means in a number of education systems, how schools develop their ethos, why many see it as very important, how schools use it for their own purposes and the influences of faith and religion. The significance of ethos to schools in Northern Ireland (NI), and the perceived threats to the ethos of some school sectors, will then be examined.

### 2. What is Ethos?

Wherever schools are located, they tend to value how and why they were founded. Schools with long histories tend to have deep roots, but all schools, even those established relatively recently, are understandably proud of how they came about and the achievements of their learners. The artefacts prominently displayed in public areas of the school, such as entrance halls and foyers, often give an insight into those achievements which are most valued and celebrated, whether artistic, social, sporting, academic or some combination of these. These can be physical objects such as trophies, artwork or photographs of successful past pupils; alternatively, they may be digitally promoted through the school website.<sup>4</sup> It has been suggested that school ethos is “recognised initially on an experiential rather than a cognitive level.”<sup>5</sup> In other words, you may be able to 'sense it' but it may be challenging to understand or satisfactorily define.

The Scottish government identify positive relationships and behaviour as important contributors to a positive ethos and culture in a school, and argue that strong school leadership is a key determinant of those being present. They also suggest that a school with a good ethos has flexible, confident and reflective teachers supporting the individual needs of learners, with parents and carers as key partners in schooling. They add that “‘climate’ and ethos are key determinants in promoting social and emotional wellbeing and mental health for all in schools.”<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Government of Victoria, Australia

(2010) [https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/images/stories/committees/etc/SH\\_Report/Ch4\\_School\\_ethos\\_and\\_environment.pdf](https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/images/stories/committees/etc/SH_Report/Ch4_School_ethos_and_environment.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Kuh, G.D. (1993) Ethos: Its Influence on Student Learning, *Liberal Education*, 79(4), pp.22-31.

<sup>3</sup> DENI (2009). *Every School a Good School* <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/de/ESAGS%20Policy%20for%20School%20Improvement%20-%20Final%20Version%2005-05-2009.pdf>, p.19.

<sup>4</sup> Deal, T.E. and Peterson, K.D. (2016) *Shaping school culture*. John Wiley & Sons, p.59.

<sup>5</sup> Allder, M. (1993).

<sup>6</sup> Scottish Government (2018) *Developing a Positive Whole School Ethos and Culture: relationships, learning and behaviour*.

<https://www.gov.scot/publications/developing-positive-whole-school-ethos-culture-relationships-learning-behaviour/pages/1/>

The ethos or culture of a school has been described as a slippery concept<sup>7</sup> – just when you feel you have an understanding of it, it seems to mean something else. Some describe it as an “illusory item which is ...difficult to recognise, measure or improve”.<sup>8</sup> School ethos is often used alongside similarly hard-to-measure terms such as ‘spirit’ and ‘ambience’.<sup>9</sup> It has been described as

“... a web of interconnecting components, including school policies and procedures, cultural values and the social and physical environments. It is about the climate, atmosphere or feeling of a school and the way this impacts upon students’ learning and teachers’ work.”<sup>10</sup>

There are some who question the value of the term ‘ethos’ itself, with some preferring an alternative term: “School culture is a tangible entity, whereas ethos is far more nebulous, always retaining a vagueness.”<sup>11</sup> Others just ask that the terminology be used consistently,<sup>12</sup> because often it is used very loosely. Sometimes ethos is said to be the same as ‘culture’ while, at other times, ‘identity’ seems to be the interchangeable term. Often other words are used. One source, rather confusingly, incorporates a number of terms in the same question: “How can we examine the school environment to see what positive changes we can make to a school’s climate or culture?”<sup>13</sup> It seems that ‘atmosphere’, ‘environment’, ‘values’, ‘culture’, ‘climate’, ‘identity’ and other terms are used rather casually as different labels for similar characteristics of schools, but all seem close to the concept of ‘ethos’.

One English viewpoint sees ethos in a functional way, stating that it

“is often a bit of a nebulous beast. It can be very hard to express the school’s ethos in a few words, and yet we still aim to do so... [These are] expressions of what our schools stand for... ways of seeing how what we do is different from the school next to us, a marketing tool, a way of making a point about the purpose of education, or simply an expression of why we do what we do.”<sup>14</sup>

An examination of some school websites would suggest that ethos is often used as a marketing tool with schools seeing it as advertising an approach to learning and behaviour management to potential parents. One school in Brazil boldly asserts that clean and tidy school uniforms are “integral to the ethos”<sup>15</sup> of their school, while a South African school network focuses on learning, emphasising that “a unique ethos of aspiration, reflection and improvement permeates the schools at all levels.”<sup>16</sup>

Many consider ethos as very important. An early piece of research concluded that ethos was the most important factor in the success of a school.<sup>17</sup> If this is correct, it would be important to define it, understand it, articulate it and to get it right. However, despite asserting that it is the most important factor, those authors are criticised for not defining what they believe ethos to be, nor do they make much attempt to clarify it.<sup>18</sup> We can conclude that school ethos is a rather vague term that pervades educational discourse but it appears to incorporate the beliefs, values and norms governing teacher-pupil relationships, interactions and behaviour<sup>19</sup> alongside the overarching principles and values shaping policy and practice.<sup>20</sup>

## 3. Faith and Ethos

### 3.1 Faith Schools

Faith-based schools have been established throughout the world, including in NI where religion forms a key part of many schools’ ethos. In 2001, the Labour government in the UK called for an increase in faith-based schooling in England and Wales and this resulted in considerable growth of the sector, including new Hindu, Sikh, Muslim and Seventh Day Adventist schools. This initiative, often attributed to the Prime Minister of the time, Tony Blair, encouraged “...schools to choose to establish new partnerships with other successful schools, the voluntary sector, faith groups or the private sector, where they believe this will contribute to raising standards...we wish to welcome faith schools with their distinctive ethos and character into the maintained sector [which in England and Wales provides central government funding].”<sup>21</sup>

Strong arguments are advanced to justify faith schooling and there appears to be legal justification for schools with a religious ethos: the Human Rights Act (1998) requires governments to ensure that parents have access to “such education and teaching in conformity with their own religious and philosophical convictions”.<sup>22</sup> There is also an argument made that faith-based schools encourage participation in society by minorities, thus leading to greater social cohesion. The integration of Irish Catholics into British society has been linked to faith schools for those learners, for example.<sup>23</sup> There are times when faith-based schooling allows minority religions to achieve in ways which would not be possible in a system dominated by another group:

<sup>7</sup> Glover, D. and Coleman, M. (2005) School culture, climate and ethos: interchangeable or distinctive concepts? *Journal of In-service Education*, 31:2, pp.251-272, p.253.

<sup>8</sup> Alder, M. (1993) The Meaning of ‘School Ethos’, *Westminster Studies in Education*, 16:1, 59-69, DOI: 10.1080/0140672930160109.

<sup>9</sup> Solvason, C. (2005) Investigating specialist school ethos... or do you mean culture? *Educational studies*, 31(1), pp.85-94, p.85.

<sup>10</sup> Government of Victoria, Australia (2010) [https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/images/stories/committees/etc/SH\\_Report/Full\\_Report.pdf](https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/images/stories/committees/etc/SH_Report/Full_Report.pdf) p.43.

<sup>11</sup> Solvason, C. (2005) p.86.

<sup>12</sup> Glover, D. and Coleman, M. (2005) p.266.

<sup>13</sup> Roach, A.T. and Kratochwill, T.R. (2004) Evaluating school climate and school culture. *Teaching exceptional children*, 37(1), pp.10-17, p.10.

<sup>14</sup> Bawden, M. (2019) School ethos, vision and aspiration. *The Voice for Secondary Education*, <https://www.sec-ed.co.uk/best-practice/school-ethos-vision-and-aspiration/>

<sup>15</sup> The British College of Brazil (2022) *School Uniform* <https://www.nordangliaeducation.com/en/our-schools/brazil/sao-paulo/british-college/students/student-life/school-uniform>

<sup>16</sup> Thinking Schools South Africa (2020) <https://www.thinkingschools.org.za/home.html>

<sup>17</sup> Rutter, M., Maughan, B., Mortimore, P., Ouston, J. & Smith, A. (1979) *Fifteen thousand hours, secondary schools and their effects on children* (London, Open Books).

<sup>18</sup> Solvason, C. (2005).

<sup>19</sup> Modin, B., Läftman, S. B., & Östberg, V. (2017) Teacher rated school ethos and student reported bullying—a multilevel study of upper secondary schools in Stockholm, Sweden. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 14(12).

<sup>20</sup> Glover, D., & Coleman, M. (2005).

<sup>21</sup> Department for Education (2001) *Schools achieving success*. [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/355105/Schools\\_Achieving\\_Success.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/355105/Schools_Achieving_Success.pdf), p.44-45.

<sup>22</sup> UK Parliament (1998) Human Rights Act, Schedule 1 Part II Article 2.

<sup>23</sup> Lewis, P. (1997) Arenas of Ethnic Negotiation: Co-operation and Conflict in Bradford, in T. Modood and P. Werbner (eds) *The Politics of Multiculturalism in the New Europe: Racism, Identity and Community*. London: Zed Books.

**“Like the Catholic schools in Northern Ireland, the faith-based schools [in England] are internally perceived to be institutions where the minority can be free from the debilitating effects of prejudice and are often perceived to be the key to economic and social mobility.”<sup>24</sup>**

A majority of school children in NI are now Catholic, so the ‘minority’ argument may not apply, but certainly there was a time when there was a power imbalance between the communities in NI,<sup>25</sup> and the minority, at that time, may well have benefited from having separate schooling.

Schools with a faith ethos are also widely believed to produce good academic outcomes for learners, as well as developing a strong moral sense. It has been said that

**“arguments for separate religious schools hinge on the special qualities [of] such establishments ... These... refer to the ethos of schools, the quality of teaching, the attainment of pupils and the views of parents.”<sup>26</sup>**

The linkage of faith-based schools, raised standards and academic success is deeply rooted, and “the Blair government’s encouragement of faith-based schools was officially linked to a belief that faith schools have a particular ethos that supports the development of morality and of high academic achievement.”<sup>27</sup> Whilst there is some evidence that not all faith schools enjoy academic success,<sup>28</sup> trustees and representatives of Catholic schooling in NI maintain the link between faith and quality indicators reporting that “the quality of learning, teaching, policy and practice of the Catholic school flows from a strong foundation of the Catholic ethos and Christian values.”<sup>29</sup>

Evidence supports the argument that, on average, faith-based schools in England and Wales do produce better examination results than schools which are not faith-based.<sup>30</sup> However, there is a considerable body of research which suggests that this is a consequence of selection by social class and is unrelated to the faith ethos of the school.<sup>31</sup> Some research has pointed out that faith-based schools in England and Wales are ten times more likely than non-faith-based schools to be unrepresentative of their local areas, as they attract high-achieving pupils from outside the area.<sup>32</sup> Their apparent academic success may be a result of class and ability segregation across the school system, rather than a faith-based ethos.

Regarding the argument of a legal right to religious schools enshrined in the 1998 Human Rights Act, a response argues that

**“this article ...does not require the government to establish or fund a particular type of education. The requirement to respect parents’ convictions is intended to prevent indoctrination by the state. However, schools can teach about religion and philosophy if they do so in an objective, critical and pluralistic manner.”<sup>33</sup>**

### 3.2 Challenges to Faith Schools

There are robust arguments that defend the contribution of religion in schools and the role of religion in cultivating “tolerance, moral integrity and civic virtue”<sup>34</sup> and, understandably, those who work in and support faith schools often wish to retain the faith ethos of the school. However, as school enrolment becomes ever more diverse in terms of culture, ethnicity and religion, that becomes harder to maintain. Similarly, while church attendance remains relatively high here, all communities in NI are becoming less religious, even if not at the pace of most other European societies.<sup>35</sup>

Alongside an increased secularisation of society is a fear by some communities of losing an essential cultural focal point. Some of that may come from a desire to have schools help to promote faith:

**“...from some faith groups there remains a demand for a form of school-based religious instruction (even though they themselves may describe it as ‘education’) that wishes to convey what is perceived to be religious truth, and in order to achieve and justify this the call is made for separate faith schools of various kinds”.<sup>36</sup>**

Most school sectors are at pains to point out that they are available for all, and there are many commonalities such as openness, inclusion and cooperation, the involvement of parents, respect for learners and the development of the whole child. However, Christian worship is mandatory in state schools in the UK, the only country in which this is required. It is also a requirement in schools which are not explicitly ‘faith’ schools.<sup>37</sup> In most sectors in NI, an explicitly Christian ethos is consistently emphasised, not least because of the legislative requirement that

**“All schools in receipt of grant funding in NI are required (under the terms of the 1989 Education Reform Order) to provide pupils with both a daily act of collective worship and Religious Education [RE] in line with a syllabus drawn-up by the four largest Christian denominations (Catholicism, Presbyterianism, Anglicanism and Methodism).”<sup>38</sup>**

<sup>24</sup> McKinney, S.J. (2006) The faith-based schools debate: challenging assumptions and stereotypes. *Journal of Moral Education*, 35(1), pp.105-115, p.109.

<sup>25</sup> Rusciano, F.L. (2016) The Civil Rights Movements of the USA and Northern Ireland. In *World Opinion and the Northern Ireland Peace Process*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, pp.9-26.

<sup>26</sup> Jackson, R. (2003) Should the State Fund Faith Based Schools? A Review of the Arguments. *British Journal of Religious Education*, 25:2, 89-102, p.91.

<sup>27</sup> Walford, G. (2008) Faith-based schools in England after ten years of Tony Blair. *Oxford Review of Education*, 34(6), pp.689-699, p.696.

<sup>28</sup> Humanists UK (2020) 40% of independent faith schools fail to meet Ofsted standards with Steiner schools also failing badly.

<https://humanists.uk/2020/01/22/40-of-independent-faith-schools-fail-to-meet-ofsted-standards-with-steiner-schools-failing-badly/>

<sup>29</sup> Catholic Council for Maintained School (CCMS) & Catholic Schools’ Trustee Service (CSTC) (2022) Catholic Education Delivering for Communities <http://www.onlineccms.com/index.php/publications/building-and-development?task=document.viewdoc&id=983>

<sup>30</sup> Schagen, I., and Schagen, S. (2005). The impact of faith schools on pupil performance. In R. Gardner, J. Cairns and D. Lawton (eds.), *Faith schools: Consensus or conflict*. London: Routledge Falmer.

<sup>31</sup> Walford, G. (2008).

<sup>32</sup> Tough, S. and Brooks, R. (2007) *School admissions: Fair choice for parents and pupils*. [https://www.ippr.org/files/images/media/files/publication/2011/05/schooladmissions\\_1582.pdf](https://www.ippr.org/files/images/media/files/publication/2011/05/schooladmissions_1582.pdf).

<sup>33</sup> Amnesty (September October 2000) Amnesty International UK, cited in Humanists UK <https://humanists.uk/campaigns/schools-and-education/faith-schools/faith-schools-why-not/>.

<sup>34</sup> Barnes (2005) p.125.

<sup>35</sup> Fahey, T., Hayes, B. and Sinnott, R. (2005) *Conflict and Consensus: A study of values and attitudes in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland*, Dublin: Institute of Public Administration, p.46.

<sup>36</sup> Richardson, N. (2011) Diversity, Controversy and Good Relations. Practical Possibilities for Religious Education. Interfaces from Northern Ireland. In P. Götte and J. Nissen, *Religious Education between Formation, Knowledge and Control: Papers from the 11th Nordic Conference of Religious Education*, p.10.

<sup>37</sup> Lichten, A. (2021) Mandated worship can never be inclusive <https://www.secularism.org.uk/opinion/2021/05/mandated-worship-can-never-be-inclusive>

<sup>38</sup> Milliken, M., Bates, J. and Smith, A. (2021)

Although RE is a compulsory part of the Northern Ireland Curriculum, parents have the right to withdraw their children.<sup>39</sup> While schools should provide educationally equivalent alternatives for opted-out children, there is evidence that this does not always happen.<sup>40</sup> Also some parents do not exercise their right to opt out to avoid social exclusion of their children, and there are parents who favour an opting in to RE, rather than the reverse.<sup>41</sup> In 2021, one parent and child in NI successfully challenged the exclusively Christian curriculum and school assemblies in the High Court, which found it to be unlawful and in breach of the Human Rights Act. The impact of that ruling remains to be seen.<sup>42</sup>

Issues have been raised concerning the teaching in some faith-based schools, including instances of selective delivery of the curriculum. For example, a Jewish school in London was censured as it was “teaching creationism in geography and science and not letting students take GCSEs... text, photographs and illustrations in geography text books had been redacted”.<sup>43</sup> Education in the Republic of Ireland, where schools are mainly owned and managed by churches, particularly the Catholic Church, “allows schools to protect a particular ethos by refusing to employ or by dismissing teachers who might be regarded as being at odds with the prevailing ethos.”<sup>44</sup> There is concern that national policies protecting minority groups are not implemented fully or at all in some schools where this is seen as contrary to the school ethos, and it “raises questions about the possibility of equality for all students in a school that has a default faith tradition which holds particular views on specific issues such as sexual orientation.”<sup>45</sup>

The prospect of secular schooling in NI has been dismissed by some. For one author, writing in 2011, it was not “conceivable that education [in NI] could ever become secularized”.<sup>46</sup> More than a decade on, ‘faith’, particularly as used to identify community allegiance, remains strong in NI. However, declining religiosity, the continued move away from church-based ‘faith’ and increased diversity may make sustaining faith schools and the Christian ethos more and more difficult’.

## 4. School Ethos in Northern Ireland

In NI at least, ethos is often used as a marker to differentiate particular types of schools and is often a feature of their separation. The ethos of schools in NI is, like other aspects of education, likely to be interwoven with identity, culture, ethnicity, social class, religion and, potentially, division and this may differ between schools and the various school sectors. For example, cricket teams in Catholic Maintained schools may be as rare as camogie teams in Controlled ones. A borderless map of Ireland may be displayed on the wall of one Geography classroom, and a map of the UK in another. A Controlled primary may display a Union flag on a flagstaff outside their school for much of the year, while another school may have no flag, or fly a neutral flag of achievement rather than affiliation, such as an Eco-schools Award flag. Implicitly through symbols and emblems, and often explicitly as well, many schools in NI can be identified, often experientially, as having a ‘Catholic/Irish’ or a ‘British/Protestant’ ethos. These may reflect the ethos of the school, or they may be designed to illustrate an idea of community or solidarity. However, whether or not they are ‘ethos’, they may help to portray the image of the school that it wants to present to parents, prospective parents, visitors and the wider community. These schools are likely to be experientially challenging to those from another community, even if subliminally, whatever the websites, admission criteria or faith-based credentials might suggest. Beyond ‘faith’, schools may be, deliberately or otherwise, sending signals to parents as to whether their children may feel welcome or not.

### 4.1 Faith and Ethos across school sectors in NI

#### 4.1.1 Catholic Maintained Schools

The Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) is an organisation explicitly established to support Catholic education, and it upholds the values espoused in Catholic social teaching. Until relatively recently, neither the Catholic Church nor CCMS placed much emphasis on faith in the materials available on their website but their influence on the sector is clear elsewhere. On the CCMS website it explains that, while applications for teaching jobs are welcomed irrespective of the beliefs of the applicants, there is a requirement for a Catholic Teaching Certificate for those getting a job in a CCMS nursery or primary school.<sup>47</sup> That may help to explain why the proportion of non-Catholics teaching in Catholic schools is low, with just 2% in Catholic Maintained primaries.<sup>48</sup> The certificate may be requested in post-primary schools from applicants for teaching posts with significant ‘pastoral duties’, but it is not routinely required. Perhaps as a result, the percentage of non-Catholics teaching in Catholic post-primary schools is higher at 8%. While this is still quite low, it should be noted that these proportions indicate an improvement from 2004, when figures were 2% or less in all types of schools.<sup>49</sup> Given that the two main education sectors in NI locate themselves within their own particular belief systems subsumed within their broader school ethos, any cross-over of employment between the sectors may be considered somewhat surprising.

<sup>39</sup> Department of Education (n.d.) Statutory Curriculum <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/articles/statutory-curriculum>

<sup>40</sup> Richardson, N. (2014) *Sharing Religious Education* RE Today Services, Birmingham.

<sup>41</sup> Mawhinney, A., Niens, U., Richardson, and Chiba, Y. (2010) *Opting out of Religious Education. The views of Young People from Minority Belief Backgrounds* [http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/uploads/docs/2010\\_09/1285762741\\_Opting\\_out\\_of\\_RE\\_Project\\_Report.pdf](http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/uploads/docs/2010_09/1285762741_Opting_out_of_RE_Project_Report.pdf)

<sup>42</sup> Herbert, S. (2022) Northern Ireland rules on RE are ‘in breach of human rights’. *Church Times*. <https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2022/22-july/news/uk/northern-ireland-rules-on-re-are-in-breach-of-human-rights>

<sup>43</sup> Hazell, W. (2021) *Jewish private school hit by Government action for teaching creationism in science*. iNews 15.1.21 <https://inews.co.uk/news/education/jewish-private-school-government-action-creationism-831496>

<sup>44</sup> McNamara, G. and Norman, J. (2010) Conflicts of ethos: Issues of equity and diversity in faith-based schools. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 38(5), pp.534-546, p.535.

<sup>45</sup> McNamara, G. and Norman, J. (2010) p.536.

<sup>46</sup> Hughes, J. (2011) Are separate schools divisive? A case study from Northern Ireland, *British Educational Research Journal*, 37:5, p.847.

<sup>47</sup> <http://onlineccms.com/index.php/faq-s/51-catholic-education-certificate/56-do-i-have-to-be-a-catholic-to-teach-in-a-catholic-maintained-school>

<sup>48</sup> Milliken, M., Bates, J. and Smith, A. (2021) Teaching on the Other Side: how identity affects the capacity for agency of teachers who have crossed the community divide in the Northern Ireland educational system. *Oxford Review of Education*

<sup>49</sup> Milliken, M., Bates, J. and Smith, A. (2021)

It has been argued that, in addition to Catholic schools in NI being recognised as “upholding a quite separate set of religious principles and values than ‘Protestant’ schools, the schools also provide a sense of confidence for each group that their cultural and political values will also be protected”.<sup>50</sup> On the CCMS website,<sup>51</sup> alongside more general principles such as Rights and Responsibilities, Solidarity and the Dignity of Work and the Rights of Workers, “Care for all of God’s Creation” is explicitly listed. As recently as January 2022, CCMS and the Catholic Schools’ Trustee Service (CSTS) published their future vision for Catholic Education, its ethos and values.<sup>52</sup> Signposting ambitions for inclusivity, excellence, extra-curricular activities, collaboration, and participation, it reaffirms how

**“Catholic education, rooted in the person of Jesus Christ, offers welcome, care and celebration of the unique identity of children and young people from all cultures, backgrounds and faiths.”**<sup>53</sup>

Simultaneously it cements the centrality of how “the Catholic Ethos informs all aspects of the school curriculum”,<sup>54</sup> “through increasing the awareness of Christian Values in all aspects of life and work of the school”.<sup>55</sup> Nonetheless, the Chief Executive of CCMS argues that “Catholic maintained schools - indeed all Catholic schools - are open to all faiths and none.”<sup>56</sup> His organisation heralds how

**“some parents and carers who do not subscribe to Catholicism or to any faith tradition or culture make the conscious decision to send their children to a Catholic school. They do so because they want their children educated within an integrated values-led curriculum, which promotes critical thinking within a moral framework and underpins high-quality learning and teaching with exceptional levels of pastoral care.”**<sup>57</sup>

#### 4.1.2 Controlled Schools

The Controlled Schools Support Council is clear about its faith credentials in its ethos<sup>58</sup> with an explicit mention of Christian morals and values.<sup>59</sup> While this sector also claims to be open to all faiths and none, it then explicitly sets out that this is in the context of Christian values and principles, albeit non-denominational.

While Catholic Maintained schools under the auspices of CCMS can be accepted as having a Catholic ethos, Controlled schools have their roots in the 1930s “when schools managed mainly by the Protestant churches were transferred to the state.”<sup>60</sup> Those schools became ‘state’ schools but the Protestant churches retained considerable control over them. This sector now contains a wider range of schools than those which initially transferred. There are 30 Controlled Integrated schools<sup>61</sup> and two Controlled Irish Medium schools, although those numbers are small in a sector of 560 schools.<sup>62</sup> Despite being called ‘state’ schools, they have generally been considered as effectively Protestant.<sup>63</sup> The Controlled Schools’ Support Council (CSSC), however, argue that “the proportion [of Protestants] is not as high as common perception may suggest.”<sup>64</sup>

So, are they Protestant schools? “There is little doubt as to the [Controlled] sector’s view of itself with relation to the Protestant faith”,<sup>65</sup> argue some researchers. They say that Principals in the Controlled sector, while emphasising its inclusive nature, are

**“...quick to suggest that the Christian faith is intrinsic to its schools and understand that this will be manifested within a Protestant tradition.”**<sup>66</sup>

This would seem to confirm that Controlled schools see themselves as representing Protestantism, just as much as Maintained schools represent Catholicism. Despite that, some point to a diminishing

**“Protestant involvement in schools in all areas, aspects and roles down at around 63.4% ...our schools are open to pupils from all denominations of Christianity, and our staff in teaching and non-teaching roles also include many who are not from the Protestant community.”**<sup>67</sup>

<sup>50</sup> Donnelly, C. (2012) ‘Defending Identity and Ethos: An Analysis of Teacher Perceptions of School Collaboration in Northern Ireland’, *Policy Futures in Education*, 10(5), pp.540–551. doi: 10.2304/pfie.2012.10.5.540. p541

<sup>51</sup> CCMS (2021) A call for Change: Time for Action. <http://www.onlineccms.com/index.php/2-uncategorised/400-a-call-for-change> p.5

<sup>52</sup> Catholic Council for Maintained School (CCMS) & Catholic Schools’ Trustee Service (CSTC) (2022)

<sup>53</sup> Catholic Council for Maintained School (CCMS) & Catholic Schools’ Trustee Service (CSTC) (2022). p.2

<sup>54</sup> Catholic Council for Maintained School (CCMS) & Catholic Schools’ Trustee Service (CSTC) (2022). p.7

<sup>55</sup> Catholic Council for Maintained School (CCMS) & Catholic Schools’ Trustee Service (CSTC) (2022). p.8

<sup>56</sup> Meredith, R. (2021) NI Education: No religious mix in ‘nearly a third of schools’ BBC. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-59242226>.

<sup>57</sup> Catholic Council for Maintained School (CCMS) & Catholic Schools’ Trustee Service (CSTC) (2022). p.11

<sup>58</sup> Controlled Schools’ Support Council (n.d.) *Ethos self-evaluation toolkit* <https://www.csscni.org.uk/sites/default/files/2019-10/Ethos%20toolkit%20part%201.docx> p.2.

<sup>59</sup> Controlled Schools’ Support Council (n.d.) *Part 2 Evaluation of ethos Post-primary schools* <https://www.csscni.org.uk/sites/default/files/2019-10/Ethos%20toolkit%20part%202%20post%20primary%20schools.docx> p.6.

<sup>60</sup> Controlled Schools’ Support Council (2017) *An analysis of the controlled education sector in Northern Ireland* <https://www.csscni.org.uk/sites/default/files/2019-10/Baseline%20analysis%20of%20the%20controlled%20education%20sector.pdf> p.2.

<sup>61</sup> Controlled Schools’ Support Council (2022) *Open to all* <https://www.csscni.org.uk/news/controlled-schools-are-open-to-all>

<sup>62</sup> CSSC (2017) p.7.

<sup>63</sup> Gallagher, T. and Duffy, G. (2015) Recognising difference while promoting cohesion: The role of collaborative networks in education. In Honohan, I. and Rougier, N. (eds) *Tolerance and Diversity in Ireland North and South*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, pp. 35–54.

<sup>64</sup> CSSC (2017) p.7.

<sup>65</sup> Gracie, A. and Brown, A. (2019) Controlled schools in Northern Ireland—de facto Protestant or de facto secular? *International Journal of Christianity & Education*, 23(3), pp.349–368. p.359.

<sup>66</sup> Gracie, A. and Brown, A. (2019), p.359.

<sup>67</sup> Northern Ireland Assembly (2021a) *Committee for Education OFFICIAL REPORT* (Hansard) Integrated Education Bill: Transferor Representatives’ Council 10 November 2021 <http://data.niassembly.gov.uk/HansardXml/committee-29174.pdf>, p.2.

Data, however, suggests that the 'many who are not from the Protestant community' is as low as 7% for teaching staff across NI's Controlled primary schools.<sup>68</sup> Despite this, some continue to argue that "the Controlled sector [is] more religiously mixed than even Grant-Maintained Integrated schools".<sup>69</sup> This assertion seems to be based on the proportion of Protestant pupils in Controlled schools which declined from 78.1% in 2004/05<sup>70</sup> to 63% in 2021/22. Whilst the sector promotes its welcoming ethos to all and while more Catholic pupils are enrolled in Controlled schools (3.8% in 2005-06, 7.5% now – growth which the addition of IME and Controlled Integrated schools may be partly responsible for), the larger change has been the growth of 'Other' (11.6% in 2005-06, 29.6% now).<sup>71</sup> There is no evidence to indicate that Catholic pupils are being attracted to Controlled schools in large numbers, even if they opt to be 'Other' rather than 'Catholic', and the figures do not suggest that it signifies a significant increase in religious mixing. The increase in 'Other' may be related to declining religiosity within Protestant churches,<sup>72</sup> and to a lesser extent in the Catholic population.<sup>73</sup> The Chief Executive of CSSC, answering a question as to whether the Controlled Sector was more integrated than the Integrated sector, was explicit in stating: "I am not going to tell you that the Controlled sector outperforms the Integrated sector [in terms of level of inclusion] because I do not have the data to tell you that".<sup>74</sup> Indeed, the data seems to contradict that idea entirely (Table 1).

**Table 1 - School Enrolments by Religion 2021-22**

**Table 1: Religion of pupils by school type and management type (2021-22)**

	% Protestant	% Catholic	% Other
<b>Controlled</b>			
Controlled Primary	58.5	7.9	33.6
Controlled Post-primary Non-Grammar *	73.3	4.6	22.1
Controlled Grammar	64.5	11.6	24.0
<b>Total Controlled</b>	<b>63.0</b>	<b>7.5</b>	<b>29.6</b>
<b>Catholic Maintained</b>			
Catholic Maintained Primary §	0.8	93.8	5.3
Catholic Maintained Post Primary	1.8	93.1	5.1
<b>Total Catholic Maintained</b>	<b>1.2</b>	<b>93.6</b>	<b>5.2</b>
<b>Other Maintained</b>			
Other Maintained Primary &	6.8	83.7	9.6
Other Maintained Post-primary (all Irish Medium Education (IME) schools)	0.4	93.6	5.9
<b>Integrated</b>			
Integrated Primary	31.2	33.6	35.2
Integrated Post-primary	39.0	35.5	25.5
<b>Total Integrated</b>	<b>35.5</b>	<b>34.7</b>	<b>30.0</b>
<b>Grammar</b>			
Voluntary Grammar Schools under Catholic Management	1.4	94.5	4.1
Voluntary Grammar Schools under Other Management	56.6	15.2	28.2

**Key**

- \* Excluding Controlled Integrated and Other Maintained
- § Two Catholic Maintained primary schools are Irish Medium schools
- & All Other Maintained Primary schools are IME schools, except for two

**Source:** Calculated from NISRA data (2022) Annual enrolments at schools and in funded pre-school education in Northern Ireland 2021/22 Table 5 (Revised 1st March 2022) <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/annual-enrolments-at-schools-and-in-funded-preschool-education-in-northern-ireland-2021-22>

### 4.1.3 Voluntary Grammar Schools

Many Voluntary grammar schools have their origins as schools established by churches. Non-Catholic Voluntary grammar schools would claim to be non-denominational but their names often reflect their religious roots. Examples include Methodist College, Belfast or Friends' School, Lisburn. Others were established as Anglican establishments, such as the Royal schools at Dungannon and Armagh. Some of those with a Catholic ethos were established by religious orders. In the past these schools often shared a campus with a convent and it was from there that many of the teachers were drawn. The shared support body for Voluntary grammar schools, the Governing Bodies Association (GBA), represents both those with a Catholic ethos and those with a non-denominational ethos. Perhaps that explains why it does not try to project a common ethos for these very different sorts of schools, instead concentrating on providing support for all the schools and making strong representations in favour of academic selection. The GBA note that it is schools' individual "governing bodies [that] are the managing authorities of the schools and required by their foundation documents to promote the values on which they are based".<sup>75</sup> Despite the support body being careful not to present a particular ethos, many Voluntary grammar schools are explicit about their Christian ethos on websites and in promotional literature.

### 4.1.4 Integrated Schools

The Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education (NICIE) represents a school movement which uniquely aims for a mixed intake with regards community background. They promote "equality in sharing between and within the diverse groups that compose the school community" and have a particularly developed vision of partnership with parents as "a fundamental element of Integrated Education [as] historically, parents have been central to the development of integrated schools". All of this, however, is within the context of "a Christian based rather than a secular approach... where those of all faiths and none are respected, acknowledged and accepted as valued members of the school community".<sup>76</sup>

### 4.1.5 Irish Medium Schools

The last of the main school types considered is Irish Medium Education (IME), represented by Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta (CnaG). Unusually for NI, its 'vision' neither mentions nor hints at religion. It aims for "excellence in education, at the heart of developing Irish Language communities".<sup>77</sup> While largely attended by members of the Catholic community in NI,<sup>78</sup> the wider Irish Medium sector in the Republic of Ireland is proactively trying to create more diverse schools. A 2017 study found that 9.6% of Irish Medium primary school pupils were "new Irish", newcomers without English as their first language and often non-Catholics. Over a quarter of the pupils in one Irish Medium primary school in County Cavan were "new Irish".<sup>79</sup> In NI, there have been efforts to change a prevailing perception that Irish Medium education is only for one section of the community with the opening in 2021 of an Irish Medium Nursery school in East Belfast, a predominantly Protestant area.<sup>80</sup> Additionally, 72% of all Irish medium primary schools lie outside the Controlled or Catholic Maintained sector, giving them a certain independence.<sup>81</sup> Nonetheless, whilst IME is still largely identified with Nationalist areas, links to any church seem not to be a factor in the expressed ethos of these schools.

<sup>68</sup> Milliken, M., Bates, J. and Smith, A. (2021) Teaching across the divide: Perceived barriers to the movement of teachers across the traditional sectors in Northern Ireland, *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 69(2), pp.133-154, p.149.

<sup>69</sup> Gracie, A. and Brown, A.W. (2019), p.350.

<sup>70</sup> Controlled Schools' Support Council (2019) *Key Statistics – update 2018/19* <https://www.csscni.org.uk/publications/cssc-controlled-schools-key-statistics> p.6.

<sup>71</sup> DENI (2006) Enrolments at schools and in funded pre-school education in Northern Ireland 2005/06. <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/de/enrolments-0506-final.pdf>

<sup>72</sup> McCartney, M. and Glass, D. (2014) *The decline of religious belief in post-World War II Northern Ireland*. Newtownabbey: University of Ulster. <https://docplayer.net/22475448-The-decline-of-religious-belief-in-post-world-war-ii-northern-ireland.html>

<sup>73</sup> McGarry, P. (2021) 'A possible disaster': Catholic Church reckons with declining interest post-pandemic. *The Irish Times* 7.5.21 <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/social-affairs/religion-and-beliefs/a-possible-disaster-catholic-church-reckons-with-declining-interest-post-pandemic-14557615>

<sup>74</sup> Northern Ireland Assembly (2021b) *Committee for Education Official report* (Hansard) Integrated Education Bill: Controlled Schools' Support Council: <http://data.niassembly.gov.uk/HansardXML/committee-29224.pdf>, p.10

<sup>75</sup> <https://www.gbani.org/about/voluntary-grammar-schools/>

<sup>76</sup> <https://www.nicie.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/Statement-of-Principles1.pdf>

<sup>77</sup> <https://www.comhairle.org/english/about/about-us/>

<sup>78</sup> DENI (2020) School Enrolments 2020-21 statistical bulletins: Table 5.

<sup>79</sup> <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/education/Revised%2028%20May%202021%20-%20Annual%20enrolments%20at%20schools%20and%20in%20funded%20prescho...pdf>

<sup>80</sup> Donnelly, K. (2017) Irish yes, but not always Catholic, *Irish Independent*.

<sup>81</sup> <https://www.independent.ie/irish-news/education/irish-yes-but-not-always-catholic-35594309.html>

<sup>80</sup> <https://www.scoilnaseolta.org/>

<sup>81</sup> Belfast Telegraph (2013) *Benefit of Irish Medium Education is there for all*. 24th July 2013 <https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/opinion/columnists/benefit-of-irish-medium-education-is-there-for-all-29443404.html>

#### 4.1.6 Is a divided faith ethos a ‘soft-barrier’ to communities coming together?

Some argue that a faith ethos in schools, wherever they are located, supports community reconciliation, and that churches, far from being the problem, have had an important role in promoting cohesion. The Catholic Church, for example, argues that the faith-based ethos in their schools is not designed

“... to oppose other cultures and religious faiths, but to engage in dialogue with them ... providing friendly contacts between pupils of different characters and backgrounds ... [which] encourages mutual understanding”.<sup>82</sup>

However, other sources suggest that some schools emphasise ‘faith formation’ as their core role,<sup>83</sup> which appears to undermine the argument above.

While all the churches claim that the current Maintained and Controlled sectors are already providing mixed schooling, some are sceptical. Following challenges from both the Catholic church authorities and representatives of the Protestant churches on legislation intended to promote Integrated education ...

“the message delivered ...from the churches was one of how our schools are already integrated, diverse and inclusive. In short, they feel precious little need to change ...[but, their stance against the Integrated Education Bill is] ...opposing more schools where Catholic, Protestant and those of all faiths, or none at all, are educated together and opposing a core commitment of the Good Friday Agreement.”<sup>84</sup>

Despite attempts to argue that the present system is inclusive and mixed, it is clear that the system of education in NI is fundamentally divided between the two main communities in NI along traditional community lines with 93% of children and young people in NI educated alongside others overwhelmingly from their own, often separate, communities.<sup>85</sup>

<sup>82</sup> Gravissimum Educationis, 1965

<sup>83</sup> Maney, J.S., King, C. and Kiely, T.J. (2017) Who do you say you are: Relationships and faith in Catholic schools. *Journal of Catholic Education*, 21(1), pp.36-61.

<sup>84</sup> Bain, M (2021) Churches are hampering the drive for integrated education: Baroness Blood. Campaigner says religious leaders are ‘failing yet another generation’. Belfast Telegraph 17.11.21 <https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/baroness-may-blood-hits-out-at-churches-over-absence-of-support-on-integrated-education-in-ni-41058186.html>

<sup>85</sup> Campbell, B. (2021) *A Study of Religious Residential Segregation in Northern Ireland, 1981-2011* [https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Brad\\_Campbell4/publication/343222368\\_A\\_Study\\_of\\_Religious\\_Residential\\_Segregation\\_in\\_Northern\\_Ireland\\_1981-2011/links/5f1d87f992851cd5fa48f021/A-Study-of-Religious-Residential-Segregation-in-Northern-Ireland-1981-2011](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Brad_Campbell4/publication/343222368_A_Study_of_Religious_Residential_Segregation_in_Northern_Ireland_1981-2011/links/5f1d87f992851cd5fa48f021/A-Study-of-Religious-Residential-Segregation-in-Northern-Ireland-1981-2011)



## 5. The Future

None of this discussion is meant to detract from churches and the work that they do with their parishioners nor from whatever legitimate steps they may take to defend and promote their faith. The dominance, however, that churches continue to have on educational experiences for all children in NI far exceeds their influence elsewhere in society. The question remains whether society in NI wants schools, paid for by public money, to be run along religious lines, often factionalised into smaller religious affiliations.

The idiosyncrasies of such factionalisation have, in every sense, been costly. For example, the long exception of schools from Fair Employment legislation is likely to have contributed to the segregation of teaching and other staff in many schools, limiting the variation of approach and pupil experience that might otherwise have been possible.<sup>86</sup> As this changed in 2022, more diverse staffrooms might be expected to emerge over time and, with that mixed workforce, there may be a knock-on effect on school ethos. Additionally, the 2022 Integrated Education Act may impact on ethos. That Act defines an Integrated school as one which “intentionally supports, protects and advances an ethos of diversity, respect and understanding between those of different cultures and religious beliefs and of none, between those of different socio-economic backgrounds and between those of different abilities.”<sup>87</sup> The Department of Education's expanded legal duties regarding Integrated Education,<sup>88</sup> may move more schools towards meeting that definition. There may be optimism and, in some quarters concern, that the ethos at the heart of Integrated Education may be more widely promoted and adopted within the education system.

There are many instances worldwide where schools have an ethos based on shared human values but are not under the governance of any religious authority. One such is happening elsewhere on this island. Educate Together schools in the Republic of Ireland are a small but growing sector, displacing schools previously under the governance of churches, particularly the Catholic Church. Their Ethos Handbook does not mention any religion by name, but it does portray an ethos of nurture and care, with strong moral underpinnings. It states that Educate Together schools are “equality-based ... child-centred/learner-centred ...co-educational ...[and] democratically run with active participation by parents.”<sup>89</sup>

An explicitly Christian ethos is required by law for all publicly-funded schools in NI; schools in NI are not permitted to be secular.<sup>90</sup> However, despite that requirement remaining in place today, arguably, a more secular approach which does not promote any religion but is truly open to all children and young people of any faith and none, is worth exploring. In NI, we have a school system with schools in different sectors, each claiming to have a distinct ethos. And yet the core principles of each are similar. They include aspirations such as tolerance, respect for diversity, acknowledgement and respect for the rights of others: all core values of a liberal democracy. To have a school system which has the learner at the centre, and involving the learner, and his/her family, in the effective running of the school also seems desirable. Effective schools might be considered those which aspire to be caring, and also effective organisations. Perhaps a positive and inclusive school ethos is really just ‘good practice’ and it is that which is valued by parents and learners, sought for by inspectors and promoted by schools.

<sup>86</sup> Milliken, M., Bates, J. and Smith, A. (2021)

<sup>87</sup> The National Archives (2022) *Integrated Education Act (Northern Ireland) 2022* <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ni/2022/15/section/1/enacted>

<sup>88</sup> The National Archives (2022) *Integrated Education Act (NI) 2022*. <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/en/ni/2022/15/contents>

<sup>89</sup> O'Brien, S. 2020. Ethos SSE in Educate Together Schools – Handbook. Dublin: Dublin City University, Centre for Evaluation, Quality and Inspection (EQI) and Educate Together. [https://www.educatetogether.ie/app/uploads/2021/10/2021-Ethos-SSE-in-Educate-Together-Schools-Handbook\\_2021-1.pdf](https://www.educatetogether.ie/app/uploads/2021/10/2021-Ethos-SSE-in-Educate-Together-Schools-Handbook_2021-1.pdf)

<sup>90</sup> The National Archives (2022) *Education Reform Order 1989* <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/nisi/1989/2406/part/VI/chapter/1>



**transforming education**

Report 16  
Published September 2022

## School Ethos in Northern Ireland



Sammy Taggart and Stephen Roulston  
Ulster University  
Cromore Rd  
Coleraine  
BT52 1SA  
[www.ulster.ac.uk](http://www.ulster.ac.uk)



Integrated Education Fund  
Forestview  
Purdy's Lane  
Belfast  
BT8 7AR  
[www.ief.org.uk](http://www.ief.org.uk)

Supported by



Brian & Sue Dickie

