

Challenges of immigrant religious diversity in Irish schools

Iseult Honohan and Nathalie Rougier – University College Dublin

Irish society has become more diverse in terms of nationality, language, ethnicity and religious affiliation, as **immigrants increased from 3% of the population in 1993 to 10% in 2006**, originating from over 188 countries. This has posed certain challenges for schools with limited prior experience of dealing with ethnic and cultural diversity. There is **no evidence of school segregation** in relation to immigrant students relative to international comparisons, as most immigrant students are quite broadly dispersed, and in schools with a low proportion of newcomers. There is a **substantial mix of nationalities within individual schools** which, while positive, also offers greater challenges for schools, given the new variety of linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

Education in Ireland is organised on a largely denominational basis, while primarily funded by the state. Thus, while most schools are managed by the Catholic Church, there are also Protestant, Jewish, Muslim and multi-denominational schools. However, **religious diversity among newcomer pupils is also a challenge for the largely denominational Irish school system**: four out of five primary schools now cater for pupils from at least two religious backgrounds, with one-in-six catering for children of at least six different faiths.

A number of issues have raised debates relevant to tolerance in the area of **curriculum, pedagogy and general educational culture**. The most important of these has been **the place of religion in the curriculum** in the great majority of primary schools. By law, schools *can* and *must* teach the 'integrated curriculum', in which religion is integrated with other subjects throughout the school day. **The integrated religious curriculum in 98% of Irish primary schools** is increasingly seen as endangering the freedom of religion of children who do not want to be exposed to doctrinal teaching. An 'opt-out clause' allows exemptions from a subject which is contrary to the conscience of parent or student. However, 'opting out' is not a viable solution when an integrated curriculum is taught.

Both the religiously integrated curriculum and religious management of schools have been addressed by the **Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector**.

With regard to **practices and interactions in schools**, bullying and racism have been mentioned as contributing a lot or quite a lot to difficulties among newcomer students. While bullying or discrimination on the ground of religion have not made the headlines in the school context, a significant debate about **the wearing of the Muslim headscarf** arose in May 2008.

This policy brief outlines issues arising in relation to Ireland's new Muslim population with regard to education, specifically support for Muslim schools, and the accommodation of Muslim pupils within mainstream schools with respect to curriculum and dress.

Key Findings

The 2006 census showed that there were **32,539 Muslims in Ireland, a 70% increase since 2002**. Unlike the UK and France for instance, there is no dominant national or ethnic background within the Muslim community. Initial Muslim settlement from the 1950s was primarily of students or others with high educational and professional backgrounds. Since the 1990s, Muslim immigration diversified to include refugees from Bosnia, Somalia and Kosovo, asylum-seekers from Nigeria, Algeria, Libya and Iraq, and economic migrants from across the world. It is estimated that now one third of the Muslim community are Irish citizens.

Table 1 - Change in population classified by RELIGION between 2002 and 2006 (CSO, 2007)

Population	2002	2006	% change 2002 - 2006
	Thousands		%
Roman Catholic	3,462.6	3,681.4	6,3
Church of Ireland (incl. Protestant)	115.6	125.6	8,6
Muslim (Islamic)	19.1	32.5	69,9
Other Christian religion	21.4	29.2	36,5
Presbyterian	20.6	23.5	14,4
Methodist	10.0	12.2	21,2
Jewish	1.8	1.9	7,8
No religion	138.3	186.3	34,8

There has been limited research on Muslims in Ireland, and few surveys on the *perception of Muslims* in Ireland. A 2006 poll of Muslims themselves revealed that more than two thirds felt Islam was compatible with Irish life and **77% felt accepted**, although a minority of young Irish Muslims took a more negative view of Ireland. In general, the Irish media have been rather indifferent, which may reflect a certain isolation of Muslims from the mainstream community.

Initially the Irish Muslim community experienced very little overt prejudice, but in 2006 the EUMC reported that members of Muslim communities were more vulnerable to prejudice and discrimination than before and the National Consultative Committee on Racism and Interculturalism (NCCRI) Racist Incidents reports (2001-08) identified instances of racism as a result of 9/11, and discrimination against Muslims on the basis of their religion, ranging from verbal abuse to physical assault.

Muslims in Ireland

...one third of the Muslim community is represented by Irish people... and what will you say to them... you can't use tolerance of them and you can't use integration either because it's... it's theirs... there is a need for a revolution of terms...

(AS - interviewee, March 2011)

... they did great work [the NCCRI]... they were a great team of people and they challenged, they really did... the misconceptions, all that... both sides of the facts, they challenged it... I believe they did great work and now we're at a loss, we're lost without them...

(SK - interviewee, March 2011)

While the events of 9/11 and July 2005 in London have raised the Irish public's awareness of Islam in a negative manner, there have been some efforts both by the state and by Muslim representatives to educate the public about Islam in order to counter negative stereotypes and to address concerns about fundamentalism and militancy.

Separate schools for Muslims have been awarded state funding on a basis similar to other religious denominations. **There are currently two Muslim state-funded primary schools in Dublin:** the Muslim National School, set up by the Islamic Foundation of Ireland (IFI) in 1990 and the North Dublin Muslim School, established in 2001. Both follow the 'normal' Irish school curriculum, but have an Islamic ethos, teaching Arabic and Qur'anic studies. In order to cater for the spiritual and religious education of children who do not attend a Muslim school, other part-time schools have been established.

There are **no Muslim secondary schools in Ireland**, so Muslim children in secondary education (as well as the majority of Muslim children in primary education) attend mainstream Irish schools, which are mainly denominational (over 90% Catholic). Schools that are single-sex and have a religious ethos are often attractive to Muslims. Because numbers are still low, **some local accommodations appear to have been relatively easily made**, for example, by allowing students to leave religious education classes, and, sometimes, to use rooms for prayer.

In Ireland, there are **no rules limiting the wearing of Muslim dress**, and it is now quite common to see Muslim women and men in religious dress, particularly in Dublin. For women, this is mainly the hijab and jilbab; with a smaller number wearing the niqab. **Most schools came to permit the hijab**, as long as it was in the school's uniform colours, although there was no consensus on the issue.

Controversy arose in May 2008, when the parents of a 14-year-old girl requested that she be allowed to wear the headscarf to school in Gorey, Co. Wexford. The principal accommodated her, but was concerned, in the absence of national guidelines or policy, that she might encounter difficulties if she transferred to another school. **He wrote to the Department of Education seeking guidance and requesting 'official' guidelines on the issue.** The publication of the correspondence between the Department and the Principal made this a national issue, and the subject of fiery debates and controversy among commentators, politicians and Muslims themselves.

Muslim education in Ireland

Controversies around the hijab in Irish schools

Guidelines to schools

In September 2008, the Ministers for Education and for Integration jointly agreed recommendations on school uniform policy, formulated on the basis of a consultation process and taking account of the legal position in Ireland. The recommendations were that:

1. The current system, whereby schools decide their uniform policy at a local level, is reasonable, works and should be maintained.
2. In this context, no school uniform policy should act in such a way that it, in effect, excludes students of a particular religious background from seeking enrolment or continuing their enrolment in a school. However, this statement does not recommend the wearing of clothing in the classroom which obscures a facial view and creates an artificial barrier between pupil and teacher. Such clothing hinders proper communication.
3. Schools, when drawing up uniform policy, should consult widely in the school community.
4. Schools should take note of the obligations placed on them by the Equal Status Acts before setting down a school uniform policy. They should also be mindful of the Education Act, 1998. As previously mentioned, this obliges boards of management to take account of 'the principles and requirements of a democratic society and have respect and promote respect for the diversity of values, beliefs, traditions, languages and ways of life in society'. (Department of Education, 2008)

In September 2010, Guidelines were issued for Catholic schools by the Joint Managerial Body of Catholic secondary schools on how best to integrate students of other faiths. They too emphasised 'accommodation and dialogue' between schools and parents, and, most significantly, drew a distinction between the hijab, which is accepted in Catholic schools, and the niqab, the full veil worn over the face, which is not.

This hijab debate occurred in a country which has not seen any prohibition on headscarves in schools or public places. This contrasts with those European countries where the headscarf has been a major issue or even banned in schools. It also represents a touchstone in the contemporary debates on school diversity in Ireland – debates on both the new diversity *within* schools and the growing diversity *of* (types of) schools. It involved not only practical but also legal challenges, and was hotly debated in the media and the political arena. At the same time, this issue represented a diversity challenge to Irish education, as it engaged with a primarily religious minority that was relatively new and mainly of

... Why would you have to be tolerant at all... we are the same as you... in terms of going to school, we are going for an education like everyone else, we are people... we just wear a headscarf... I don't know why you have to use the word 'tolerant' towards us... that's kind of discriminating already...

(Z - interviewee, April 2011)

Four out of five primary schools now cater for pupils from at least two religious backgrounds, with one-in-six catering for children of at least six different faiths

immigrant origin, and also raised the issue of the recognition of religious minorities' rights to education. It served as a touchstone for wider debates about Islam, identity and immigration in Ireland – until then the Muslim community had been not only well integrated but also relatively ignored.

This debate brought out to a greater extent than any previous event a range of views on the new religious and cultural diversity, and casts light on the state of tolerance in Ireland. The discussion was framed principally in terms of three sets of issues:

a) **gender rights - protecting vs. rejecting the veiled woman** - Media commentaries covered the full spectrum of feminist perspectives, with contributors voicing either support for, or absolute opposition to, the hijab in Irish schools (and Irish society), while invoking women's and/or individuals' 'rights'. This included the issues of freedom of religion, and the risk of gender and religious discrimination in access to education for girls who might be excluded on this ground.

b) **integration vs. segregation** - the debate went beyond the question of the headscarf in schools. It also embodied the first controversy concerning the Muslim presence and potential claims for recognition in Ireland, and, more broadly, Ireland's coming to terms with the fact that it was now a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and multi-religious society.

c) **the place of religion in school and beyond** – If the hijab debate was not *only* about religion, however, it was *also* about religion, about how faith and religious beliefs are expressed, acknowledged and valued/respected. Unlike France or Turkey where the state has consciously been constructed as secular, Ireland has always enjoyed a close relationship with religious institutions, notably the Catholic Church and this special history resulted in rather unique arguments both *for* and *against* the hijab in Irish schools.

While this debate demonstrated a **generally tolerant attitude towards headscarves in schools** - with some dissenting voices - **almost unanimous intolerance towards the niqab in school** (so far hypothetical in school, though increasingly present in society) was noteworthy, however.

Interpreting this event in terms of a spectrum of acceptance, ranging from intolerance through tolerance to respect or recognition, we may see it as reflecting general tolerance of the hijab in Irish schools (if conditional on each school's assessment of the situation) to hypothetical intolerance of the niqab by all education actors.

Main issues/questions raised by the hijab in Irish schools

Gender & Rights

Integration

Religion in schools

Key Messages for Policy Makers

- ***Religious diversity***
This is here to stay, despite a slowing down of immigration to Ireland. In particular, it should be recognized that there is now a substantial population of Irish Muslim citizens.
- ***Intercultural approaches***
There is considerable support for *interculturalism*, defined as the ‘*development of strategy, policy and practices that promote interaction, understanding, respect and integration between different cultures and ethnic groups on the basis that cultural diversity is a strength that can enrich society, without glossing over issues such as racism*’ (NCCRI, 2006); this language and policy should be maintained, rather than a more assimilatory approach to integration.
- ***Educational structures***
Education will be a key area of religious diversity challenges, starting from the central question whether schools should be religious or non-religious, and managed by the state or otherwise. Rather than a single model, the solution arrived at should provide for both diversity of types of school and diversity among pupils within schools.
- ***Teacher training for diversity***
Teachers in all schools will need to deal with religious and cultural diversity; thus courses in this area should be compulsory for all teachers as part of their training.
- ***Religion and the curriculum***
The requirement for a religiously integrated curriculum should be removed. Proposed courses in world religions and ethics should be introduced; these will provide greater recognition of religious diversity, but may cause issues for some religious groups, including Muslims and Muslim schools.
- ***Accommodation of Muslim students in school***
Further matters will need to be addressed especially as more children reach secondary level, both within mainstream schools, and in potential separate schools. The headscarf debate may be succeeded by debates on the niqab and other accommodation issues.
- ***Facilitating interaction***
Minority groups need to be facilitated in dealing with institutions by bodies filling the role previously filled by the NCCRI, such as, for example, the Minority Religion Group of the National Parents Council.

Methodology

The case study comprised desk research and empirical fieldwork. The desk research consisted of collecting and analysing available statistical data, over 80 media items (newspaper articles, TV and radio recordings), Oireachtas debates (Dáil and Senate debates), official reports, legal documents, position papers, and academic works. The fieldwork consisted of semi-structured qualitative interviews and a discussion group and was for the most part conducted in the Dublin area.

Eleven interviews were conducted between March and June 2011 with education experts, religious representatives, school principals, representatives from organisations involved in education, parents, Muslim representatives and Muslim third-level students wearing the hijab. A discussion group on 'The embodiment of tolerance in discourses and practices addressing cultural diversity in schools' was organised with experts in the field of education and/or immigration on Thursday 30 June 2011 in Dublin. In addition to the two researchers from the Irish ACCEPT Team, 8 people took part. With the participants' agreement, the 2-hour session was recorded.

Data from the secondary sources gathered during the desk research and empirical data gathered through both the interviews and the discussion group were combined to provide a comprehensive picture of the challenge to tolerance in Irish education. The qualitative data were analysed using a critical discourse analysis approach (Wodak, 2001; Wodak and Meyer, 2009) to examine the main argumentation strategies (discursive topoi) through which the event and its repercussions were constructed and debated.

Further reading

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- Smyth, E. Darmody, M. McGinnity, F. and Byrne, D. (2009) *Adapting to Diversity: Irish Schools and Newcomer Students*, Research Series Number 8. Dublin: ESRI.

Project Identity

Acronym:	ACCEPT PLURALISM
Title:	Tolerance, Pluralism and Social Cohesion: Responding to the Challenges of the 21st Century in Europe
Short Description:	<p>ACCEPT PLURALISM questions how much cultural diversity can be accommodated within liberal and secular democracies in Europe. The notions of tolerance, acceptance, respect and recognition are central to the project. ACCEPT PLURALISM looks at both native and immigrant minority groups.</p> <p>Through comparative, theoretical and empirical analysis the project studies individuals, groups or practices for whom tolerance is sought but which we should not tolerate; of which we disapprove but which should be tolerated; and for which we ask to go beyond toleration and achieve respect and recognition.</p> <p>In particular, we investigate when, what and who is being not tolerated / tolerated / respected in 15 European countries; why this is happening in each case; the reasons that different social actors put forward for not tolerating / tolerating / respecting specific minority groups/individuals and specific practices.</p> <p>The project analyses practices, policies and institutions, and produces key messages for policy makers with a view to making European societies more respectful towards diversity.</p>
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EC officer:	Ms Louisa Anastopoulou, Project Officer