

# Education in the UK

## Ukrainian Government Conference on Education, January 2006

### 1 Introduction

I feel greatly honoured to be asked to present a paper at this conference. I hope that what I share about the experience of education in England may prove to be some help to you as you consider the education system of your great country.

This paper will focus on education in schools in England and will make only occasional references to the situations in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. The intention is to present as clear a picture as possible of a particular context and this is best achieved by concentrating on England as the country in which almost 75 per cent of all schools in the UK are located.

It will study in turn: (i) the system of different kinds of schools, (ii) the provision made for religious education in state schools and (iii) the provision made for the ethical dimension of education.

### 2 Schools in England

#### 2.1 The Main Categories of Schools in England

Schools may be divided administratively and financially into the following broad categories:

- **Mainstream state schools:** These are schools that work in partnership with other schools and with local education authorities from which they receive funding. 85 per cent of all schools are in this category and they provide for 91 per cent of all school pupils.[\[1\]](#)
- **Mainstream independent schools:** These schools do not receive funding from the local education authority. 9 per cent of all schools are in this category and they provide for 7 per cent of all school pupils.
- **Special schools:** These are schools for children with special educational needs who cannot be educated satisfactorily in an ordinary school. Some of these are state schools and some are independent. 4 per cent of all schools are in this category and they provide for 1 per cent of all school pupils.

**Home education:** In addition to schools, it should be noted that there is legal provision for parents to educate their children at home if they wish to do so. At the present time, about 50,000 children in the UK of compulsory educational age (0.5 per cent) are educated at home.[\[2\]](#)

#### 2.2 The Religious Character of Schools

##### 2.2.1 The Independent Schools

As might be expected, many of the independent schools have a faith basis and this is usually, but not always, Christian. Most of them are long-established schools at both primary and secondary levels and they include the prestigious (and expensive!) schools of Eton, Harrow and Rugby.

There has also been a significant development in the past thirty years or so of about 100 small new Christian schools being established, mostly at primary level. Most of these schools are very small but it is noteworthy that their academic performance has often placed them at or near the top of the league in their local education authority area.

##### 2.2.2 The State Schools

What is often surprising to people from other countries is the discovery that many of the state schools in England are church schools, especially at primary level, and, even more surprising, that both collective worship and religious education are required by law in *all* state schools, whether church or not.

The state education system is a dual system. The state provides education in schools run by different religious denominations (Church of England, Roman Catholic, Jewish, etc) and in schools which are non-denominational.

Approximately one in every three state primary schools and one in every six state secondary schools are faith-based in the country as a whole.

It is important to note that the state schools that are not listed as being faith-based are not necessarily secular. They may in some cases be very Christian without being denominational, i.e. without being identified as being Church of England or Roman Catholic or of another denomination or faith. Their Christian ethos may come more from the faith commitment of their headteacher and a sufficient proportion of their teaching staff rather than from whether a particular denomination owns the school buildings or is responsible for admission arrangements.

### 2.2.3 The Government Welcomes New Faith-Based Schools

In September 2001, the Government announced that it welcomes new faith-based schools into the state sector in places where there is clear local agreement.<sup>[3]</sup> This applies particularly at secondary level where plans were put in place to work towards doubling the number of faith-based schools and lowering the financial commitment required of their religious funding bodies.

These new schools may be either church schools or schools set up by non-Christian faith communities. Not only are Muslims and those of other non-Christian traditions interested in setting up new schools or in bringing existing schools into the state sector, some Christian denominations, especially the Church of England, are also planning to increase significantly the number of their schools in the state sector.

Muslims are particularly eager to have state funding for more of their schools. In many places, Muslims are more in favour of schools which have an explicit faith basis, even one that they do not themselves share, than of schools which claim to have no faith basis and effectively promote secularism as an alternative to religious faith. They may choose a church school for their children simply because it recognizes the importance of faith.

The church schools and other faith-based schools have a distinctive ethos and character and they have tended to do better than other schools in terms of their academic results.<sup>[4]</sup> They are proving popular with parents, including those of religious outlooks which are different from that of the school's governing body and those of no religious commitment.

It is important to note here that being faith-based does not mean that a school is necessarily closed to pupils from other Christian denominations or other faith communities or to those of no religious commitment. The Church of England has always believed that its duty is to open its school doors to the local community. In some areas, church schools are so popular that it is difficult to get children accepted unless their parents are regular church attenders. In other areas, especially in the inner city areas of Birmingham or Bradford where the local community may be predominantly Muslim, the church primary schools have mostly Muslim children.

However, the Government initiative has not proved universally popular and there has been some strong opposition expressed in the media, especially by people of a more secularist outlook.

Because of ongoing concerns for good relations among the different faith communities in the country, the years since 2001 have seen not only an increase in the number of faith-based schools but also ongoing controversy in the media concerning their desirability. In spite of this, a new Education Act is currently being prepared by the Government which aims to give state schools increasing independence and to provide for more faith-based schools to be set up within the state education system.

### 2.2.4 Can Faith-Based Schools be Distinctive without being Divisive?

The answer to this question depends partly on how inclusive or exclusive is the purpose of faith-based education. The Church of England aims to combine an emphasis on the nurture of children from church-going families with one on service to all in the local community, regardless of their faith perspectives. This balance comes through in a recent report on church schools:

'Church schools are places where the faith is lived, and which therefore offer opportunities to pupils and their families to explore the truths of the Christian faith, to develop spiritually and morally, and to have a basis for choice about Christian commitment. They are places where the beliefs and practices of other faiths will be respected.'<sup>[5]</sup>

Living the faith should, I suggest, find expression in the whole ethos of the school – the atmosphere that pervades it but is difficult to express in words – and in not only its written curriculum but also the hidden curriculum of the values that it upholds, and not only in the explicitly religious education that it provides but in every subject area of the curriculum.

Faith-based schools may become narrowly tribal, promoting attitudes of suspicion towards others outside the 'tribe' and indoctrinating their pupils into closed attitudes of mind which do not respect fellow human beings. They *may* be divisive but they do not *need* to be divisive. My personal experience is of being brought up in the Republic of Ireland and receiving my secondary education in a Roman Catholic school although I was from a Church of Ireland (Protestant) family. Indeed, for most of my time in the school, I was the only person who was not a Roman Catholic. I gained immensely from the experience because, although the school was very distinctively Roman Catholic, the attitude of the

teachers and of the other students was so open towards me and my different family background. I was valued as a fellow human being made in the image of God and warmly welcomed as a member of the school community. As a result, I gained a deeper understanding of what it is to have a Roman Catholic faith without being put under pressure to change my denomination.

### **3. Religious Education in the State Schools of England**

#### **3.1 Issues in Religious Education**

I will focus in this section on issues in the teaching of Religious Education as a school subject.

##### **3.1.1 Religious Diversity**

Plurality is a fact of life in contemporary England. There is diversity among Christians in that they hold sometimes widely differing beliefs about matters that may seem quite central for them and this has been the case through the history of the Christian faith. The presence of significant numbers of those who follow non-Christian faiths and of those who identify themselves as not holding any religious beliefs make plurality even more a fact of life.

The quality of life in a plural society depends on people learning to live together and to respect each other's rights without feeling that they are compromising their own deeply held beliefs. A main function of education today in increasingly plural societies must therefore be to prepare children to live in a plural world. Religious Education, perhaps more than any other school subject, studies the deeply held beliefs and cherished practices of different communities within a society. This makes the work of the teacher of RE both centrally important and very demanding. It requires ways of approaching religious plurality (both within faiths and between them as well as with those of no religious faith) which do all of the following:

- enable children and young people to make up their own minds about religious faith;
- respect the rights and wishes of parents;
- do not conflict with the teacher's own beliefs and values;
- promote harmony and respect between people of differing beliefs and practices;
- promote the values of respect for truth and respect for persons;
- respect the integrity of the different religions and do not misrepresent them; and
- enable people to learn from one another and their different beliefs and practices.

I suggest that ways of approaching religious plurality which do all of these things are needed just as much in single-faith schools where the majority of staff and students share a particular religious perspective as in schools where teachers and students of different religious and perspectives and of none work together. Even if the school has a strong adherence to a particular religious denomination, it has to prepare children and young people to live in a plural world without compromising their deeply held beliefs and values.

##### **3.1.2 Indoctrination and Commitment**

Truth matters to all religious people, indeed it matters to all human beings. We want to believe things because they are true and not simply because it is fashionable to believe them. If we believe that certain things are true, then we probably want other people to come to believe them too. We want other people to believe things that are true, not things that are false.

Some people conclude from this that religious commitment may be a handicap in religious education. Indeed, it may lead teachers to attempt to indoctrinate their pupils into their beliefs. Because they are not 'neutral' in matters of religion, they will seek to 'impose' their religious beliefs on others and this, it is sometimes said, is particularly dangerous when dealing with children and young people.

The difficulty with this view is that it is just as much a problem for the person who does not have a religious belief as for the one who does. It is arguable that there is no 'neutral' position in matters of religion – even the person with no religious belief may indoctrinate others into their view of religion. Even if our beliefs are atheistic or agnostic, they are beliefs about the truth and falsity of religious beliefs and we may teach in such a way that these beliefs are imparted to our pupils in an indoctrinatory manner.

Far from being a handicap, I suggest, the teacher's personal faith commitment can actually be a positive resource in the classroom. The teacher's faith commitment can serve to demonstrate to pupils how important faith can be in a person's life without the teacher imposing his or her beliefs on them. He or she may live their faith in a way that is open without being compelling pupils to adopt it for the wrong or inadequate reasons, e.g. simply because the teacher holds it.

## 4 Ethical Education in the State Schools of England

Personal, moral and social education has long been an element in education in schools in England. Since 1988, this has been formalised in a legal requirement on state schools to promote the spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development of pupils.

This development of the whole person is also seen as a whole school issue - it cannot be restricted to RE and become thereby the responsibility only of those involved in that aspect of school life. Also clearly important to personal development, taking place as it does through personal relationships, is the ethos of the school. This pervades all aspects of the life of the school, including teacher-pupil relationships in the classroom or the playground or sports-field or in after-school activities.

### 4.1 Promoting personal development throughout the entire school curriculum

The Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) published a discussion paper *Spiritual, Moral, Social and Cultural Development*<sup>[6]</sup> (February 1994) which argued that the promotion of spiritual and moral development in all schools can be a whole-curriculum matter.

The school, and here this means each teacher, in every subject across the curriculum, is encouraged to create opportunities which, among other things, seek to:

- provide pupils with knowledge and insight into values and beliefs;
- enable them to reflect on and develop their own beliefs and values, aspects of life and experiences so that they develop spiritual awareness and self knowledge;
- encourage pupils to consider life's fundamental questions, and relate religious teaching to those questions;
- encourage pupils to explore meaning and purpose, values and beliefs;
- teach the principles which allow pupils to distinguish right from wrong;
- enable pupils to make moral decisions;
- foster values such as honesty, fairness, respect for truth, justice and property; and
- encourage pupils to respect other people and relate to them positively;

### 4.2 Moral development through the teaching of Mathematics?

When it is suggested that moral development can be promoted through the teaching of every subject in the curriculum, a frequent reaction is to say that this is surely not the case with the subject of Mathematics. 'Mathematics is mathematics', objectors may say, 'What has it to do with morality?' I often respond to this by pointing to the example of a mathematical task that is often set in textbooks and examinations in the West. The task is often expressed in the following way:

'If you invest 100 pounds in a bank account at an annual rate of interest of 5 per cent, how much is your investment worth to you after one year?'

To me as a school pupil or as a young teacher of Mathematics, this seemed to be a morally neutral task. I have come to realize more recently that it is far from neutral because, if the teaching of mathematics is *dominated* by examples like this, it will tend to convey the belief that what is of first importance in life is what we receive for ourselves. The implicit message is that it is more blessed to receive than to give, a moral message which is opposed to the Christian emphasis on love and giving to others.

This was brought home to me a few years back when I was speaking at a teacher's conference here in Kiev and I described this mathematical task to them and quickly realized from their responses that what was a familiar task for me brought up in Ireland was not familiar to them brought up in Ukraine. There were differences of cultural and moral values between our cultures.

Mathematics has been developed and applied in a wide range of human situations. It can be taught using contexts, which allow pupils to develop and use their mathematics while, at the same time, reflecting upon and discussing spiritual and moral dimensions of human issues, which arise in those contexts. For example, work on statistics of literacy in different parts of the world can remind pupils of the value of being able to read and write.<sup>[7]</sup>

The same is true of other subjects of the curriculum. The study of literature brings moral issues to the fore because the heart of the concerns of many writers is moral. History teaching also brings us face to face with moral issues of right and wrong, e.g. the rights of people and of different communities and societies. The teaching of geography quickly brings in the ethics of how we use our environment and its resources. Science confronts us with questions of the uses to which we put the knowledge gained from the study of the physical world.

The aim of this paper has been to share insights from the experience of education in schools in England in the hope that some of them may prove helpful to planning for education in a different country and a different culture with a different history. Some insights may be irrelevant, some may have some relevance but may need to be re-interpreted in order to be applied and some may have a very direct relevance because of those things that are common to us in our different countries. I hope that you will find that the paper as a whole is helpful to you.

#### Notes:

[1] Unless otherwise indicated, the statistics quoted in this paper are for the year 2004/5 and are taken from the UK Government publication, *Statistics of Education: Education and Training Statistics for the United Kingdom*. This can be seen on the website of the Department for Education and Skills at: [http://www.dfes.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/VOL/v000616/0112711812\\_web.pdf](http://www.dfes.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/VOL/v000616/0112711812_web.pdf).

[2] This statistic comes from the website [www.home-education.org.uk](http://www.home-education.org.uk).

[3] This was expressed in the Government's White Paper, *Schools - Achieving Success*. ('White Paper' is the term used for publications that give expression to new government proposals when they are published for discussion.)

[4] For example, at A Level examinations (the examinations taken by students on completing their Sixth Form studies), Church of England state schools achieve an average of 16.2 points, Roman Catholic state schools achieve an average of 15.7 points and other state schools achieve an average of 15.3 points.

[5] *The Way Ahead: Church of England schools in the new millennium*, ch. 3.12.

[6] Office for Standards in Education, *Spiritual, Moral, Social and Cultural Development* (London: Ofsted, 1994).

[7] These examples come from a publication for teachers of Mathematics with which the writer of this paper was linked – *Charis Mathematics* (Nottingham, The Stapleford Centre, 1997). Details of this publication and of others produced for teachers of other subjects including Science, English, French and German can be found on the website [www.stapleford](http://www.stapleford)