The character of Controlled schools in Northern Ireland: A complementary perspective to that of Gracie and Brown

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Abstract
The aim of this article is to interact with Anita Gracie and Andrew W Brown’s recent account of the historical development and nature of Controlled schools and of religious education in Northern Ireland in this journal. A complementary perspective is used to illustrate how the relationship between the Protestant churches and Controlled schools has evolved, and the bearing this has on how best to describe them. This is followed by a consideration of their claim that the type of education and of religious education practised in Anglican schools in England provide a model for Controlled schools to emulate.

Keywords
Catholic schools, Controlled schools, ethos, Northern Ireland, religious education, secular schools

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Introduction

Recently, in this journal, Anita Gracie and Andrew W Brown (2019: 363), after examining the evidence, concluded that Controlled schools in Northern Ireland, that is, schools that are attended mainly by those from the Protestant community, ‘are . . . quite clearly Christian’. Yet 20 lines further on, in the same final section, they speak of de facto secular schooling of Protestant children, in these same schools. Their (2019: 363) advice is that Controlled schools should develop their religious ethos by emulating the Church of England (Anglican) model of ‘inclusive and impartial’ religious education.

An attempt will be made to make sense of what initially appears to be a somewhat confused interpretation of the nature of Controlled schools and of religious education in Northern Ireland (at this stage it ought not to be assumed that the attempt will be successful), and in this context, to gain a clearer picture of how they should be characterised. This is followed by a consideration of the merits of the type of education and of religious education practised in Anglican schools in England. Finally, the critical question is briefly addressed whether Anglican schools provide a model to be emulated by Controlled schools in Northern Ireland. The parameters of this response are quite narrowly drawn. This is deliberate. Gracie and Brown, in what is the focus of their article, provide a detailed and useful account of the evolution of Controlled (i.e. Controlled by the state) schools, though they underestimate the significance of two developments, an appreciation of which is necessary both for a defensible and fully informed historical narrative and for a proper interpretation of the contemporary debate over the current character and appropriate designation(s) of ‘Controlled’ schools.

Controlled schools in historical perspective

The challenge for interpreters and commentators on Northern Ireland education is to explain why the role of religion has gained increased importance in debates on the character of Controlled schools at a time when the processes of secularisation, which have always followed a wider and deeper current in the Protestant community than the Catholic community, continue unabated (McCartney and Glass, 2014). It is this that the historical narrative of Gracie and Brown fails to illuminate fully.

Initial efforts of the first Northern Ireland government in the early 1920s to establish common schools for all pupils were shunned by the churches (Farren, 1995: 86–105), which continued to operate largely independently of the state to provide education for their respective adherents. The state educational system did, however, become acceptable to the Protestant churches in 1930, when an Amending Act provided for religious education in the form of Bible instruction by teachers to be included in the school curriculum (Akenson, 1973: 107–118). As a result of this (and certain limited transferor rights of representation on school management committees), the Protestant churches relieved themselves of the
increasing financial burden of their schools and ‘transferred’ them to state control. In the same year, the state agreed to pay Roman Catholic schools 50% of capital expenditure and 50% of maintenance costs (the state always covered recurrent costs). In 1947, the Northern Ireland Education Act legislated for state secondary schools to provide the same form of ‘undenominational’ religious instruction based upon the ‘Christian scriptures’ as primary schools (Armstrong, 2009: 300). More controversially, the Act introduced a conscience clause that allowed teachers in state schools to be excused from giving religious teaching or leading collective worship if they were conscientiously opposed to doing so (Farren, 1995: 179–186): no such right applies to teachers in Catholic schools up to the present. (Parents also have the legal right in all schools to withdraw their children from religious education classes.)

Irish nationalist distrust combined with a philosophy of education that requires the Catholic Church through its clergy to have control of education and schooling have ensured that historically Catholic (‘maintained’) schools preserve a degree of independence from the state (McGrath, 2000: 1–2). Yet by various means the state has attempted to foster closer relationships. Lest one think of the state’s overtures as overly benign, closer relationships (typically pursued through increased funding, either ongoing or to support educational initiatives) can be read as attempts to gain influence and to further reforms and initiatives that raise ‘educational standards’ and foster ‘mutual understanding and reconciliation’ between communities. In the 1970s, the Astin Committee suggested that there should be closer cooperation between the Department of Education and the Catholic Church, the legal owner of Catholic schools. After much discussion, the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools was constituted legally by the Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 1989. It is fully funded by the Department of Education (NI), with responsibility for the management of Catholic schools, including administering procedures for the appointment, promotion, dismissal and disciplining of teachers. ‘A primary function of the Council is to provide the Catholic Maintained sector with a unified voice in all matters relating to education policy and procedures’ (Northern Ireland Executive, 2019). By this stage, Catholic schools were receiving 100% funding from the (then) five ‘local’ Education and Library Boards (replaced in 2015 with a single Education Authority) for recurrent expenditure and 85% grant aid from the Department of Education (NI) for capital costs (estates). The remaining 15% was raised by the ‘trustees’. Under these rules, the Catholic sector continued to exercise a degree of independence from state control as the trustees still own their schools (formally ‘private voluntary ownership’) and still hold majority representation (60%) on ‘the governing body’ (Byrne and McKeown, 1998: 322). For a variety of reasons, however, including evidence of lower levels of attainment in maintained schools compared with Controlled school pupils and the vagaries of funding (see Gallagher et al., 1994), the government introduced new financial arrangements in 1993, which potentially provided 100% public funding for capital expenditure. To receive such, Catholic schools had to agree to increased ‘public’ representation on boards of governors, though trustee nominated
members and teacher representatives would constitute a majority. The Department of Education (NI) pledged to appoint members to the governing bodies of schools only after consultation with the school trustees; thus ‘the Catholic authorities will hold a de facto majority’ (Gallagher et al., 1994: 515), effectively ensuring exclusively Catholic boards of governors, if desired. Maintained schools have taken advantage of this financial provision.

Gracie and Brown (2019: 352) claim that until the late 1990s ‘the [Protestant transferor] churches had handled their management role with a very ‘light touch’. They then comment that ‘[t]his complacency was shaken in 2006, when the Review of Public Administration proposed the removal of the statutory role of transferors on the proposed new Education and Skills Authority (ESA), on the grounds that it purportedly contravened equality legislation’ (subsequent legislation indicates it did not). The proposal that representatives from the original Protestant transferor churches should lose their right of membership of school boards of governors intensified the debate about the character of Controlled schools. My point is that this debate was already raging and had been for over a decade. This is the missing decade in the account of Gracie and Brown. The complacency of the Protestant churches was already shaken by the mid-1990s, first by the creation of Catholic Council for Maintained Schools (CCMS) and then a few years later by the announcement that Catholic confessional schools would be fully funded by the state. In an article published in 1998, Byrne and McKeown reported the ‘renewed concern of the Protestant churches about the protection of their interests in the state school system’. According to them (1998: 319) by this stage, the Protestant churches were already seeking ‘government recognition of an “umbrella” Protestant Church body to reassert the Protestant nature of the schools which they once owned, but transferred to the state’. They (1998: 329) noted how the CCMS facilitated the Catholic hierarchy direct access to government and noted that '[t]his stands in contrast to the position of the Protestant churches, whose formal channels to articulate their specific concerns have not increased beyond their [minority] representation on school boards of governors and on the ELBs [Education and Library Boards]. At the same time, the Protestant churches were also concerned that the influence and powers of transferor representatives within individual schools had slowly been diminished; and even that their number as a proportion of state school governing bodies had been reduced. Comparison with the Catholic Church, a comparison no doubt foremost in the minds of Protestant church leaders, is again highlighted by Byrne and McKeown (1998: 330) by reporting a 1997 research finding that ‘transferor governors in the Controlled sector believed that, while any direct influence of the Protestant churches in school governing bodies has been heavily eroded, this is not the case in the maintained sector’.

Church owned and managed confessional Catholic schools paid for by the state naturally raised critical voices from different quarters. There were those who believed that ‘segregated’ education was one of the main causes of sectarianism and thus a driver of inter-community tension. Protestant church leaders brought a different perspective to bear on things. Confessional Catholic schools, under the
ownership and management of the Catholic Church, were now fully funded by the state. Catholic children receive a confessional education, between the ages of 5 to 16 (and potentially up to 18). Publicly, Protestant church spokespersons could speak of unfair treatment, whereas privately there existed a certain enviousness that the Catholic Church had managed to secure for itself a privileged role for its schools, one denied to the Protestant churches.

At this point, we can return to Gracie and Brown’s (2019: 352–353) account of more recent events: how after years of lobbying the Controlled Schools’ Support Council (CSSC) came into existence on 1 September 2016 to represent the interest of the original transferor churches – Church of Ireland, Methodist and Presbyterian Churches (see also Armstrong, 2017: 92–99). Its remit is to work in partnership with the Department of Education and other bodies and schools, and to focus on advocacy, governance, raising standards and area planning of the schools (CSSC, 2020) – essentially ‘to develop and maintain the ethos of the Controlled sector’ (quoted by Gracie and Brown, 2019: 353). The CSSC Vision Statement, while indicating a broad commitment to fostering Christian values and principles, nevertheless makes it clear that Controlled schools are open and inclusive:

The Controlled Schools’ Support Council supports Controlled schools, which are open to all faiths and none, in providing high quality education for children and young people to enable them to learn, develop and grow together, within the ethos of non-denominational Christian values and principles. (CSSC, 2020)

What precisely is the ethos and what values and principles are promoted?

An ethos of love and care should be highlighted through the development of the full human potential of each person - whether pupil, parent, governor or member of staff. The school should foster tolerance of, and respect for, the beliefs of others and should also respect the rights of those with no religious belief. (Transferors Representatives’ Council, 2018: 5)

What is noteworthy is that the values and principles that Controlled schools endorse, while regarded as Christian (and presumably grounded in Christian doctrines, which are not mentioned), are those that command broad support in society.

**How best to characterise Controlled schools**

We are now in a better position to consider the character of Controlled schools, which Gracie and Brown (2019: 363) describe as ‘clearly Christian’. For the 95% of Controlled schools that have decided to be identified with and to be represented by the Council, there is some sort of acknowledgement of the importance of Christianity and its continuing relevance to education. If by ‘clearly Christian’,
however, is meant that schools provide Christian nurture and seek to convince pupils of the truth of Christianity in a way comparable to Catholic schools, this is (equally) clearly not the case, nor could it be, for the kind of uniform religious constituency of pupils so characteristic of Catholic schools does not exist in Controlled schools. Although the majority of pupils can be formally identified as Christian (including 9.6% Catholic), this tells us little about religious commitment and religious practice, such as church attendance, prayer and Bible-reading; about 20% do not identify with Christianity. The terms ‘nominal Christian’, ‘cultural Christian’, ‘lapsed Christian’ or even ironically non-Christian are titles that can be used to describe the diversity of attitudes towards Christianity of ‘Protestant’ parents of schoolchildren who attend Controlled schools. Documentation produced by the CSSC speaks of developing a Christian ethos and of liberal values, such as sensitivity, respect and tolerance (TRC, 2018: 3), values that can be supported by religious and non-religious people alike, but not of engaging in Christian nurture or religious formation. Gracie and Brown’s description of schools as ‘clearly Christian’ also does not fit with the numbers of church (transferor) representatives on boards of governors (3/8ths of membership, not counting the principal; Education Authority, 2018), again contrasting with Catholic schools, or with the fact that there is no religious test for teachers, unlike Catholic primary schools, where those seeking appointment are required to have a Catholic Certificate in Religious Education (Milliken, 2020; St Mary’s University College Belfast, 2020). Certainly, Controlled schools are neither Protestant nor Christian in the way that maintained schools are Catholic and Christian.

What can be concluded about the character of Controlled schools? First, they are not confessional Christian schools, unlike Catholic schools, though the religious education curriculum is almost exclusively Christian (except at Key Stage 3, where two world religions other than Christianity are required to be studied, DENI, 2007: 29–30) and its content (it is called the Core Syllabus) the product of the collaborative efforts of the Protestant transferor churches and the Roman Catholic Church. If the religious education curriculum is centred on the culturally dominant religion, does this make it a religious school? But can they be religious schools when the element of Christian nurture is absent? Second, by historical circumstance and current legislation, the transferor churches have a role in their management. Is this a necessary or a sufficient criterion of a religious school? Some commentators could maintain that any association between the churches and schools means that they are religious. Other commentators could point out that in Northern Ireland, any Christian influence through transferor representatives and higher up in the management chain by the CSSC is dissipated at the classroom level. This is borne out by what we know happens in Controlled primary schools, where in many cases the statutory requirement of religious education is not fulfilled (Gracie and Brown, 2019: 356–357). Can a school where pupils do not receive religious education be considered a religious or a Christian school? Yet other schools do provide religious education. Perhaps a differentiated answer is
needed that takes account of the actual experience of pupils. Third, Controlled schools are open to all pupils of any faith or none and teachers of any faith or none are employed. These last two points can be interpreted to give support to the position that Controlled schools are secular schools, though they are not secular in the sense that French or American public schools exclude religious education from the curriculum.

This discussion could easily be extended. What should be becoming apparent is that Controlled schools can legitimately be described in different ways because distinctions between descriptive terms can be drawn in different ways, in different contexts for different reasons. Controlled schools can appropriately be described as both Christian and secular, religious but non-confessional, secular but not secularist. They can be called culturally Protestant schools, non-denominational schools, formerly Protestant schools, church-related schools and so on. Contrasted with Catholic maintained schools, they may legitimately be called non-confessional or public schools, even secular schools.

The observation that Controlled schools can be characterised in different ways for different reasons alerts us to the ideological purposes that can be present in descriptions. Secularists may want to describe Controlled schools as ‘religious’ (implicitly connoting sectarianism) as part of a wider political programme to convert them into completely secular schools. Other may refer to them as religious to reinforce the role of the churches in education and to support a religious agenda. Some may refer to Protestant schools to maintain the fiction that they are a mirror image of Catholic schools. Often we need to look at the wider context of usage to identify the implicit or concealed prejudices and commitments that are conveyed. Different descriptions of Controlled schools (and this may be the least subjective and controversial description) are appropriate in different ways and some less appropriate in different ways. There is no definitive definition and description of Controlled schools.

Towards the future

Gracie and Brown report that ‘many Protestant parents might be concerned to find that [secular schooling]…is de facto what their children are experiencing unless Controlled schools are prepared to own and celebrate their cultural and religious ethos by encouraging and enabling the teaching of open and inclusive Religious Education’ (2019: 263). In the preceding paragraph, they referred to Anglican schools who have…been able to maintain and even strengthen the expression of their Christian ethos. At the same time, they have been able to raise academic standards and accommodate school populations made up of children from families of all faiths and none who have chosen to send their children there in preference to the secular state school, for a wide variety of reasons. The Religious Education in these, mainly Church of England, schools is inclusive and impartial, committed to the ‘broader RE’
approach and the development of skills such as enquiry and debate which foster confidence in the discussion of belief, even when beliefs vary. At the same time, their Christian ethos is confidently and visibly displayed through every aspect of school policy, including pastoral care, collective worship and the school environment (Diocese of Norwich, 2015). (2019: 363, incorporating authors’ reference)

There are too many controversial points made to be properly considered. For example, although there is empirical support for the view that academic attainment in faith schools in Britain is generally higher than community schools, debate centres on the reasons for this. Research that focuses on Church of England schools in comparison with community schools shows that ‘after controlling for prior attainment and pupil characteristics’, the difference in attainment is slight. In other words, the quality of initial intake, in terms of non-religious variables such as social class, gender and so on, accounts for the superior academic performance of Anglican schools (Andrews and Johnes, 2016). A recent extensive empirical study carried out by researchers from University College London (Sullivan et al., 2018) concluded that the enhanced academic performance of ‘faith schools’ (of which most in the study were Anglican) is attributable to religious upbringing and not faith schools per se. The exception seems to be confessional Catholic schools, where enrolment is confined to Catholic pupils. Here there does seem to be performance enhancement that is attributable in some way to religion (Morris, 2009).

The view of Gracie and Brown that a Christian ethos permeates all that happens in Anglican schools is also controversial. It does sound implausible, given their policy of open enrolment and the consequent religious diversity of pupils in attendance. Diversity is also reflected in the staffing of schools, where typically it reflects the diversity of attitudes towards religion found in the wider society. The only evidence that Gracie and Brown adduce for the existence of a distinctively Christian ethos in Anglican schools is reference to a diocesan policy statement that provides a Christian perspective on spiritual, moral, social and cultural development (Diocese of Norwich, 2015). This document tells us how one diocese (out of 42) aspires to fulfil this particular statutory requirement. It does not tell us what goes on in schools and does not draw on reports of school experience. Empirical research confirms that the ethos of Anglican schools differs little from (secular) community schools (Francis et al., 2018).

Gracie and Brown conclude their article by citing ‘broader RE’ in Church of England (Anglican) schools as providing the model for religious education in Northern Ireland to follow. They make a number of claims that indicate that they have limited acquaintance with its reality. Most Anglican schools follow local Agreed Syllabuses, which are multi-faith and intended for use in all schools; and by virtue of this excludes all confessional elements. What research there is denies any distinctiveness to religious education in church schools compared with the practice of multi-faith religious education in community schools. Ten years ago, Leslie Francis and Mandy Robbins conducted a large-scale survey of teacher attitudes towards various aspects of teaching in secondary-level church schools,
part of which explored their conception of the aims of religious education. What they found was that religious education teachers in church schools do not see their role as that of ‘shaping the religious and spiritual commitment of their pupils’ (Francis and Robbins, 2011: 231). There is no reason to think that the views of religious education teachers have changed. When this evidence is complemented by ethnographic findings of what goes on in classrooms, the difference between Christian religious education (apart from Catholic schools) and multi-faith religious education is often difficult to find (see Conroy et al., 2013; Street, 2007), despite the rhetoric of Christian distinctiveness that is expressed in official Church of England documents. Religious education in Anglican faith schools has become virtually indistinguishable from multi-faith religious education. (There are those, however, who are working to develop a Christian identity for Anglican schools; see Cooling, 2013.) Gracie and Brown (2019: 363) refer positively to religious education in them as ‘open and inclusive’ and ‘impartial’. Are they truly aware of the type of religious education in classrooms that give meaning to these terms (Barnes, 2014)? The Norfolk Agreed Syllabus (Norfolk SACRE, 2019), which is endorsed by the Diocese of Norwich for use in its schools, and is the diocese that they use as providing an example for Controlled schools in Northern Ireland to follow, requires the study of six religions alongside Humanism and is multi-faith throughout all Key Stages, beginning with 6-year-olds: this arguably results in truncated teaching and superficial learning.

The Commission on Religious Education, to which they refer approvingly, is one response to what is widely perceived as a ‘crisis’ (Chater, 2012; Parker et al., 2015), the term most commonly used to describe the current travail of English multi-faith religious education (responses to which are reviewed in Barnes, 2020). The findings of the resultant Report of the Commission (2018) have also attracted criticism (Barnes, 2020: 80–84, 189–193; Hannam and Biesta, 2019; Schweitzer, 2018) for largely ignoring the systemic and serious weaknesses that are widely acknowledged: ‘specific weaknesses in the teaching about Christianity’ (Ofsted, 2010: 6), ‘scant subject knowledge and understanding’ (Ofsted 2013: 4), lack of a critical element in the study of religions (Conroy et al., 2013: 48–49), agnosticism towards religious truth regarded as a basis for tolerance and respect for others and so on (see Barnes, 2020: 9–23). English religious education may be open and inclusive as Gracie and Brown report, but it is undergoing a crisis of identity. Mark Chater and Clive Erricker (2013: 3) have commented that ‘English RE . . . should come with a health warning for other national systems’ and Mary Myatt (2020: 11) has recently stated that ‘RE in English schools is in a lamentable state’. Gracie and Brown equate English style ‘broader RE’ with the development of skills such as enquiry and debate which foster confidence in the discussion of belief. That such skills and that debate are frequently not found in English multi-faith religious education (Conroy et al., 2013: 46–47, 121) does not detract from their importance and they are right to think that religious education in Northern Ireland needs to attend to them, just as there is much else to which it needs to attend.
Conclusion
Prescribing the kind of religious education that best serves the needs of pupils in Controlled schools in Northern Ireland has not been my aim. Instead I have endeavoured to complement Gracie and Brown’s review of the historical development and evolution of Controlled schools by adding further details and refining their perspective. I have also, more critically, questioned their proposal for Controlled schools to follow English developments and practices in religious education. England differs from Northern Ireland culturally, religiously and politically and such differences justify a different form of religious education in Northern Ireland, though both can learn from each other.

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