

# Keeping faith -- schools must balance ethos with equality

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Faith based schools are on the rise in the UK, apparently boosting educational standards. But are religious values at odds with legislation on equality? Research that appears today in the journal *Education Management Administration and Leadership* published by SAGE shows what happens when school values and those of the state diverge, with unfortunate consequences for gay students and staff.

The UK Government, and certainly former Prime Minister Tony Blair, suggest that [faith](#) based schools contribute to choice and diversity, and also raise educational standards. Brian Caldwell's theory that schools with a strong 'spiritual capital' can raise student achievement has been influential.

However, Gerry McNamara and James Norman from Dublin City University, set out to investigate whether giving control of a school's ethos and philosophy to churches or other organisations can lead to unfair policies and practices, as has been the case in the Republic of Ireland.

In Ireland, the vast majority of schools are owned and managed by the Catholic Church but funded by the state. State measures to encourage equality and protect minorities such as lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) students are often not transmitted or supported in these schools, and due to legislation loopholes schools can also sack LGBT teachers to protect their ethos. Could something similar happen in faith schools in the UK?

McNamara's research shows that Catholic schools showed a marked unwillingness to address LGBT issues under sex education, flouting national policy. Worse still, teachers' failure to respond to serious homophobic [bullying](#) in schools was commonplace.

McNamara suggests that teachers and presumably [school](#) leaders felt constrained or even intimidated by the power structures within which they operate. "There was little indication at leadership level that concerns about social justice and equity were leading to a willingness to take potentially controversial initiatives," says McNamara, "and this timidity seems to percolate down through the staff structure".

Legislation loopholes allowing schools to choose pupils to 'protect its ethos,' mean that faith based schools operate in what McNamara describes as "an equality vacuum," where it is not clear what their obligations are under the equality legislation.

Finally gay and lesbian teachers in schools were also fearful for their positions since the churches had sought and obtained exemption from the legislation designed to protect minorities from discrimination in employment. This is despite the fact that Ireland has introduced a comprehensive and advanced set of legislation on equality.

This research has implications for schoolteachers in all faith schools, including those in the UK. "Fundamentally, it is the responsibility of all those who are identified as leaders within the school community to ensure that practical steps are taken to challenge and respond to homophobic bullying," says McNamara.

The Catholic Church primarily runs schools not to provide choice and diversity or to raise standards, but to promote faith and religious knowledge among young people. In this context, it makes sense that such schools reflect the teachings and ethos of the church, which acts as their

patron.

In Ireland, this is an inherited reality, which must be managed as well as possible. In Britain the authors conclude that if faith based schools are to be further encouraged, the State should retain adequate power to require schools to comply with, for example, equality legislation and with the prevailing standards of justice and tolerance in the wider society.

**More information:** This paper will be available free for a limited time at [ema.sagepub.com/content/38/5/534.full.pdf+html](http://ema.sagepub.com/content/38/5/534.full.pdf+html)

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