

0312

## **Opting Out of Religious Education: The Views of Young People from Minority Belief Backgrounds**

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### **Background**

In the UK, as in many other countries where religious education has a place in the education system, the right of parents to withdraw their children from such teaching (and related activities such as school worship) on grounds of conscience is enshrined in domestic law and in international human rights law. Such law considers that the existence of a right to opt is sufficient to respect and protect the freedom of thought, conscience and belief of these students and parents.

However, parental decisions to withdraw their children from religious education set students from minority belief backgrounds (including those who do not belong to any religion) apart from their peers during the school day. This division has the potential to shape young people's religious understanding as well as their relationship with peers and parents, their school, belief community and the wider society.

### **Research Questions**

The research aims to examine the views and experiences of young people of minority belief with respect to opt-out policies and provision in schools and to explore the extent to which they believe that their right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion is thereby protected. The research addresses the following questions:

- (1) How do young people from minority belief backgrounds experience opt-out provision from religious education and other religious occasions in schools?
- (2) In what ways do they believe opting out respects and protects their right to thought, conscience and religion?
- (3) What factors influence a young person's decision to opt out (or not) of religious education?
- (4) Do conflicts arise between parents and young people regarding opt out of religious education?
- (5) How are opt-outs viewed by minority belief parents and communities?

### **Methods**

The research questions are explored through semi-structured interviews with young people from minority belief backgrounds (aged 13 to 18). Additional interviews are held with parents and minority belief community leaders.

### **Frame**

The approach is interdisciplinary, drawing on researchers from a legal, educational and social science background. The research is based on a fundamental principle of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, namely that young people should be consulted on matters that directly affect them. This principle has particular relevance to this project as to date, the voices of young people from minority belief backgrounds have not been considered in developing human rights standards on religious freedom in schools.

## **Research findings**

Comparing data across groups and individuals, the findings will pay attention to potential systematic differences between faith communities, gender differences as well as any conflicts that may arise at school, within families and within faith (or non-religious) communities as a result of opt-out provision. The findings will be discussed in the light of their implications for human rights law relating to opt-out provision for religious education as well as their implications for community relations and social cohesion.