

The Hijab 'controversy' that isn't

RTE's Education and Science Correspondent Emma O Kelly finds that the recent 'controversy' over the Hijab in schools is a media creation.

In the midst of all the articles, opinion pieces and [polls](#) in newspapers and elsewhere about the wearing of the Hijab by pupils in schools here, one crucial point appears to be being lost: within the schools themselves, it is currently not an issue of any real concern. In one way that's probably not so surprising. After all, for generations the Veil has played a central role in education here. Countless generations of Irish children have been educated in Irish schools by Irish women wearing veils. Some still are. The only difference now is that its pupils, not teachers, who are covering their heads, and they're not Catholic, they're Muslim.

In the schools where this is happening, it's no big deal. Where I have discussed the matter with schools, they tell me no permission was given to a particular pupil to wear the veil, but only because permission was never sought. These schools see it as a private matter, to do with tolerance and the right to religious expression.

I've discussed this matter with very few schools and that's because it's a non-issue. I have been to lots of schools, often specifically covering integration-related issues. I've attended numerous education conferences including those dealing with the challenges of integration.

In all these settings, one hears the long list of concerns schools have about catering for their increasingly diverse student cohort. It's a very long list and it usually begins with the shortage of English Language teachers. But so far, the Hijab has never, to my knowledge, featured on that list.

The latest round of media comment was sparked by a letter the principal of Gorey Community School wrote to the Department of Education. Nicholas Sweetman wrote to the Department looking for guidelines. His letter was released under Freedom of Information legislation.

The Department of Education says Mr Sweetman's letter is one of what would appear to be just two received from schools with queries related to the Hijab. That's just two schools out of 732 second-level schools, out of more than 4,000 schools in total. Mr Sweetman may want guidelines, but he says the wearing of the veil is 'not an issue' in his school or, in his view 'in any schools currently'. His school does not have a problem with pupils who wish to wear it. In a conversation last week, he told me: 'the media has sought to make this an issue which it really isn't'.

An education spokesperson from the Irish Islamic community says they are aware of no instance where a school pupil has had difficulty with her school authorities over the wearing of the Veil.

This is not to say that there may not be difficulties between schools and pupils wearing the Hijab but if there have been they must have been few and far between. Some commentators have referred to the banning of the Hijab in schools in France. The

French ban followed intense and bitter debate and controversy there. One may agree or disagree with that decision, but Ireland cannot be compared to France. The French education system is a secular one and it is on that basis that the Hijab, along with other overt religious symbols, was banned.

Our education system is of course the complete opposite - and a ramble down the corridors of many of our secondary and primary schools will testify to this. There among the crucifixes and statues of the Virgin Mary you're likely to see the faces of countless women, some smiling, some stern, wearing some of the most outrageous and ostentatious headgear you are ever likely to see.

I began this article by saying that the wearing of the Veil or Hijab is 'currently' not an issue of concern in Irish schools. It would be deeply regrettable if a media-driven debate, that's taking place outside the reality of student and school experience, were to make it one.