

An exploration of the attitudes of primary school teachers
towards the teaching of Religious Education in Catholic,
primary schools in Ireland

Marino Institute of Education

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Word Count: 10,931

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Submission Date: 10th May 2021

This dissertation is submitted in fulfilment of the Professional Masters of Education, for Marino Institute of Education, an associated college of the University of Dublin, Trinity College.

Declaration

I hereby certify that this material, which I now submit for assessment on the programme leading to the award of the degree of Professional Master of Education, is entirely my own work and has not been taken from the work of others, save to the extent that such work has been cited and acknowledged within the text of my work. I further declare that this dissertation has not been submitted as an exercise for a degree at this Institute and any other Institution or University. I agree that the Marino Institute of Education library may lend or copy the thesis, in hard or soft copy, upon request.

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Abstract

The relationship between education and religion in Ireland is an important starting point when examining the landscape of Irish primary schools today. Over 93% of primary schools in Ireland are Catholic schools, taking a confessional approach towards the teaching of RE through the patrons' programme, 'Grow in Love'. Faas, Darmody and Sokolowska (2015) argue that this does 'not adequately address the needs of children of minority faith backgrounds' (p.91). Statistics show that Ireland is becoming an increasingly multi-cultural society, which inevitably brings a broader range of religious beliefs. Yet, the majority of primary schools in Ireland come under the patronage of the Catholic Church and thus provide an education in this particular religious denomination, with a minor focus on world religions. Many have argued that this does not reflect the fact that Ireland is 'now a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and multi-religious society' (Honohan & Rougier, 2011, p.5).

This study aims to uncover the attitudes and experiences of primary school teachers teaching RE in Catholic schools. There is a significant lack of literature and research available in this area, particularly in an Irish context, and thus this research project makes an important contribution to this field. The main areas of focus include participants experiences of teaching RE, their thoughts on opting out, their opinions about teaching world religions and discussions surrounding future change they would like to see implemented in the teaching of RE.

This study used a qualitative approach, facilitated through the use of an online demographic questionnaire, alongside 8 semi-structured interviews. All participants in this study were experienced in the teaching of RE in a mainstream setting and are currently teaching in Catholic schools.

In the findings of this study, it was discovered that teachers generally feel unsupported in their teaching of RE in Catholic primary schools. Many feel they are left solely responsible

for the faith formation of the children. They favoured more involvement from both parents and the parish Priest to support the faith formation of children and to reinforce the teaching that is happening within Catholic schools in RE. This study recommends a community approach towards the teaching of RE which involves teachers, parents, and parish Priests.

Additionally, teachers expressed the challenges associated with children opting out of RE. This causes additional pressures being placed on the teacher, such as the preparation of extra resources. Teachers also worry about children who have opted out still being exposed to RE in school and feeling a sense of alienation from their peers owing to their decision to opt out. This study recommends that clear guidelines are published which will direct schools on what should be facilitated for children who are opting out, to provide standardised practice across all Catholic primary schools in Ireland.

Teachers also expressed a positive attitude towards a change within the Grow in Love programme, which would include an increased amount of time dedicated to the teaching of world religions. All teachers in this study favoured this but acknowledged that time constraints in an overpacked curriculum could prevent this change from happening in the future, as well as an older cohort of teachers who may be reluctant to facilitate this change. This study recommends that the time allocation for RE is re-examined, as it is found to be something that the teachers in this study are already struggling with. In re-examining this, more time should be allocated to the teaching of world religions.

Acknowledgements

Firstly, I would like to thank my supervisor, Dr. Andrea Lynch, for all her support, encouragement, patience, and kindness. She made the process enjoyable and kept me motivated throughout. I would like to thank her for all the time she has given me. I feel very lucky to have had the opportunity to work with her.

I would also like to thank each and every person who took part in this research project for giving me their time. I greatly appreciate every participant who has given me their thoughts and opinions on this topic, without which I wouldn't have been able to conduct this piece of research.

Last but not least, I would like to thank my Mam and Dad for everything they have done for me. They truly are the best.

Abbreviations

B.Ed.	Bachelor of Education
BOM	Board of Management
CNS	Community National School
CSO	Central Statistics Office
DEIS	Delivering Equality of Opportunities in Schools
DES	Department of Education and Skills
ET	Educate Together
ITE	Initial Teacher Education
PME	Professional Master of Education
RE	Religious Education
SERC	Student Ethics in Research Committee
SET	Special Education Teacher
SNA	Special Needs Assistant

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Introduction

This chapter is an overview to this research project, outlining topics including aims and objectives of the study, research questions, study rationale, qualitative research, the experience of participants and an overview of subsequent chapters.

Aims & Objectives

This research aims to explore the experiences of primary school teachers in their teaching of RE in Catholic primary schools in Ireland. This includes a discussion surrounding opting out of RE, the teaching of world religions and future change which participants would like to see in the teaching of RE in Catholic primary schools in Ireland.

Research Questions

Research questions which guided this study included, ‘what are the attitudes of primary school teachers towards the teaching of RE in Catholic primary schools?’, ‘how do/would teachers feel about teaching world religions?’, ‘what are teachers’ thoughts about opting out of RE?’ and ‘what changes would teachers like to see regarding the teaching of RE?’.

Study Rationale

The rationale for this study is the ongoing conversation regarding confessional RE which prevails in over 93% of schools in Ireland, in an increasingly multi-cultural society. Heinz, Davison and Keane (2018) argue that denominational school systems allow for one religious group to become over-represented and is ‘acting as a deterrent for many minority or non-religious individuals (p.242). However, there is an absence of research on the attitudes of primary school teachers towards the teaching of RE in Catholic schools. Studies in this field do not consider the realities of the classroom or question the children’s experiences of RE.

Overview of Subsequent Chapters

Chapter 2 focuses on literature available surrounding the teaching of RE. A history of the relationship between education and religion in Ireland is outlined, and Irish policy and practice which guides the teaching of RE. It outlines alternative approaches adopted internationally, and alternative approaches which are advocated. The chapter outlines the content of the Grow in Love curriculum and discusses teaching world religions.

Chapter 3 outlines the methodologies used. It discusses qualitative methods and how interviews and questionnaires were created and used. This chapter outlines ethical considerations and methods used for data analysis. It discusses researcher reflexivity, strategies for validation and transferability.

Chapter 4 examines the information gathered through data collection and categorises it into three themes – lack of support, challenges associated with opting out and enthusiasm regarding teaching world religions. It outlines the implications of these themes for the teaching of RE.

Chapter 5 further analyses the findings and gives recommendations based on this, focusing on policy and practice.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

This chapter examines the teaching of RE in Catholic primary schools in Ireland including discussion surrounding the Grow in Love curriculum, arguments for and against its use, the historical significance behind the current situation and how RE is approached internationally. An examination of the opt out clause is included and suggested alternative approaches towards RE. Discussion surrounding the teaching of world religions is included and a review of teachers attitudes towards the teaching of RE.

Religion and Education in Ireland

Ireland is a changing landscape regarding multi-culturalism, which impacts religious affiliation, causing tension in the primary school landscape. This change occurred predominantly during the Celtic Tiger, a period of economic prosperity, which saw an influx of people to Ireland. This is obvious when examining CSO statistics. In the Census of 2016, the number of Roman Catholics had fallen by 132,220 in the previous five years. There was an increase of 204,151 individuals with no religion. There was an increase of 28.9% in the Muslim population, a 12.1% increase in the Buddhist population and a 28.9% increase in the Jewish population. Between 2006 and 2016, there was an increase of 135.6% in the Hindu population (www.cso.ie). Many argue that Catholic primary schools are not responding to this change in their delivery of the RE curriculum.

Since the establishment of the National School System in 1831, education in Ireland has been bound up with religion. The State delineated funds to patrons who took responsibility for running schools. Although it was intended that patrons would be of mixed denominations, most schools came under the patronage of the Catholic Church, adopting a denominational approach and the delivery of confessional RE. (Coolahan, Hussey, Kilfeather, 2012, p.1).

Williams (1999) argues, 'the strong association between the Catholic church and the struggle for independence has contributed to a close identification between loyalty to the nation and loyalty to the church' (p.317). He argues that the relationship between the two institutions is problematic. Fischer (2015) acknowledges there is tradition attached to this and that 'an abrupt withdrawal of such traditions from the school context would be seen as a form of 'cultural obliteration'' (p.101). It is argued that many could be opposed to change.

The 'Grow in Love' Curriculum

The patron's programme in Catholic schools, 'Grow in Love', dedicates a small section to world religions. It predominantly teaches the Catholic faith. Major themes include Jesus, The Bible, The Church and Catholic celebrations such as Advent and Easter, with the aim 'to help children to see how they can respond to God's love through love: by doing acts of love that mirror the actions of Jesus' (www.veritas.ie). Faas, Darmody & Sokolowska (2015) argue this does 'not adequately address the needs of children of minority faith backgrounds' (p.91). It promotes an interplay between Christianity and other world religions. Bryan and Bracken (2011) argue that 'the use of Christian religious literacy as central to understandings of other world religions can have marginalising, othering and delegitimising effects on non-Christian students' (p.112). This can lead to exclusion among children who are not represented in the teaching of RE. Kitching (2013) sees this approach as 'imposing certain values on children and families' (p.31). When focusing on one religious' viewpoint, it confirms that viewpoint as the majority and reinforces it as the norm. This is counteracted with a creation of the 'other', which appears to justify exclusion from full participation. (Devine, Kenny, McNeela, 2008, p.379).

World religions exist within the Grow in Love curriculum, but only include Islam and Judaism, beginning in First Class. From Third Class, this material is named as 'seasonal/additional lessons'. This language pre-supposes that the material does not need to be

covered but can be used at the discretion of the teacher. Fischer (2015) is critical of the Grow in Love programme and highlights its original intention of replacing a curriculum which promoted Catholic beliefs, to one which was inclusive of other religions. Yet it 'appears to represent a limited acknowledgement of the existence of non-Catholic children in Catholic schools rather than a significant departure from the basic standpoint of religious instruction' (p.94). Many see the teaching of RE in Catholic primary schools as problematic. As Heinz et al. (2018) argue, 'there has been little accommodation from the overwhelmingly denominational education system' (p.233). Curriculums exist within ET schools and CNS schools which incorporate a range of religious and non-religious beliefs.

Some advocate the 'Grow in Love' programme and highlight the benefits of a confessional approach towards RE. Grenham (2011) argues that RE contributes to the holistic development of children, with a focus on spirituality. He advocates a confessional approach and believes 'religions and religious practice are part of a living faith, not to be privatised and fossilised in a secular museum outside the school to be visited now and then' (p.234). Leahy (2015) argues that the 'Grow in Love' programme is essential in creating a community through which children can 'express the deepest longing of their heart in faith, prayer and knowledge' (p.629).

RE Internationally

Evidently, different systems of religious instruction provide increased inclusivity. In England, an integrative approach is adopted. This allows for an understanding of different religions, without a focus on one. Alberts (2010) argues that it 'provides a common arena where children with different cultural and religious backgrounds learn together and thereby also learn to live with each other, despite the different worldviews they may have' (p.278). Alberts argues it must be approached in a neutral manner, focusing on the 'subject matter' as opposed to

indoctrination. Jackson (2004) argues that an instructional approach towards RE does not allow for children to construct their own knowledge, which he emphasises is not static. It is important to emphasise this to children, so they realise that ‘there is no absolute knowledge to be attained and no external criteria for judging one narrative against another’ (p.63). Jackson’s approach celebrates different viewpoints in a non-judgemental manner. Faas, Foster & Smith (2016) support the use of diverse content in allowing for ‘respect, awareness and an explicit knowledge of cultural and religious diversity to be achieved’. (p.605).

Irish Policy and Practice

Irish policy and practice allow for parents to opt their child out of RE in Catholic primary schools. Although parents have the right to do so, some argue it enforces exclusion. Richardson, Niens, Mawhinney & Chiba (2013) argue it infringes on ‘the right of the child to freedom of thought, conscience and religion’ (p.240). However, this is problematised by the integrated curriculum, whereby the doctrine of RE is intertwined with all lessons. Thus, if a child has opted out, they remain exposed to RE. Daly (2009) argues that this ‘curtails the efficiency of the constitutional guarantee of a child’s right to withdraw from religious instruction classes’ (p.238). Franken (2017) argues for an approach that allows students to ‘opt in’. He sees it as a neutral approach in which all individuals are equal. (p.109).

The opt out clause is criticised when examined alongside legislation. Faas et al. (2015) point to the Irish Constitution as contradicting the opt out clause, arguing that it is ‘advocated that the State should respect religious affiliation, including the freedom to manifest beliefs and no person should be denied access to education’ (p.90). Yet, children who opt out are denied access to any form of RE. Under Article 44 of the Irish Constitution, the state should not discriminate based on religious belief. (Ireland, 1945, p.170). Yet, children opt out due to the limited capacity of the RE curriculum in addressing all religious beliefs. The UN Convention

on the Rights of the Child has been used to argue against the opt out method. This is highlighted by Coolahan et al. (2012) who argue that the opt out method 'is unsatisfactory because some children are deprived of an education opportunity to learn about religions and ethics' (p.88).

Alternative approaches towards RE

Jackson (2014) favours an inclusive approach and aims to rectify that 'some young people feel that some resources used in schools do not represent their own religious background fairly or accurately' (p.36). He believes RE should examine all religious and non-religious views, without indoctrination. However, due to the domination of Catholic primary schools in Ireland, there are not enough schools to cater for the growing population. Reports show there is demand for schools offering more diversification for students, particularly in urban areas. (Coolahan et al., 2012, p.43). Byrne, McGinnity, Smyth and Darmody (2010) argue that immigrant children suffer from a lack of choice when choosing a school that reflects a range of religious beliefs. They argue they lack knowledge of the school system while non-immigrant, middle class people are 'more likely to successfully negotiate access to their preferred school' (p.277). Yet, Daly (2009) argues parents need to realise their role as the primary educator of the child, including education in religion. He argues if children do not attend a school that reflects their religious beliefs, the opportunity remains for parents 'at a minimum, for them to access one which does not interfere with their authority in this domain' (p.246-247). Yet, this argument ignores the agency of the child in deciding their religious affiliation. Smyth, Darmody, Lyons, Lynch and Howlett (2013) found that a large proportion of children affiliated themselves with the religion of their parents, most commonly their mother, but do so critically. They develop their own interpretation, developing 'a personalized sense of religion and belief in interaction with, but not determined by, their family and school context' (p.129). They argue children are active agents in the moulding of their religious identity yet are denied this through a confessional approach.

Other approaches include secular schooling. O'Toole (2015) suggests this accommodates children of all faiths and no faith but is aware of its challenges. She argues that a programme not including RE could be perceived as 'discriminatory towards those of religious beliefs' (p.93). For many, religion permeates their existence, and is 'inextricably linked to each and every part of their lives' (p.94). Poulter (2017) outlines there has been a shift in the teaching of RE in Finland, from indoctrination towards the cultivation of good citizens. Through one's own world views, a 'moral education' is provided which helps 'pupils see their own responsibility in the world' (p.197). Therefore, RE can be a means of understanding the world.

Teaching World Religions

Many argue that RE is a tool to promote an understanding of diverse cultural backgrounds, which, as Miller and McKenna (2011) argue, is inseparable from the notion of religion. (p.177). It is argued that children need to understand different cultures to be responsible citizens. Davies (1999) argues that 'harmonious relationships between different religious and ethnic groups are more likely if world religions have been taught in an open and respectful manner' (p.76). This is relevant in Ireland as it becomes increasingly multi-cultural. Schweitzer (2013) argues that countries adopting an integrative approach produce citizens that are 'quite capable to deal with religious difference in public' (p.252).

Hella and Wright (2011) argue for the teaching of a plurality of religious world views. They use the analogy of a child who has never encountered purple before and cannot draw comparisons between it and other colours. This analogy is symbolic of children who had not encountered other beliefs. The children cannot draw comparisons and critically analyse the relationship between their own views and that of others and cannot appreciate views that are alternative to their own (p.59). Hella and Wright argue that understanding the relationship between one's own personal beliefs and the beliefs of others should be central in the teaching

of RE. This aligns with Barnes' (2002) argument that 'an appreciation of religion is gained only by an acquaintance with its diversity and variety in different cultural contexts' (p.24). Barnes argues it is not enough that children learn about world religions. To shape children's attitudes towards the 'other', they must be 'changed by personal experience, personal encounters and by personal example' (p.26). Barnes promotes a meaningful and active methodology when approaching world religions.

Teachers and RE

Jenkins and Masterson (2013) argue that issues relating to the absence of teaching world religions in primary school is owing to the teacher. They argue that ITE does not prepare teachers for the diversity which they are encountering in classrooms. They find teachers 'may or may not have had training on diversity matters' (p.479). They suggest that pre-service teachers need to have experience with other cultures to create 'critical agents for diversity teaching' (p.481). Jenkins and Masterson highlight that issues surrounding a lack of diversity permeate higher structures within Irish primary schools, such as the BOM. Their research conveys a situation where no Muslim, Jewish or other religious representation participated in the BOM. For change to happen, structures must be 'adjusted to enable representation from minority groups' for this to permeate the whole structure. (p.483). Davison and Keane (2018) highlight the lack of diversity among primary school teachers in Ireland surrounding religious belief, 'which may result in teachers not being able to make connections to students' lives, or prior learning' (p.235). They argue for teachers from diverse religious backgrounds to accommodate children from diverse religious backgrounds, as 'teachers from minority religious faiths tended to have a greater understanding of being marginalised, and that they believed they were in a better position to teach about social justice and critical thinking' (p.235). They argue that the homogeneity that exists needs to change.

Some argue the delivery of the patron's programme can impede on primary school teacher's identities, as they are restricted from delineating their beliefs. One reason for this is regarding job security, as many 'would be prepared to change 'fake' religious beliefs to gain secure employment' (Heinz et al., 2018, p. 242). Fahie (2016) argues the beliefs of the teacher can impact on teaching and learning, as it was found that 'the depth of the teachers' own commitment to their own religious beliefs, or their sense of personal spirituality, impacted significantly on their attitude towards the teaching of religion in schools' (p.16). These teachers expressed their preference for teaching a variety of beliefs, owing to Ireland's multi-cultural society, to enable children to 'make up their own minds' (p.239).

Conclusion

This chapter outlines arguments for and against the use of the Grow in Love curriculum in Irish, Catholic primary schools. The curriculum is criticised when examined alongside legislation and this chapter explains how the relationship between education and the Catholic church has allowed for the dominance of denominational schooling in Ireland. Alternative approaches towards RE have also been discussed. At the heart of this discussion is the teacher who delivers the patron's programme. Literature reveals that teachers have strong opinions on how religion should be taught. The following chapters aim to explore this, focusing on teacher's feelings and opinions towards the teaching of RE in Irish, Catholic primary schools.

Chapter 3: Methodologies

Introduction

This chapter outlines the methodologies used in creating the research project. This project uses a qualitative approach using semi-structured interviews and a demographic, online questionnaire. To test the research instrument, a pilot study was undertaken to highlight any flaws. Another means of preparation was reflecting on ethical considerations, the researchers own position and how to validate the study. These topics are discussed further in this chapter.

Qualitative Research & Interpretivism

When choosing a research methodology, Silverman & Marvasti (2008) argue that there is often bias towards one method. This should be avoided and ‘your choice of method should not be predetermined’ (p.8). Through examining what qualitative research can achieve, it was deemed the most appropriate method for this research project, which aims to explore the attitudes of primary school teachers in Ireland towards the teaching of RE in Catholic schools. The interview was chosen as the research tool, to hear participants experiences and give them the space to articulate this. Within qualitative research, ‘the goal is to try and understand how participants view the world, what it looks like through their eyes’ (Anderson & Arsenault, 1998, p.132). It allows the researcher an insight into individual experiences. This research is situated within the paradigm of interpretivism and aims to examine participants thoughts and experiences. This is achieved without taking one example to be truthful but appreciating that there are multiple truths. It is relevant in exploring the attitudes of primary school teachers towards the teaching of RE in Catholic primary schools, as it allows for an accurate portrayal of human experiences.

Semi-Structured Interviews

The semi-structured interview was chosen to address the research question, ‘what are teachers attitudes towards the teaching of RE in Catholic primary schools in Ireland?’. The semi-structured interview can be described as a ‘conversation with a purpose’ (Bell & Waters, 2014, p.181). It allowed the researcher to elicit information in a relaxed environment. Hochschild (as cited in Cohen, Mannion & Morrison, 2018) argues that interviews have advantages such as the ability to ‘explore issues in depth, to see how and why people frame their ideas in the ways that they do, how and why they make connections between ideas, values, events, opinion, behaviours, etc.’ (p.506). This was facilitated through open-ended questions which allowed for meaningful conversation between the researcher and the participant. Another advantage is ‘they make possible interviewing people who are far away and perhaps situated in locations that are inaccessible or even dangerous’ (2018, p.1000). This is relevant in the current Covid-19 pandemic which would make proximity interviews dangerous. The interview allowed for the researcher to further investigate points of interest mentioned by the participant, a freedom which other forms of data collection do not allow. However, this can cause difficulty in the analysis stage, due to different questions being posed to different participants. To rectify this, new questions were added to the interview schedule as the project progressed and points of discussion emerged. The interview can allow bias on behalf of the researcher, which can shape the course of the interview and the responses of participants. To minimise this risk, the researcher reflected on this prior to the commencement of interviews.

Participants were previously known to the researcher which can allow a degree of bias in that participants may have answered in the way they deemed the researcher preferred. To overcome this, the researcher examined transcriptions carefully to find coherence with individual participants responses.

Topics for the interview included questions about teaching RE, opting out, the teaching of world religions and what changes participants would like to see regarding the teaching of RE in Catholic primary schools. These topics formed the basis for 25 questions included in the interview schedule, which was developed to allow for a range of feedback and perspectives. The interview schedule was constructed with the aim of delving into the complexities of teaching RE and allowing participants to reflect on their encounters with such complexities and give their opinions. To create the interview schedule, the researcher used their knowledge of available literature and posed questions based on the most pressing issues emerging from this. The researcher brainstormed other relevant areas to create questions. A copy of the interview schedule can be found at Appendix B. Participants, on average, completed the interview in 35 minutes.

Demographic Questionnaire

An online questionnaire was distributed to all participants. A copy can be found at Appendix C. This questionnaire gathered demographic information regarding the individuals. Seven questions were posed, including topics such as years of teaching experience, age range, experience of class levels, current class level, school type and description of school. This allowed the researcher to collect data about the participants 'for a relatively low cost, in terms of materials, money and time', which is one of the major advantages of questionnaires. (Denscombe, 2014, p.180). The data collected provides a numeric representation of their backgrounds, to contextualise the interview.

The Pilot

A pilot was run to identify areas for improvement within the questionnaire and the interview schedule. Bryman (2012) argues that undertaking a pilot with those 'not a part of the main study may be a legitimate way of carrying out some preliminary analysis' (p.201). The

participant in question had experience in teaching RE at a Senior Infants level, in a Catholic, Urban, DEIS school, but was not part of the sample and was not included as part of the study. The interview was carried out in an identical manner to that which was carried out with the sample. A zoom call was used to communicate. The researcher reminded the participant of the information included in the consent sheet, conducted the interview, and undertook a feedback session. The participant completed a feedback sheet which aided the researcher in reframing questions and highlighting areas causing difficulty. The participant identified areas of improvement regarding the phrasing of questions, such as the use of the term ‘patrons programme’. The participant had not encountered this phrase before, and it caused difficulty for them. Thus, the title of the curriculum, ‘Grow in Love’, was used to replace this phrase. Hinds (2000) highlights the importance of pilots, as it is ‘particularly important to ensure respondents don’t misunderstand the questions you have asked’ (p.46). The importance of remaining neutral was realised through this process. Gentle encouragement was noticed to be a feature in the responses of the researcher during the pilot, which has the potential to persuade the contributions of the participants. The researcher’s awareness of this was heightened and responses which would usually be used were replaced with more neutral phrases.

Participant Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

To address the research question, it was necessary to include teachers who had experience in the teaching of RE in Catholic primary schools in Ireland. Grounds for exclusion included employment as an SNA, lack of experience in teaching RE and lack of experience in a mainstream classroom. A total of 8 teachers were chosen through the method of purposeful sampling, in which the researcher used their prior knowledge of participants to deem them eligible and knowledgeable regarding the chosen topic. This is a useful method due to its time efficiency. Participants were contacted privately to seek their agreement to be involved and were previously known to the researcher through various connections made in primary schools.

Those contacted agreed to contribute to the research project and confirmed that they met the eligibility criteria. This was agreed in an informal manner initially. Following this, the researcher distributed both an information letter and a consent form to participants to guarantee their involvement, which can be found at Appendix A. This was signed and returned to the researcher.

Research Protocol

8 semi-structured interviews were conducted with primary school teachers. Participants were sent an information sheet and letter of consent to review. Each participant printed and signed the form and returned this electronically to the researcher. The beginning of each interview featured a review of the information sheets and letters of consent to ensure participants were comfortable with the process. Participants were reminded of their right to withdraw and that information would be kept confidential using pseudonyms and any naming of schools would be avoided or disguised. Transcriptions of the information would remain unshared. Through the information letter and a reminder at the beginning of each interview, participants were made aware that the interview would be recorded and stored privately using a password protected zip file. They would be stored until the research project was complete and then deleted to ensure confidentiality. The interviews were conducted via Zoom and lasted approximately 35 minutes in total. Each interview was conducted on a one-on-one basis and recorded via Zoom. A back up recording was created using a mobile device, on the app named 'Easy voice recorder'. Each recording was transcribed thereafter.

Ethical considerations

This study was designed to pose minimal risk to participants. Participants were made aware of this through the information sheet which outlined procedures for confidentiality. It explained the participants right to review and edit the data. It outlined procedures for

anonymising identities of individuals and schools, and processes for deleting data following the completion of the project. Although the risk of anonymity is threatened by the collection of data via video recording, this was alleviated by using a password protected zip folder, stored on the researcher's device. Participants were reminded of their right to withdraw. If this request were placed, the researcher would dispose of all data pertaining to that individual.

Ethical consideration was given to the topic of RE as it is one which can be contentious. This topic was given SERC approval prior to the commencement of the research to ensure it aligned with ethical values. Relevant ethical considerations were reflected upon, such as the delivery of RE in classrooms and avoiding conversation regarding the researcher's personal religious beliefs, or the personal religious beliefs of participants. The proposal for this topic was reviewed and accepted by the Student Ethics in Research Committee (SERC).

Consideration was given to questions posed to ensure that the researcher would not be seen to be attempting to elicit information on the participants own religious beliefs or practices. Consideration was given to questions regarding the teaching of RE to ensure the researcher would not be seen as bringing judgement to the interview regarding teacher's practices. Regarding world religions, questions were generated to ensure they did not cause the participant to feel their practice was inadequate if it is not something they teach. Questions were phrased in a general way to avoid topics becoming personal.

Researcher Reflexivity

It is necessary that the researcher reflects on their own opinions and underlying biases, to avoid bringing such ideas into the interview process. Cohen, Mannion and Morrison (2018) argue that, 'as there are many participants involved, each of whom has his/her own authentic meaning and interpretation, there will be multiple realities and accounts' (p.300). It is important the researcher does not shape the sharing of these realities and elicits authentic information.

Underlying biases may stem from the researcher's personal background. (Creswell, 2018, p.258). This holds the potential to direct the interview process if left unaddressed. Creswell suggests taking notes throughout the research process and limiting discussion regarding the researchers past experiences to overcome this.

Underlying biases that the researcher addressed were their opinion regarding the teaching of RE in primary schools. The researcher holds strong views regarding a teacher's beliefs, in that they should not allow this to influence their teaching of RE. The researcher believes that RE should be taught in a broader manner which would not involve faith formation but would educate children on different belief systems. The researcher believes this would alleviate some issues which exist surrounding opting out and provide for an inclusive classroom environment, where difference is celebrated. By reflecting on these opinions and biases, the researcher will be more aware of how this can influence the research and thus prevent bias.

Strategies for Validation

As participants were previously known to the researcher, it is important to add validity to the project to present the findings as uncompromised by the pre-existing relationship between the researcher and the chosen participants. Creswell (2018) defines validity as checking 'for the accuracy of the findings by employing certain procedures. (p.274). Similarly, Robson (2002) defines validity as findings that are 'accurate, or correct, or true' (p.170). Creswell recommends using validity procedures, including searching for discrepant and negative cases, maintenance of an audit trail and researcher reflexivity, all of which were employed throughout this study. Another method used for validation was the collection of rich data. This was followed by a process of transcription which detailed the experience of primary school teachers regarding the teaching of RE. The researcher paid attention to respondent

validation throughout the interview process. This allowed participants the opportunity for clarification and avoided misinterpretation of information.

Transferability

Transferability is described as ‘a process in which the researcher and the reader infer how the findings might relate to other situations’ (Denscombe, 2009, p.189). Within qualitative research, it is imperative that the researcher provides sufficient information for the researcher and the reader to undertake this exercise to validate the research findings.

To allow transferability for the research findings, the researcher engaged with a demographic questionnaire to inform the reader of the backgrounds of the participants under headings such as age, qualification, teaching experience etc. The researcher ensured participants had a range of backgrounds and experiences. This aided the transferability of data.

The researcher provided thick description regarding the interview process with each participant. This allowed the reader an insight into the data collection process and the opportunity to engage with transferability, using their judgement to determine if they feel the findings and conclusions of this study have relevance to specific contexts which they are familiar with.

Data Analysis

In analysing the data, the researcher attempted to extract meaning and understand the viewpoints of participants to answer the research question. The researcher followed six steps, as outlined by Braun & Clarke (2006), beginning with engagement with the data. This was achieved through the construction of transcriptions which were closely analysed and used for dual purpose – to familiarise the researcher with the data collected and to interpret it. Through coding, the researcher was enabled to give ‘full and equal attention to each data item’, before

identifying themes and sub themes which emerged from the data (p.89). This process was undertaken electronically, in conjunction with computerised transcriptions.

In the next phase, searching for themes, Braun & Clarke (2006) recommend the use of two levels of analysis. In level one, the researcher searched for themes based off the coding and identified patterns and level two ensured that these themes work with the data set. At level two, one must revisit the coding to ensure inclusion of all relevant information and to interpret the information further, as Anderson & Arsenault (1998) describe data analysis as ‘a continuous activity that constantly evolves’, particularly in relation to the nature of qualitative research (p.138). Deciding on the final definition of themes relates to stage five of the process, before the researcher produces the report and thus has completed the six steps of data analysis.

Conclusion

This chapter details the methods used in the construction of this research project. Rationale is given for the chosen research method and an insight into the methodologies used in the construction of semi structured interviews are given. This chapter outlines the effectiveness of the demographic questionnaires in gaining insight into the background of the sample. Ethical considerations are outlined as an important reflection and the researcher has outlined considerations taken. Other concepts such as researcher reflexivity, transferability and validity are also discussed and evidenced.

The following chapter will discuss findings that emerged from the data, having analysed the information. The three emerging themes will be discussed in detail. The researcher will compare and contrast the ideas and thoughts of the 8 participants with literature which has been published on these matters.

Chapter 4: Findings and discussion

Introduction

This chapter outlines findings from interviews conducted with 8 primary school teachers and findings from the demographic questionnaire, which allows an insight into the backgrounds of participants. Three themes emerged from the data including the need for more support in the teaching of RE, challenges associated with opting out, and enthusiasm towards teaching world religions.

Demographic questionnaire findings

Eight primary school teachers completed a demographic questionnaire as part of this study. Of the 8 participants, 3 have been teaching for between 1 and 4 years, 3 have been teaching for between 5 and 9 years, and the remaining 2 have between 10 and 20 years of teaching experience.

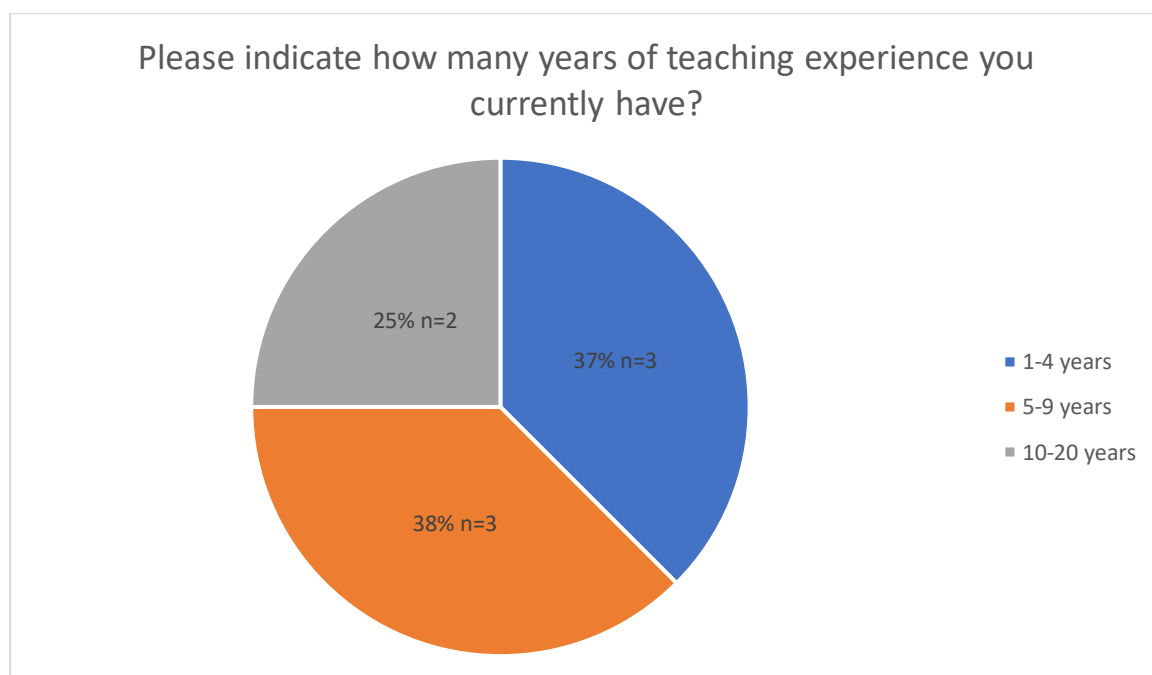


Chart 1: Participants' years of teaching experience

The age range of participants was recorded. Six participants are between the ages of 20 and 30, 1 participant is between 31-40 years of age, and 1 participant is between 51-60 years.

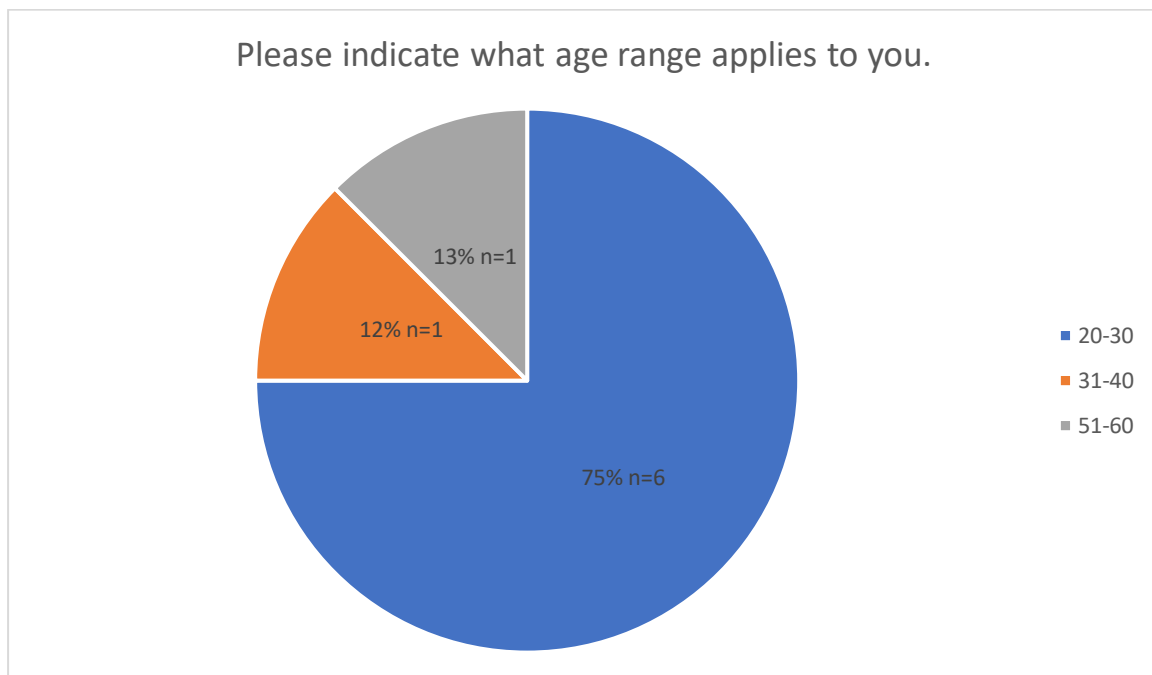


Chart 2: Participants' age range

A range of teaching qualifications were identified, including B.Ed, PME and other. One participant undertook the PME course, 5 participants undertook the B.Ed course and 2 participants described their qualification as 'other'. Qualifications described as 'other' included 'Higher Diploma in Arts in Primary Education' and 'Graduate Diploma in Education'.

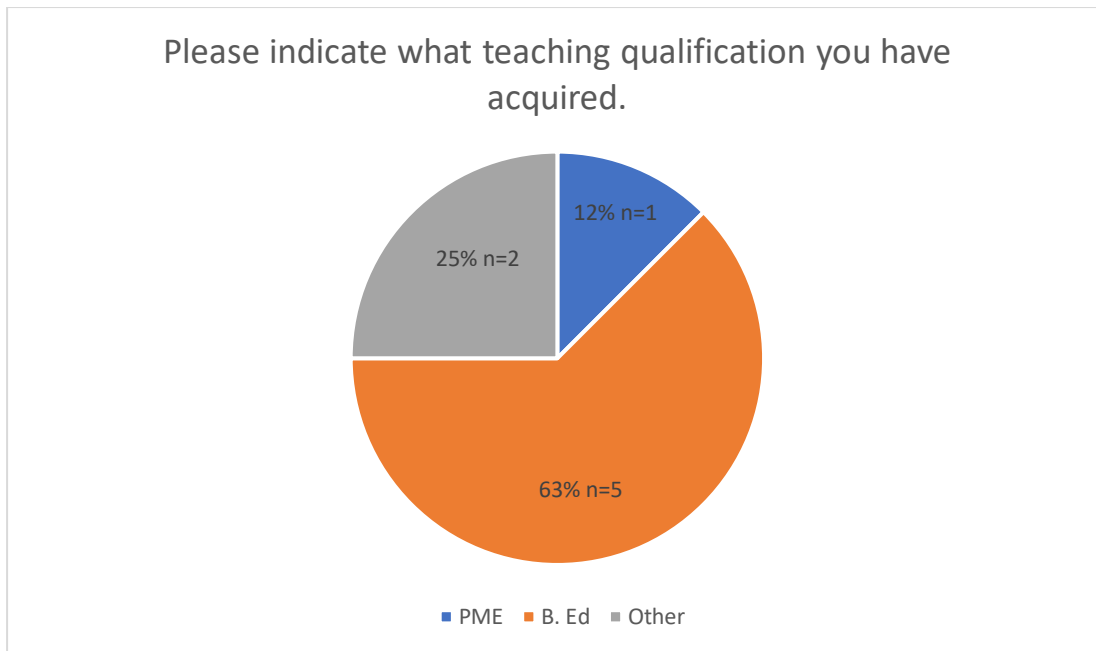


Chart 3: Participants' qualifications

Participants identified what school types they have experience in. Eight participants had experience in Catholic schools, with 1 participant having experience in an ET school, and 1 participant having experienced an Islamic School outside of Ireland.

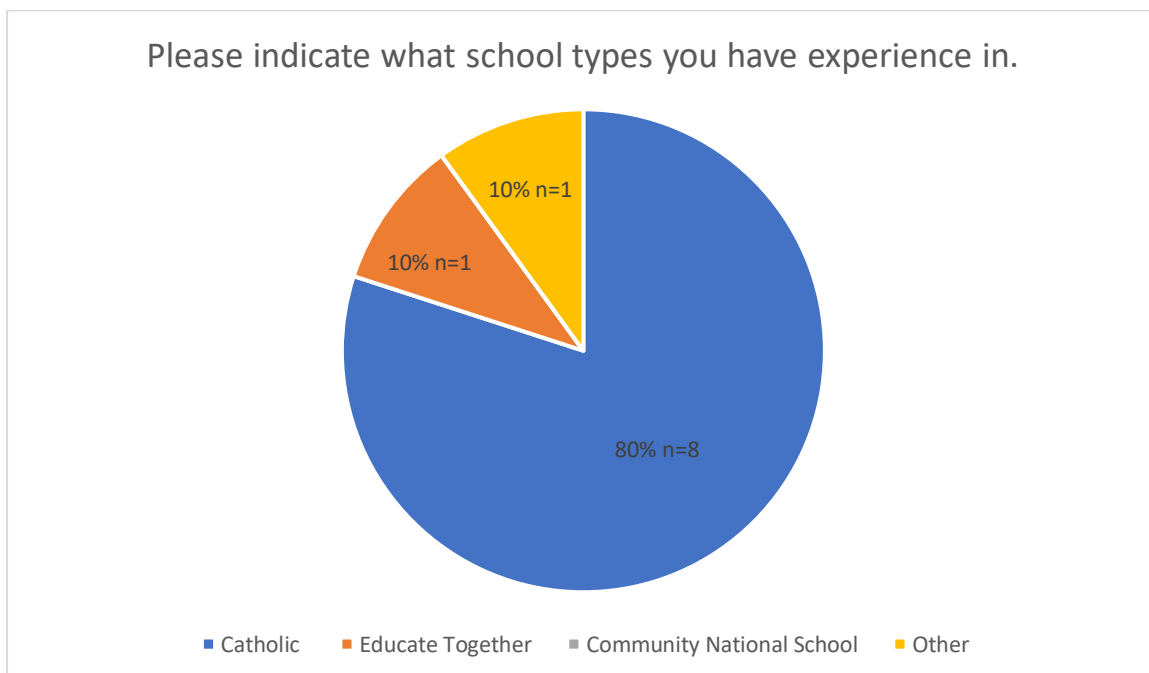


Chart 4: Participants experience of school types

Participants shared what class levels they had experience with. Participants demonstrated a variety of experience with different class levels.

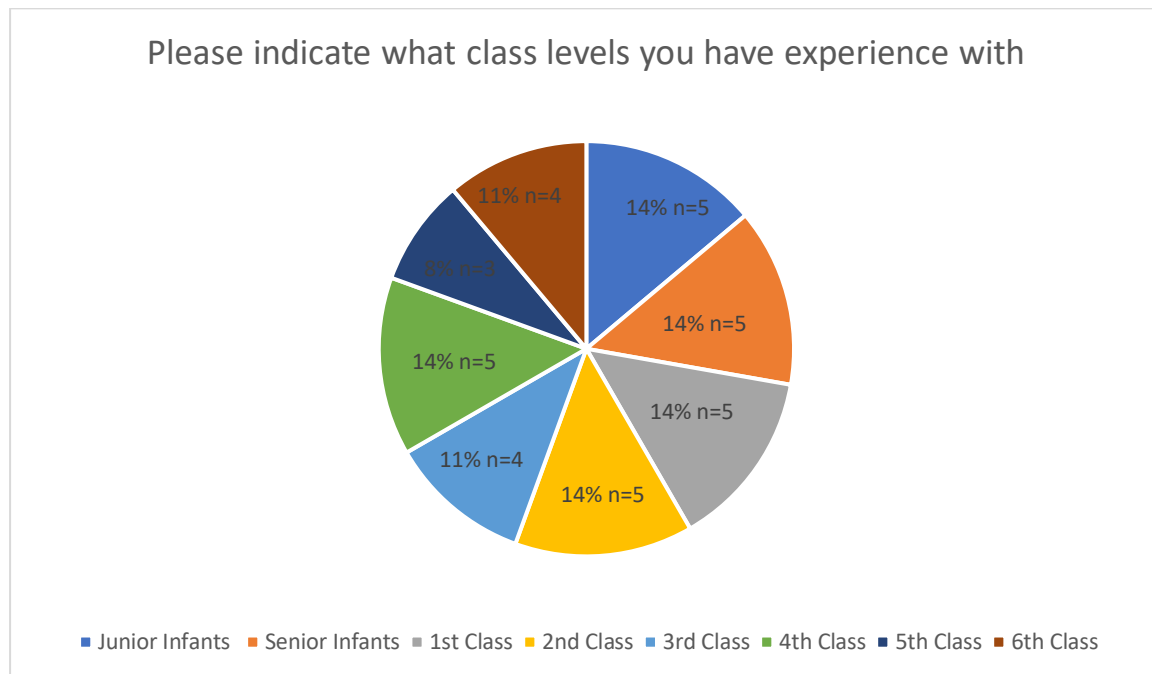


Chart 5: Participants' experience of class levels

Participants disclosed what class level they are currently teaching. This spanned from Junior Infants to 6th class, with 1 participant teaching Junior Infants, 2 teaching Senior Infants, 2 teaching 4th class, 2 teaching 5th class, and one teacher in a multigrade setting including 3rd, 4th, 5th and 6th class.

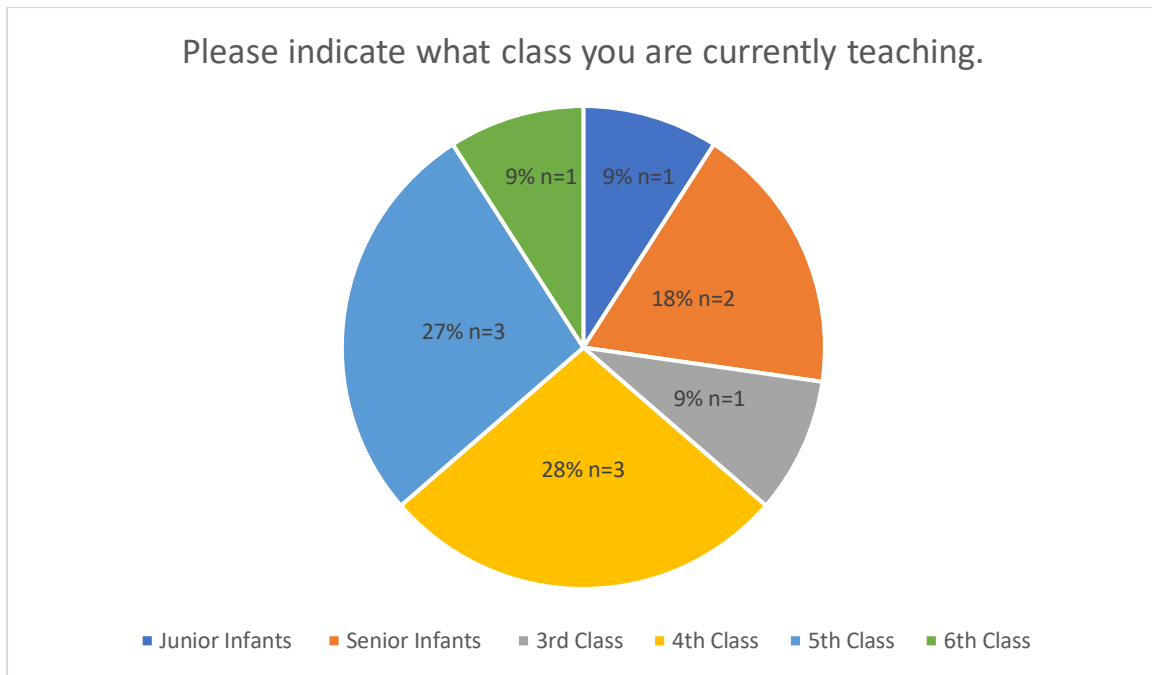


Chart 6: Class currently taught by participants

Participants were asked to identify their school as urban, rural, DEIS or non-DEIS. Four schools were described as rural, 2 schools were described as urban, and 2 schools were described as urban and non-DEIS.

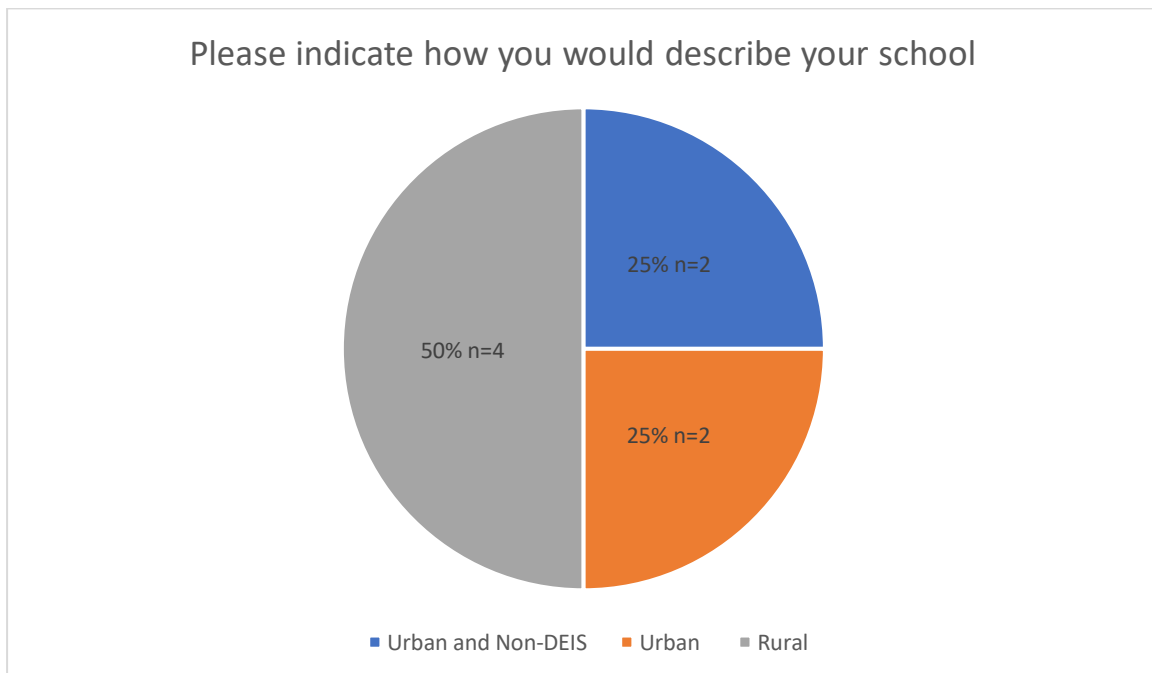


Chart 7: Participants' description of school

Summary of Thematic Findings

Participants were generally positive about the teaching of RE, viewing it as a means of instilling morals and values in children. The three themes below outline the points of interest which emerged from this data.

Theme	Summary
Lack of support in teaching RE	Teachers expressed concern about a lack of support from parents regarding RE. Teachers appreciated support from the Parish priest when it existed but expressed difficulty when this support was absent.
Challenges associated with opting out	Teachers expressed difficulties with opting out owing to concerns such as alienation among children who have opted out, additional planning and preparation and the continued exposure of children to religion, despite opting out.
Emphasising the importance of world religions	All teachers expressed willingness to teach world religions but acknowledged drawbacks which may occur such as time constraints and other teachers.

Theme One - Lack of support in teaching RE

Participants highlighted that RE places pressure on teachers owing to the realities of the classroom in Catholic primary schools and the lack of support than some teachers feel. Many teachers desired to incorporate more involvement from the wider community in the faith formation of children. Teachers pointed to the role of parents and support from the local parish

Priest as essential in the faith formation of children yet felt it was these two groups that they most commonly received a lack of support from.

Parental involvement

Many participants felt a lack of support from parents regarding the teaching of RE. Some believe it is seen as a subject of less importance and one that parents are not interested in. Amy states, 'I've never had a parent ask me about religion', explaining how other subjects such as Maths or Irish would take prominence in conversations with parents. Vemeer (2009) provides potential rationale for this, noticing a decline in religious affiliation in Western Europe which has led to a situation whereby 'parents no longer take the religious upbringing of their children very seriously' (p.202). Nadine feels that parents have little knowledge regarding the RE curriculum and how this takes shape in the classroom. She explains, 'I don't actually know do parents know what's in Grow in Love, that's the whole thing. How much do parents know about religion in schools, that's another question'. A similar feeling is reflected in research by Darmody, Lyons and Smyth (2016), in which they state that 'parents indicated that they did not in fact have detailed knowledge of the religious, moral and value messages taught at their child(ren)'s school' (p.258).

The lack of support from parents extends to outside of the school community, as teachers believe parents are not involved with Mass and practicing prayers. Robyn reports that when asking her class who attended mass at the weekend, 'about three out of thirty hands went up'. Robyn believes that extra-curricular activities are affecting children's attendance at Mass. Another teacher reported that 'maybe the bits of religion and prayers that I do in the classroom is probably the only prayers that some children will ever do' (Elma). Vermeer (2009) believes this may be because 'parents no longer consider a denominational school, and probably the church as well, to be partners in their children's religious upbringing' (p.202), and as a result,

distance themselves from school and church regarding RE. Teachers report some children as lacking knowledge of fundamental aspects of faith formation, such as blessing themselves and knowing major figures such as Jesus Christ, and feel parents should play a bigger role in educating their children in RE. This aligns with the perspective of the Catholic Church, who state that ‘parents have the first responsibility for the education of their children’ (Catechism of the Catholic Church, n.d). Through further studies, it is evident that ‘children’s beliefs, practices and perceived religiosity are clearly associated with those of their parents, especially of their mothers’ (Smyth et al., 2013, p.124). Darmody et al. (2016) highlight that teachers appreciate ‘the importance of greater parental involvement in the religious development of the child’ (p.254). Teachers feel that a lack of support from parents is affecting the child’s education in RE.

Yet, some participants reported increased support from parents during Sacramental preparation. Robyn describes parents getting involved and bringing their children to Mass in preparation for the Sacraments. Robyn notices how parents look to the teacher for ‘when to stand, when to kneel’, which tells Robyn that this is not something parents usually engage in and she appreciates efforts made during this time. Elma describes a situation whereby parents become more involved during Sacrament years. She highlights First Class, Second Class and Sixth Class as times when they are more involved. However, she explains that she believes parents with children in other classes ‘don’t really care’. Natasha raises the question of Irish people being involved in religious ceremonies such as weddings and funerals but failing to become involved in habitual worship at Sunday Mass. She questions the integrity involved with the Sacraments and wonders, ‘is it just going through the motion of a box and a tick?’. The overwhelming response from teachers is they feel solely responsible for the faith formation of children for most of their time in primary school.

The lack of support from parents in their children's religious education questions their rationale for Sacramental preparation, particularly when contemplated alongside their reported lack of personal involvement with the Catholic Church. It presupposes that parents do not consider their own role in the faith formation of their children and view it as the role of the primary school teacher.

Involvement of Parish priest

The involvement of the parish Priest was seen to be fundamental in the teaching of RE in Catholic schools by participants. Six out of the eight participants expressed the importance of having a relationship with the parish Priest, while four participants explained how children enjoy interacting with the Priest. Robyn describes how the children feel during these intervals as 'it was a sense of importance, a visitor, and they did want to listen'. Helen, who reports a close relationship with the parish Priest, commented on how this relationship benefits the children and supports her in her practice. She explains, 'our parish priest is really involved so if you ever had any kind of questions or anything, he would always come into the class and chat to them so there wouldn't ever be a time where I'd feel unsupported in it'. Therefore, the parish Priest is seen to be a figure who allows teachers to feel supported in their role in teaching RE.

For 4 teachers without this relationship with their parish Priest, they desire this support. Nadine feels Priests should re-establish a connection she feels has been lost between schools and the Church, and she feels 'Priests are left out there on their own'. Research from a US context shows that parish Priests are given little input in their initial training in how to 'work effectively in their parish schools'. (Boyle, 2017, p.121). This is potentially relevant in an Irish context, as undergraduate theology courses in St Patricks campus, Maynooth only provide input on 'teaching religion in a contemporary Irish school' as an optional module. Thus, it is

possible that parish Priests have no experience in this area. Participants disagree with the notion that the presence of clergyman ‘can be a source of concern’ or find this involvement ‘intimidating’. (Fahie, 2016, p.19). Teachers in Fahie’s study explained how they feared clergymen to be attempting to examine their personal lives from a religious viewpoint and pass judgement on this, making them feel vulnerable.

A lack of involvement from the parish Priest means that children are missing out on the formation of relationships with a figure who can provide them with insightful meaning and enhance their understanding of RE. It allows teachers to feel increasingly isolate and they are lacking a figure who can provide support and help, should they need it to support their practice.

Theme Two - Challenges facing teachers associated with opting out

The term ‘opt out’ in relation to RE in an Irish context permits parents to remove their child from religious instruction which is contrary to their beliefs. As stated in article 30 (e) of the Education Act 1998, schools ‘shall not require any student to attend instruction in any subject which is contrary to the conscience of the parent of the student’ (Ireland, 1998). None of the participants had any issues with opting out, but evidently, challenges prevail in this area. Children are exposed to RE despite having opted out and remain in the classroom throughout the lesson. Additional pressures face teachers owing to the opt out clause which requires increased planning and preparation for these lessons. Teachers expressed concern about how children feel about opting out, noting where children have expressed or demonstrated a sense of exclusion.

Exposure to RE for all children

Teachers expressed concern regarding children who have opted out but are exposed to elements of RE. Exposure to RE was a concern because children opting out were generally referred to as belonging to a different belief system, and thus teachings within RE lessons

would be conflicting, owing to its confessional approach. This can be alleviated by removing the child from the classroom, as in Karla's case. She reports that no child stays in the classroom for RE if they have opted out. However, Laura explains that her school does not have the resources to facilitate this and as a result, 'the child who opts out knows just as much religion as the rest of the children'. This aligns with Frances' experience, who details the difficulties that opting out can cause, particularly among parents. She recalls an incident whereby a child opted out of RE but was found to be reciting Catholic prayers at home. Having clarified the situation with the parents, Frances recalls that they were understanding. However, the situation caused her stress as she thought of how problematic it could have been, had the parents not been understanding. Faas et al. (2015), argue this causes conflict for children who have opted out, as it means 'these students may be exposed to conflicting sets of values – one set at home, another outside' (p.92). Some teachers expressed difficulty in that RE lessons may not always be planned for. Helen describes how 'I find if I have 10 minutes to spare before lunch, I might do a little bit'. Elma also describes it as a good 'time filler' when tasks finish quickly. Teachers are forced to plan rigorously owing to this. Therefore, these instances suggest that the opt out clause is not proficient in aligning with the realities of the classroom.

Although recent publications have considered the issue of opting out at post primary level, there is no literature which guides primary school teachers' practice regarding opting out. Legislation suggests that the presence of children opting out during RE is not acceptable, particularly owing to the information given by participants regarding the knowledge of children who have opted out. In providing policies and guidelines, more consideration needs to be given to the realities of the classroom, as although children's participation is limited, they are in attendance.

Additional planning and preparation

Teachers face pressures with planning and preparation due to opting out. All teachers provide the child/children in question with tasks to avoid them becoming 'idle' (Elma). This includes reading, writing, and catching up on unfinished work. Elma describes the pressures teachers face in keeping this work interesting, explaining that 'there's only so much 'go and read your library book' that you can say to them'. Frances mentions that she provides a 'Busy pack', that takes additional planning and preparation on her behalf. These activities vary among schools. Robyn states that within Catholic primary schools in Ireland, there are no guidelines regarding what the procedure should be when children have opted out, as explained by Coolahan et al. (2012), who state that 'no guidelines or exemplars of good practice have been provided to schools' (p.27). Teachers expressed difficulty with younger classes, owing to their dependence on the teacher. Helen reports that activities must be chosen carefully to avoid children disrupting the class, being mindful that 'you don't want to take away from the rest of the classes experience of the religion lesson either'.

Thus, the decision is left to the discretion of the teacher, which leads to different situations occurring across schools. Teachers are not given guidelines explaining how to facilitate this in the classroom in a realistic and appropriate manner and need to be provided with exemplars of good practice for preparing and planning for children opting out.

Alienation and division among children

Teachers expressed concern regarding alienation among children opting out of RE. Participants explained it was not their peers who alienated the children opting out, rather, it was the children themselves that felt alienated. Amy describes how one child became upset because he did not possess a Grow in Love book, while the remainder of his class did. Frances reports an incident in a Junior class whereby children were wondering why they had no book,

as others did. This disparity extends further at certain times of the year, as explained by Elma. For a period leading up to Christmas, she feels children who have opted out feel disconnected from their peers, as ‘you’re preparing for a Christmas nativity maybe from the middle of November maybe earlier sometimes, and that child is missing out on kind of engaging with their friends and being involved’. Faas et al. (2016) report major Catholic events as a widespread issue among teachers, who ‘have expressed that they experienced little difficulty including minority faith children in regular RE lessons, [but] sacramental preparation during the school day posed great difficulty in this regard’. (p.610). Karla describes an experience whereby parents made alternative arrangements for their child while the remainder of the school attended mass. Mawhinney (2007) suggests that parents of a minority faith have concern for their children, as they feel as though this exclusion enforces the message that ‘you don’t belong to this community’ (p.394). Therefore, children feel a sense of alienation from their peers.

Robyn feels that opting out causes alienation. She describes the feeling in the classroom as ‘an invisible divide’. Although she acknowledges that it depends on the child, she senses reluctance among some children to discuss the issue of opting out, which she speculates could be because, ‘some children don’t know why they’ve opted out, that decision has been made for them by parents’. Participants acknowledge that it is the child who has opted out who internalises feelings of alienation and this is not necessarily heightened by their peers. Kitching & Shanneik (2015) found similar attitudes among children, who felt that those who participated in religious activities within school, such as First Holy Communion, were seen as “belonging more” to the school community’ than those who did not partake (p.46).

To overcome this, teachers should facilitate open conversation with the class group regarding religious difference, given parents’ permission. This could be inspired by storybooks which feature such characters, such as ‘Hats of Faith’ by Medeia Cohan. The teacher should

demonstrate inclusivity through acts of kindness and words of affirmation to reassure children opting out that they are an important part of the community, regardless of their religious affiliation.

Theme Three - Emphasising the Importance of World Religions

All participants were willing to be more inclusive of other religions and all expressed a sense of comfort in teaching world religions. However, various teachers acknowledge difficulties which could emerge, including time constraints and resistance from older cohorts of teachers.

Positive Attitudes Towards World Religions

All teachers demonstrated positivity towards teaching world religions if there was an increased focus on this within the RE curriculum. Helen feels it is important for children to have an awareness of this because of the increasingly diverse nature of schools, 'to show people from different religions and different cultures that you are welcome and we're all the same'. Some teachers commented on their situation as one which is 'sheltered' and that the children are living in a 'bubble', and that teaching world religions allows the children's minds to be broadened. Additionally, it is important for them to recognise that 'that person is different and they have a different belief system but they're playing on the yard with me and that's okay' (Natasha). This aligns with research involving teachers from Heinz et al. (2018) which highlights that all participants 'were strongly in favour of teaching children about all faiths' (p.242). Additionally, all teachers reported they would be comfortable with teaching world religions in a Catholic school.

Frances feels stereotypes about people of different religions can be portrayed through media and that teaching world religions provides children with the skills they need to be critical of this and to realise 'that that's not right or that's not wrong, it's just the way it is'. Elma looks

to the children's future as a time when they may need to have this education in world religions, as they could encounter these individuals in the world of work, for example, and having this knowledge would be 'a step closer to making the world a better place'. This is congruent with Davies' (1999) argument that 'as children grow up, they are more and more likely to encounter people of other faiths. Harmonious relationships between different religious and ethnic groups are more likely if world religions have been taught in an open and respectful manner' (p.76). Therefore, the overwhelming response was a positive attitude towards the teaching of more world religions within RE in Catholic schools.

Children's Enthusiasm for World Religions

Teachers who engage with teaching world religions explain the enthusiasm among children in learning about this. Frances explained how children asked if they could do projects about Islam, having learned about it in RE. She explains how 'they felt like they had achieved something almost by understanding another religion a bit more'. This sense of achievement motivated them to learn more. Nadine explains that children view the learning of world religions as 'just something else that they learn', explaining how they soak up information 'like sponges' and see no distinction between that learning and other areas of learning. Teachers who identified as not engaging with world religions believe children would be open to this. Laura describes the children in her class as 'so accepting' and she foresees that they would 'be happy to learn'. All teachers expressed that this would be a welcomed change to the curriculum among children. This is evidence that there is scope available to implement this change.

Challenges of Teaching World Religions

Many teachers expressed concerns about time constraints encountered within RE and that they do not cover the required time for RE as it stands. Amy explains that she finds it 'very tough to fit in religion for half an hour a day, it's kind of just when they're eating their lunch

you might fit in a story or something'. In relation to the teaching of world religions, Karla explains that she feels all curricular areas are overloaded. She emphasises that adding to this workload might 'pressurise teachers to get everything covered' and suggests that teachers could use their own initiative to add in lessons about world religions. This shows the pressure's teacher's feel to include all aspects of the RE curriculum and shows how time constraints could be a possible drawback from moving towards the inclusion of more world religions.

Some teachers expressed that perhaps not all teachers would be willing to include information about world religions as part of the RE curriculum. Some younger teachers believed it could be problematic for older teachers. Amy believes this cohort of teachers may be 'set in their ways', and 'used to teaching in a certain way' and would be reluctant to introduce world religions. Robyn believes that younger cohorts of teachers have more experience in this area through their college education and thus 'are slightly more open minded'. She believes older teachers may be lacking this experience due to the generational gap that exists. Kitching (2013) explains that 'both adults and children's religious identifications are situated in, and may be articulated through political, economic, cultural and geographical circumstances' (p.22). Some participants feel cultural circumstances may have influenced this older cohort of teachers in their potential feelings. Elma explains that she has witnessed reluctance among parents, describing them as 'still very backwards and stuck in our grandparents age and don't want talking of other religions'. Nadine acknowledges difficulties among teachers if they are 'devout Catholics' and feel as though passing on this belief is central to their role as a teacher.

There is an enthusiastic response towards the inclusion of world religions in the RE curriculum from both teachers and children. It is possible that those who participants mentioned could possibly be reluctant to this change are experiencing a sense of discomfort owing to their lack of knowledge and experience with world religions. This could be alleviated through

increased training and availability of information about world religions to provide a reference point for information which they are unsure of.

Conclusion

This chapter outlined the findings from interviews conducted to analyse the attitudes of primary school teachers towards the teaching of RE. The study found that three themes emerged, including the need for more support in the teaching of RE, the challenges associated with opting out, and enthusiasm regarding teaching world religions. The following chapter will outline the researcher's recommendations and conclusions, based on the information gathered.

Chapter 5: Recommendations and Conclusion

Introduction

This study aimed to gather information regarding the attitudes of primary school teachers towards the teaching of RE in Catholic primary schools in Ireland. A series of interviews were transcribed, analysed and examined, from which three themes emerged. These themes were discussed in the previous chapter. This chapter uses these findings to provide recommendations.

Key Findings and implications

This section highlights key findings emerging from this study, including a lack of support when teaching RE, difficulty with the practice of opting out of RE, and enthusiasm regarding teaching world religions.

Lack of Support When Teaching RE

Participants highlighted a lack of support from parents and the Parish priest in teaching RE. Teachers feel they are solely responsible for the faith formation of children. Deirdre O'Connor (2010) states there is concern surrounding teaching a religion that is not supported at home by parents, and not supported by clergymen. Yet, participants who reported a positive relationship with their parish Priest explained how this allows them to feel supported in their teaching of RE. This suggests that this support is important to teachers and they value this input. It suggests that more efforts should be made to link in with parents and the parish Priest, to allow the teaching of RE to become a community effort. This would alleviate the concerns of teachers and allow for responsibility to be shared. This could be facilitated through the regular meeting of these parties to discuss important elements of faith formation and allow each party to take responsibility for faith formation among the children. These parties could keep in touch through regular updates via e-mail which would allow these channels of communication

and support to remain open between meeting times. In facilitating this, parents could choose to opt in and engage with the community in this way, providing a social outlet whereby discussion surrounding RE in school can be facilitated.

Difficulties with the Practice of “Opting Out” of RE

The second theme emerging was challenges associated with opting out. The data shows that various methods are utilised for children opting out, such as additional work or leaving the classroom to work with an SET teacher. There are no guidelines for teachers which places an additional workload on them and causes concern regarding the children in question being exposed to RE and/or feeling alienated from their peers. This aligns with findings from Richardson et al. (2013), which state that teachers found difficulty in ‘making realistic alternative provision for those children who did opt out’ (p.241). The lack of guidance given to teachers regarding opting out situates them in a compromised position, whereby parents believe their child is not learning religion, but they are unconsciously doing so, owing to their presence in the classroom. Ultimately, this issue is too contentious to be left to the discretion of the teacher. This issue needs to be addressed by DES, considering situations where schools do not have the resources available to remove the child from the classroom. The DES need to address the issue of children being exposed to RE despite having opted out, as this ultimately compromises the wishes of the parents and the child.

Teachers Enthusiasm towards the teaching of World Religions

The third theme emerging from the data was that teachers are enthusiastic about teaching world religions. All participants favoured the inclusion of more world religions within the RE programme but acknowledged factors which could hinder this, including time constraints and an older cohort of teachers who may be opposed to it. Richardson (2014) argues that this would aid in ‘cultivating appropriate attitudes, against a background of upholding

certain values, including tolerance, respecting the right of others' (p.33). Participants agreed with using world religions to instil values and morals such as tolerance and acceptance. This suggests that there is space for a change and a willingness among some teachers to move towards this.

Recommendations

This section details the recommendations from the researcher based on the above findings.

Developing a community approach towards the teaching of RE. Participants acknowledged the lack of support felt regarding the teaching of RE, particularly from parents and the parish Priest. It is recommended that the teaching of RE moves towards a community approach. Meetings should be facilitated which involve teachers, parents and Priests to discuss the faith formation of the children, particularly during important times in the year such as Christmas and Easter. This could be an opt in method for parents who are devoted to the faith formation of their children and want to become more involved. This would share the responsibility between all three parties and reduce the pressure placed on teachers who can feel isolated in their role in faith formation with the children. This idea is one which has been brought forward in recent times by leading figures in the Catholic Church, who feel as though links between families, schools and churches need to be built for children to receive the best education. This suggestion coincides with this recommendation.

Development & Publication of policy regarding opting out. This study found that different practices prevail among schools regarding opting out. Teachers explained their concerns about planning and preparation and the compromising of the child's decision to opt out. Guidelines should be published which provides guidance for children who have opted out of RE, what the children should do during this time, how teachers should manage their

classrooms and how to prevent children being exposed to conflicting values between home and school life. These guidelines should be implemented in all Catholic schools to provide assurance for children who have opted out. This would ensure that all children opting out receive a similar experience and would standardise practice across all schools and reduce concern among teachers if all issues are resolved accordingly.

Re-examining the Grow in Love curriculum. All teachers expressed that they are in favour of teaching more world religions as part of the RE curriculum but were concerned about time constraints. In the creation of a new RE curriculum, the issue of time should be re-examined. The time allocation for teaching RE through a confessional approach should be reduced and this would alleviate pressures facing teachers to cover all the material. This reduction of time focused on confessional RE would allow further space for the teaching of world religions which would allow for the inclusion of those who had opted out.

Limitations of this study

Limitations of this study include the small sample used. 8 teachers were interviewed to determine the attitudes of primary school teachers towards the teaching of RE in Catholic primary schools in Ireland. Although the data gathered is not representative of all primary school teachers in Catholic schools in Ireland and cannot be generalised, it provides valuable insights into the thoughts and experiences of this small sample. Furthermore, the reader may be able to find some value in the findings of this study, particularly for understanding contexts and situations they are most familiar with. Additionally, the participants were previously known to the researcher before engaging with this research project. This brings a risk of bias, as it is possible that participants answered in a manner which they deemed the interviewer would prefer. To overcome this, the researcher spent a prolonged amount of time analysing transcriptions to find coherence within the participants answers.

Contributions to the field and future research opportunities

This study aims to contribute to the field of research regarding RE in Catholic primary schools in Ireland. This area is lacking a significant amount of research, particularly in an Irish context. Therefore, this study contributes towards our knowledge of prevailing issues in the Irish education system regarding RE and the realities of the classroom. This study has the potential to guide future research using a larger sample. Future research opportunities in relation to this study may be an investigation into the effects of patronage and ethos on the teaching of RE in Catholic primary schools in Ireland. Additionally, this study looked at the experience of children opting out from a teacher's perspective. There is opportunity for further study which details the children's experiences of opting out of RE in Catholic schools. Teachers in this study also expressed concern with a lack of support from parents and parish Priest's in the religious education of children in Catholic primary schools. Through further study, the perspectives of parents and parish Priest's could be explored to provide enhanced insights into how parents and clergymen feel about the teaching of RE in Catholic schools.

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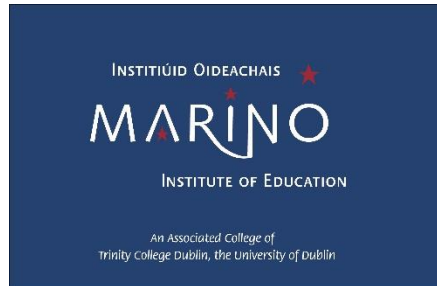
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Appendices

Appendix A: Participant information letter



Dear Teacher,

I am writing to you as a Professional Masters of Education Student currently completing my second year of study at Marino Institute of Education. As part of my studies, I am required to undertake a research project, and today, I'd like to invite you to participate in this project.

The project I will be undertaking will investigate the attitudes of primary school teachers in Catholic schools towards the teaching of religious education.

The core research question of this project is: 'What are primary school teachers attitudes towards the teaching of religious education in Catholic schools in Ireland?'

My research project is conducted under the supervision of Dr Andrea Lynch who can be reached at andrea.lynch@mie.ie.

Data Collection

Participants will be asked to fill out a short demographic questionnaire, which will ask 7 questions about their teaching experience to date, such as years of experience, level of educational attainment, and the school settings in which they have previously taught. Following this, the interviews will commence. I will ask you to respond to a number of questions regarding the teaching of religious education in the primary school classroom. This will focus on your own personal thoughts,

opinions and experiences in relation to teaching religious education, opting out of religious education, world religions and future changes. The interview will take approximately 45 minutes in total and will be recorded, using an audiotape, for the purposes of data collection and transcription.

Any data collected during the interview process will be treated with the upmost level of confidentiality and a copy of your transcript will be returned to you for your review. You have the right to edit or add to the data therein. The data collected in this study will not be accessible to any third party outside of the research project. Your answers will be anonymised for your protection. All data collected will be deleted following the completion of the research project.

Participant Rights

This project has been designed to pose minimal risks to participants, however, if the interview raises any issues that you would like to discuss further, or which are troublesome for you, please contact me immediately. You are under no obligation to participate in this study, and participation is completely voluntary. You are also welcome to withdraw your consent to participate in the research project at any time during the process. It is your right to do so. If you feel the need to do so, please contact me. Any information already collected at this point will be immediately disposed of.

Your participation in this research project would be greatly valued. A summary of the findings will be shared with all those who take part.

If you would like to consent to participating, please fill out the consent form on the next page. You can scan the document and email it to me at oissenek97@gmail.com. Similarly, if you have any questions regarding the project, please get in contact with me with the above information or at 087 2878991.

Thank you for taking the time to consider this invitation. Your time is greatly appreciated. I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours Sincerely,

Óisséne Kelly

Statement of Consent

Please read the questions below and indicate if you are willing to participate in this research project.

I agree to participate in this study by completing 1 interview: Yes No

I consent to my interview being recorded electronically: Yes No

I consent to the sharing of the data with my research team at
Marino Institute of Education Yes No

Your Email Address:

Pseudonym/Alternative Name by which you wish your data to be represented:

Signature of Participant:

Signature of Researcher:

Date:

Appendix B: Interview schedule

Opening Questions

Could you tell me a bit about yourself, your background and your teaching experience.

Teaching Religion

Tell me about your experience of teaching religious education in primary school. What has this experience been like for you?

Do you think religious education is seen to be relevant in today's society? What is your own personal opinion on this?

In your opinion, does the religious education curriculum have any impact on children? If so, what is the impact? If not, why not?

Do you think a teacher's own religious identity and belief, or lack of belief, has an impact upon their teaching of religious education?

In your opinion, do you think all primary school teachers should be required to teach religious education?

In your experience, how do children feel about learning religion in school?

In your experience, how do parents feel about the teaching of religion in school?

Are there any supports which you would like to see put in place to support your teaching of religious education?

Opting out

What are your thoughts on children opting out of religious education?

In your experience, how common is it for children to opt out?

What do children usually do during this time?

What impact do you think opting out has upon children?

In your experience, have you witnessed children who opt out become subject to alienation from their peers?

World Religion

Are world religions taught in your school? If not, why not?

If yes, can you describe what it has been like for you to teach world religions? What impact do you think it has upon children?

Does your school take part in any celebrations of world religions or cultures throughout the year?

Would you be comfortable with teaching world religions in a Catholic school? Why/Why not?

Currently, the patrons programme dedicates a very small proportion of its lessons to world religions. How do you think teachers would feel about an increased focus on world religions in the Grow in Love programme?

How do you think parents would feel about an increased focus on world religions?

How do you think children would feel about an increased focus on world religions?

Future change

Would you make any changes to the Grow in Love programme? If not, why? If so, what changes would you like to see?

If the Department of Education announced that the teaching of religion would be removed entirely from the curriculum, how would you respond?

Closing questions

Is there anything you'd like to mention about the topics we discussed today?

Do you have any questions for me?

Appendix C: Online demographic questionnaire

4/25/2021

Attitudes of primary school teachers towards the teaching of religious education in primary schools

Attitudes of primary school teachers towards the teaching of religious education in primary schools

Please take the time to read each question carefully.

Response sheets will be read by the researcher only, and confidentiality is assured

Please use the options below to select the relevant answers.

1. Please indicate how many years of teaching experience you currently have.

Tick all that apply.

- 1-4
 5-9
 10-20
 21+

2. Please indicate what age range applies to you.

Tick all that apply.

- 20-30
 31-40
 41-50
 51-60
 61+

3. Please indicate what teaching qualification you have acquired.

Mark only one oval.

- PME
 BEd
 Other

4/25/2021

Attitudes of primary school teachers towards the teaching of religious education in primary schools

4. If you answered 'Other' to the above question, please define below.

5. Please indicate what school types you have experience in.

Mark only one oval.

- Catholic school
- Educate Together
- Community National School (CNS)
- Other (please define)

6. If you answered 'Other' to the above question, please define below.

7. Please indicate what class levels you have experience with. Tick all that apply.

Tick all that apply.

- Junior Infants
- Senior Infants
- 1st Class
- 2nd Class
- 3rd Class
- 4th Class
- 5th Class
- 6th Class

4/25/2021

Attitudes of primary school teachers towards the teaching of religious education in primary schools

8. Please indicate what class you are currently teaching.

Mark only one oval.

- Junior Infants
- Senior Infants
- 1st Class
- 2nd Class
- 3rd Class
- 4th Class
- 5th Class
- 6th Class

9. Please indicate how you would describe your school. Tick all that apply.

Tick all that apply.

- Urban
- Rural
- DEIS
- Non-DEIS

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