

Multi-Ethnic Communities and Religion: How Responsive are Irish Primary Schools to Cultural and Religious Diversity?

Thesis Submitted in Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of
PhD in Sociology

Arón Foley

Under the supervision of

Prof. Daniel Faas

Dr. Merike Darmody

Submitted under the Department of Sociology

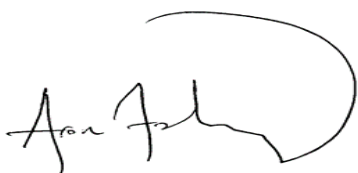
School of Social Sciences and Philosophy

Trinity College Dublin, the University of Dublin

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Declaration

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Aron Foley

Abstract

Ireland's cultural and religious identity has transformed considerably in the past three decades. Consequently, the primary school classroom has become an important platform in which to assist young people to develop the tools to interact with an increasingly pluralistic society. However, primary schools in Ireland have frequently been criticised for their response to such changes. In particular, critics have highlighted the mismatch between an increasingly diverse population and the largely denominational primary school system as a major area of concern (Faas, Smith, and Darmody 2018b). Confronted with the recent surge in anti-immigration sentiments and the high incident rates of racism experienced in Ireland, it becomes clear that schools have a critical role to play in terms of social integration and enhancing students cultural and religious literacy during their formative years.

This thesis, therefore, examines the response of the Irish primary school sector to the growing cultural and religious diversity in Ireland. It explores key questions related to how the ethos of different Irish primary schools are inclusive of diversity and what factors create a dissonance between ethos and practice. In doing so, the study further considers the factors that assist teachers and school leaders to create culturally responsive classroom environments. The study also investigates how the Irish educational system is responding to the diverse educational preferences of parents regarding the types of schools they wish to send their children to. Finally, the study explores how students from diverse cultural and religious backgrounds are exercising their agency to negotiate school belonging.

In order to address these questions, this study deployed a multi-method comparative case study design across eight primary schools in Ireland. Overall, the study sampled 97 participants, including students, teachers, school principals and parents. Cases were selected from the four main denominational, multi-denominational and equality-based primary school types in Ireland; Catholic, Church of Ireland (COI), Educate Together (ET) and Community National Schools (CNS). All cases were sampled in both rural and urban locations to examine whether geographical location influenced the delivery of culturally responsive practices.

This research provides a timely contribution to knowledge by conducting the first empirical comparative study to examine the complex factors that influence the responsiveness of Irish primary schools to religiously and culturally diverse student populations across four major primary school types in Ireland, and whether these factors vary based on location of the school. In doing so, this thesis offers insights regarding the conditions and factors that allow schools to develop a more culturally responsive school environment and moderate factors that may “other” students from migrant backgrounds. Ireland serves as a useful case study as the social phenomenon that has occurred in the country over the past three decades mirrors that of several European countries in terms of upward migration trends, yet the educational landscape of Ireland remains somewhat unique within the European context. Thus, the importance of this study to discourses on integration and inclusion of diverse groups of students extends beyond Ireland and demonstrates social utility internationally.

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Trinity College Dublin
Coláiste na Tríonóide, Baile Átha Cliath
The University of Dublin

DECLARATION OF CO-AUTHORSHIP

This signed declaration describes the contribution of the candidate and the co-author(s) to each of the papers/chapters of this thesis to identify the candidate's independent contribution to each work.

Name of candidate: Aron Foley

Title of dissertation: Multi-Ethnic Communities and Religion: How Responsive Are Irish Primary Schools to Cultural and Religious Diversity?

- **Chapter 2:** Preserving Ethos: Facilitating Factors and Barriers for Implementing Ethos in Primary Schools in the Republic of Ireland

Aron Foley is the first author of this paper. The paper is published with *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*. Aron collected the data, compiled the literature review, developed the theoretical framework, conducted the data analysis and wrote the drafts of the paper. Prof. Daniel Faas and Dr. Merike Darmody provided advice and feedback and edited the drafts of the paper.

- **Chapter 3:** The Creation of Culturally Responsive School Environments in Ireland: Factors that Assist in Reducing the Gap between Policy and Practice

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- **Chapter 4:** Parental School Choice in Post-Secular Ireland: Insights from Irish Primary Schools

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- **Chapter 5:** Negotiating Belonging in Irish Primary Schools: The Role of Childhood Agency

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Statement by the co-author(s):

We hereby confirm that the doctoral candidate's described contributions to the work where we are listed as co-authors is correct, and we consent to including the work in the named dissertation.

Signed:



Prof. Daniel Faas

Professor in Sociology

Date: 27 September 2024

Signed:



Dr. Merike Darmody

Research Officer, ESRI

Date: 27 September 2024

1: Responding to Cultural and Religious Diversity: The Case of Irish Primary Schools

This study offers an analysis of the current primary educational landscape in Ireland, exploring how responsive the educational system is to the religious and cultural diversity now found in Ireland. The process of social change that has occurred in Ireland over the past three decades is both unprecedented and inexorable. While no single measure can capture the totality of the transformation, a cursory review of the changing demographic profile suggests that Ireland is indeed a country in transition. As a result of the countervailing trends of secularisation and the emergence of diverse religious affiliations, due in part to upward trends in migration, Ireland's religious and cultural identity has transformed considerably (McGinnity et al., 2020). Consequently, questions regarding how to interact with such cultural and religious diversity have moved to the forefront of public and policy discourses. In particular, public education has become an arena in which epistemic debates concerning religious and cultural inclusion are taking place.

It is well documented that schools are critical sites of integration (Martin et al., 2023). Yet, the Irish primary school system has been subject to a great deal of criticism in recent years. Indeed, critics have questioned the conspicuous incongruity between the highly denominational educational landscape and the increasingly diverse ethno-cultural student body. Consequently, the primary school has become a contested space where religious debates have gathered momentum (Dineen and Lundie, 2017). Confronted with such debates, questions regarding the place of religion in public education have surged to prominence as scholars indicate that the “treatment of religion in education has become a touchstone against which a country's success in managing cultural diversity may be assessed” (REMC, 2009, p.55). As primary schools are settings in which many children come into contact for the first time with students from different cultures and faiths, they are uniquely equipped to influence the social cohesion of society. Therefore, it is imperative that schools provide a platform for students to develop the necessary tools and attitudes to interact with an increasingly pluralistic society.

Drawing on the Irish primary school sector as a case study, this thesis makes four central arguments. Firstly, while institutional context matters, the extent to which schools can preserve their ethos is highly influenced by school level and wider societal processes that interact with the ethos of the school. These findings support the theoretical assumption that ethos is not a static entity but is continually negotiated and renegotiated through an ongoing dialogue amongst key actors within educational settings and the responses from these actors to the many changes in Irish society. Secondly, this thesis argues that a gap persists between policy and practice in relation to the creation of school environments that are culturally responsive. Here we outline key factors that can assist in reducing the gap between policy and practice. Thirdly, exploring factors that influence school choice, it is evident that the complex interplay between the religious and secular in wider society is influencing the decision-making process of parents regarding school choice. Here, we argue that deploying a learn-about religion approach to be inclusive of religious diversity draws upon secular assumptions and fails to appreciate the nuances of families from various religious backgrounds' preference for their children's education. Finally, this thesis argues that students are engaged in a continuous process of negotiating how they belong within the school they attend. However, students are not only attempting to navigate their own sense of belonging but also that of their peers. The findings suggest that students exercise their agency in responding to the diversity within the classroom and make efforts to create a more culturally responsive environment for their classmates.

While this thesis focuses on Ireland, the findings are of potential interest to many countries across Europe experiencing changes in their social demographics, as they highlight how primary schools can respond to the needs of an increasingly diverse student body. This thesis unpacks key questions that face public primary schools, such as, what is the role of religion in schools, how can students from diverse backgrounds develop a sense of belonging within the school environment and how can schools become more culturally responsive.

Research Question and Objectives

This thesis contributes to discourses concerning the inclusion of religious and cultural diversity in Irish primary schools. It examines various factors that may influence the

integration of students from diverse backgrounds, such as, the institutional ethos of a school, the characteristics of the national teaching body, the approaches to religion a school takes, geographical factors, amongst others. The thesis, therefore, answers the following main question:

How responsive are Irish primary schools to the cultural and religious diversity present in Ireland?

In light of this question, this study explores the factors that influence students from diverse backgrounds sense of school belonging. Moreover, it examines the influence of institutional context and how the different school types are managing diversity. It highlights the factors that may influence the gap between policy and practice with regards to creating culturally responsive school environments. Furthermore, the factors that influence parental school choice, in light of recent social changes, are also explored. Finally, this thesis explores how primary school students from diverse backgrounds are negotiating their place within the Irish primary school sector and how they are drawing on their agency to overcome feelings of “otherness” that may emerge.

Theoretical Proposition of Thesis

This thesis critically examines how Irish primary schools navigate the complexities of cultural and religious diversity, ethos and inclusion. Therefore, this research makes the following theoretical propositions:

Firstly, in a highly denominational educational system, primary schools in Ireland are faced with the challenge of maintaining their institutional ethos while concurrently fostering an inclusive environment for an increasingly culturally and religiously diverse student body. Here we argue that there is often a tension between the stated ethos of a school and its practical application, as the ethos of a school is influenced by broader social and political forces. As such, we make the theoretical proposition that the ethos of a school is not static, but rather, is shaped by both school level factors and wider societal processes. Therefore, this thesis asserts that there are systemic challenges to implementing ethos, which are thus, influencing the educational experiences of students.

Secondly, for primary schools in Ireland to be responsive to the changes in social demographics, policymakers, school leaders and teachers must move beyond minor adaptations to the school day, but rather, adopt an ethos and curriculum that is embedded in culturally responsive principles. Drawing on definitions of culturally responsive pedagogy from Gay and Ladson-Billing (outlined in the Theoretical Framework), this thesis echoes the call for schools to become “culturally validating and affirming” (Gay, 2000, p.29). In the absence of such a transformation, the gap between policies that aim to foster cultural inclusivity in Irish education and practice will continue to persist.

Thirdly, this thesis adopts the position outlined by Berger (2010) that modernisation does not lead to secularisation, but rather to the emergence of two pluralisms - the coexistence of religious paradigms and the coexistence of the religious and the secular. We argue that this coexistence influences parental school choice. Consequently, nuances concerning parental school choice arise that policymakers must familiarise themselves with in order that the educational landscape is reflective of the broad preferences of parents in post-secular societies.

Finally, the last theoretical proposition relates to the complex interaction between students' agency and school belonging. Here, agency is defined as the ability of an individual or group to exert their “autonomy in the face of social institutions, social structures and cultural expectations” (Dillon, 2020, p.29). We propose that students that do not belong to the hegemonic cultural group in Ireland can exercise their agency to overcome feelings of “otherness” and develop a sense of belonging within their school community. Naturally, the burden of responsibility to foster environments that are culturally responsive must rest with the institution. However, this is not to say students cannot exercise their agency to overcome feelings of “otherness” for both them and their peers who may be at risk of feeling like an outsider.

As Ireland transitions from a relatively homogeneous society to an increasingly more pluralistic one, the primary school classroom becomes a cynosure for understanding how to engage with religious and cultural diversity. Therefore, by exploring how the institutional ethos of the 4 major primary school types, in both rural and urban locations, are influenced by the social changes in Ireland and how the different school types are creating inclusive, culturally responsive classrooms, this thesis sheds light on the dynamics

between ethos, location and religious and cultural transformation. Furthermore, with the increasing secularisation of the majority ethnic Irish population, and the steady increase of minority religious groups, understanding the preferences of parents for their children's education, particularly religious education, is becoming increasingly more important. Finally, due to the nature of the educational landscape in Ireland, many students are at risk of feeling like outsiders, therefore, understanding how students exercise their agency to develop a sense of belonging in a vastly Catholic primary school system is becoming an increasingly critical area of research. In the absence of such knowledge, tokenistic responses to cultural diversity can emerge and erroneous assumptions regarding how to respond to change and what parents want for their children's education can dominate discourses on inclusion. This thesis, therefore, offers an important contribution to knowledge as it provides further clarity regarding steps the Irish primary school sector must consider in order to be more responsive to cultural and religious diversity.

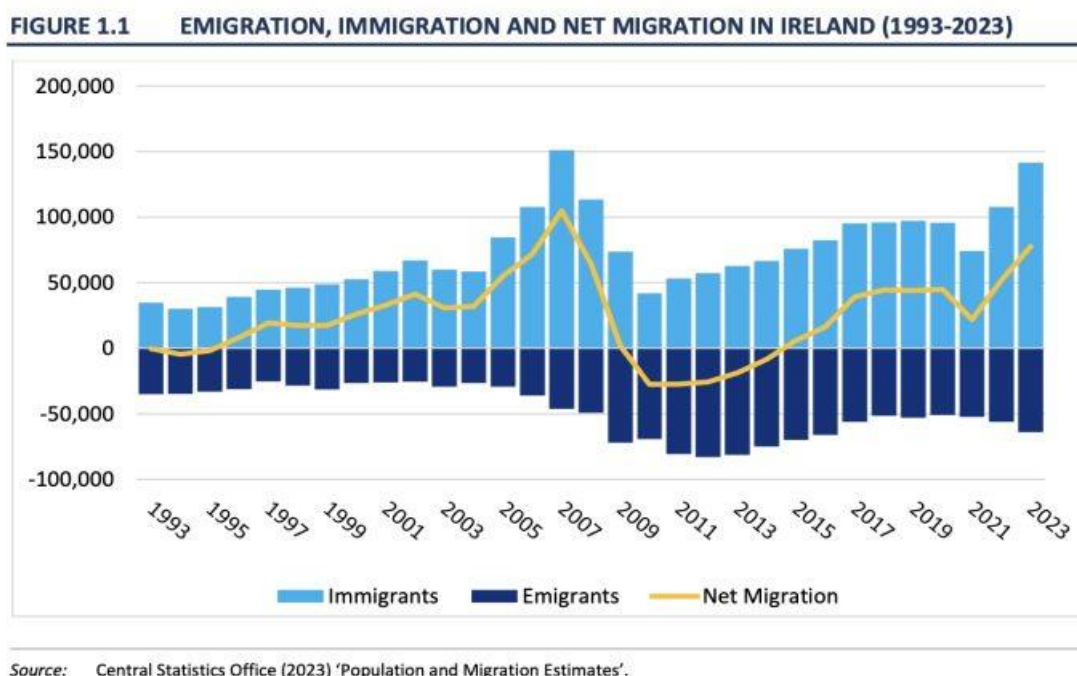
However, prior to exploring these concepts in depth, this thesis will first provide an overview of the social and religious transformation that has occurred in Ireland in recent decades and explore how these changes are impacting the Irish primary school system.

Social Change in Ireland: An Overview

Historically, Ireland's identity has largely been shaped by British colonialism, poverty, and emigration. When the majority of the island of Ireland achieved independence from British rule, in the early 1920s, it was considered to be one of the "poorest countries in Western Europe" (Honohan and Rouiger, 2012, p.9). The Great Irish Famine of the nineteenth century, helped to set in motion a legacy of emigration that defined Ireland for the next century (Honohan and Rouiger, 2012). However, as a result of the economic boom in the mid-1990s, colloquially labelled the "Celtic Tiger", Ireland transformed its global image from that of a country of poverty to prosperity. A period described as "the best of times" saw the average national income increase substantially, while in turn, the rate of unemployment decreased considerably (Fahey et al., 2007). As a consequence of the enhanced global image and improved social conditions, Ireland experienced an increase in both asylum seekers and workers migrating to the country (Ruhs, 2005).

This set-in motion four waves of migration as outlined by Ruhs (2005). The first wave consisted of the years prior to this economic boom, characterised largely by emigration. The second wave occurred as a direct consequence of the “Celtic Tiger” and the subsequent enhanced global image and improved social conditions that followed. In particular, the years between 2001 and 2004 saw a significant flow of immigrants into the country. This period also witnessed a trend of many non-EU immigrants moving to the country. However, as a result of the fiscal crises in 2008, the momentum of those entering the country slowed considerably. Although predictions of a large-scale migrant exodus were unfounded, Ireland did return to being a net emigration country between 2008-2014, which has been demarcated as the third wave. This, of course, only temporarily altered the trend, as Ireland yet again returned to a net immigration country. This final wave saw a sharp rise in non-European Union (EU) immigration between 2011 and 2017, rising from 12,400 to 29,400 (Central Statistics Office (CSO), 2017). This trend has continued into the present day. These four waves of migration in Ireland (Faas and Fionda, 2019) are best illustrated in Figure 1.1 below:

Figure 1.1 Migration Waves in Ireland



Given the low levels of immigration in Ireland pre-1990, Ireland has since transformed into a State that is being shaped by the forces of modernity and plurality that are commonplace

across Western Europe. However, Ireland, as a new immigrant receiving country, is faced with challenges, possibilities, and questions that are quite unique within the European context (McGinnity et al., 2020). Indeed, Ireland's migration trends are rather distinctive from other European countries. For example, the inflow of migrants into Ireland tends to be highly educated, young, and heterogenous (McGinnity et al., 2020). Consequently, in 2022, there were 631,785 non-Irish nationals living in Ireland, which accounts for 12% of the overall population (CSO, 2022).

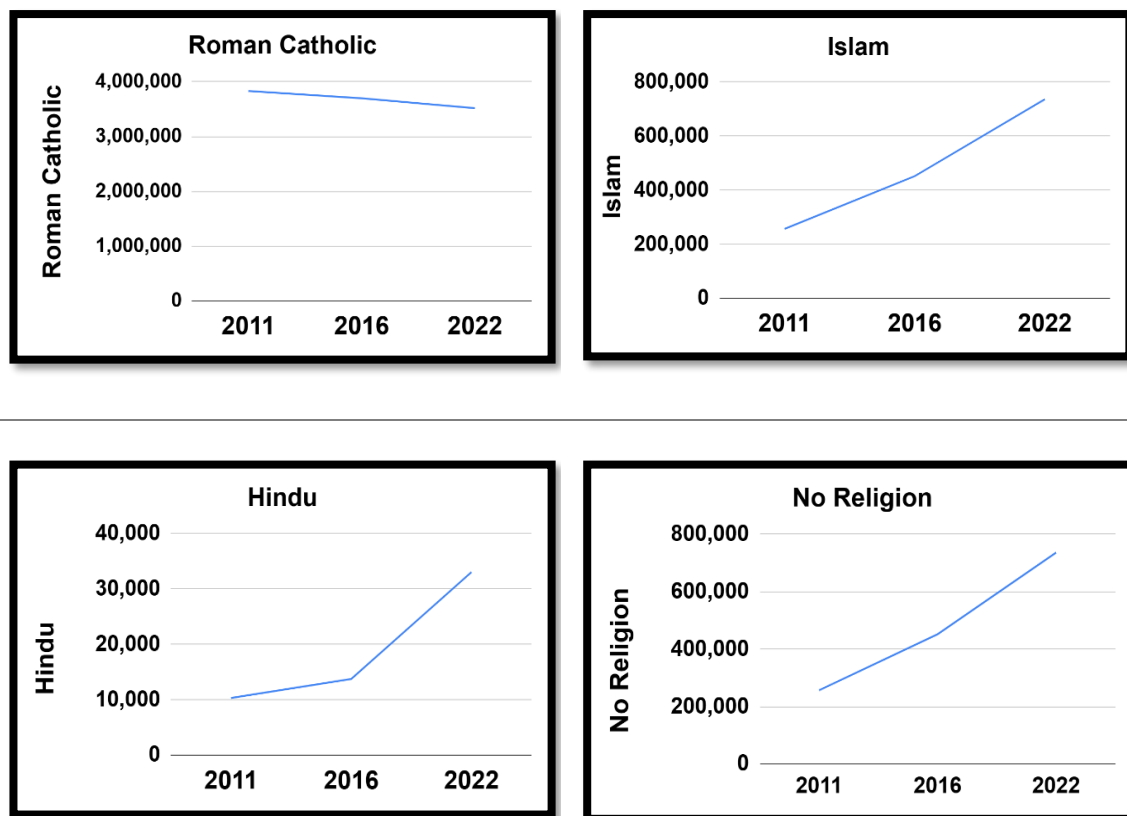
Religious Transformation

Another social phenomenon in Ireland that merits further analysis is the transformation in religious identity. Ireland, once described as the most Catholic country in the world (Stutz and Bodley, 2016), has experienced a major shift in its religious make-up. From one perspective, we can observe a rather drastic decline in religiosity. Indeed, drawing on recent census data, it is evident that Ireland, to some degree, has loosened its once strong ties with the Catholic Church. In the space of 13 years, those who identified with no religion grew significantly from 256,830 to 746,210, representing a 187% increase (CSO, 2022). While it can be argued that the majority of ethnic Irish people remain Catholic and certain ethnic groups, such as Irish Travellers, are predominately Catholic, a closer examination of Mass attendance reveals the decline in religiosity that once defined the people of Ireland. To illustrate, in 2020, 27% of Catholics attended Mass weekly in Ireland, down from 91% in 1975. To further augment this position, it can be argued that this phenomenon has been unfolding for some time, with a high percentage of the Irish population adopting a position of "belonging without believing" (Davie, 1994). Indeed, the declining number of those affiliated with Catholicism is a phenomenon that appears to be gathering momentum with each passing decade.

Concurrent to this decline, Ireland is also experiencing an increase in the number of people affiliated with minority faiths. As illustrated in the graphs below (see Figure 1.2), there has been a significant increase in those who identify as Muslims, Hindus, and other religions. This phenomenon is somewhat mirrored throughout Europe, particularly in urban centres, where a rich tapestry of religions, cultures and ethnicity can be found. As such, a "global religious market" (Lumby and Mac Ruairc, 2020, p. 2) has been established where identity, power, and the position of the individual is continually negotiated. This transformation can

be explained, at least in part, by the increased migration to Ireland (CSO, 2022). Although many people who have migrated to Ireland in recent years come from predominantly Catholic countries, such as Brazil, Lithuania and Poland, Ireland has nevertheless transformed into a religiously heterogeneous country. Consequently, there has been extensive research analysing the response and attitudes of the majority ethnic Irish population towards the diverse migrant population (McGinnity et al., 2018; McGinnity, Creighton and Fahey, 2020). Such studies offer insights into the responsiveness of the country’s ethnically Irish population towards demographic shifts.

Figure 1.2: Religious Transformation in Ireland



(Source: CSO, 2022)

Attitudes Towards Social Change

Two measures of a country’s response to social change are the public and political attitudes towards immigration. Several authors have been particularly critical towards the political response in Ireland towards immigration. Indeed, critics have warned that a “myopic focus

on what politicians say can lead to overestimating the importance of official party discourses on immigration policy” (Elliot, 2019, p.552). However, it is rather difficult to identify the causal attribution of this laboured political response to immigration policy. Some, for example, have pointed towards a “no problem here attitude” (Connolly, 2002, p.342), where issues of race and integration are not seen as “Irish problems”, particularly in rural areas (Biggart, O’Hare and Connolly, 2013). However, a closer inspection of the literature indicates that migrants in Ireland are often exposed to racism (McGinnity et al., 2006; Devine, 2009; McClure, 2020), exclusion (Fanning and Michael, 2019), and housing inequalities (Grotti et al., 2018). As such, it can be argued that such political complacency has inevitable knock-on effects that can be detrimental to the well-being of migrants. The political response towards immigration is an important indicator of how a country is responding to social change, however, it is also helpful to also explore the public’s perception of migration and factors which influence negative and positive attitudes.

Several studies have been conducted in Ireland over the past few decades to measure both hidden and overt attitudes towards immigrants held by the ethnic Irish population (McGinnity et al., 2018; McGinnity, Creighton and Fahey, 2020). Despite methodological concerns with identifying attitudes, primarily the concern of participants sharing sociable desirable answers (McGinnity, Creighton and Fahey, 2020), some consistencies appear to emerge in the literature. Research on migration posits that native attitudes towards immigration are often contingent upon several social, economic and political factors (Dustmann and Preston, 2007; McGinnity et al., 2018). To illustrate, research has found that in periods of economic decline, when the labour market becomes more competitive and the threat of unemployment rises, attitudes towards immigrants become more negative (McGinnity and Gijssberts, 2016). Evidence for this can be found when examining attitudes towards immigration during the economic crises in Ireland (McGinnity and Kingston, 2017). Indeed, when economic factors were controlled for, McGinnity and Kingston (2017) found that perceptions towards immigrants were generally positive. Another, somewhat surprising, finding was that even when the proportion of immigrants increased, attitudes continued to remain positive.

Despite these relatively positive findings, caution must be exercised when interpreting them. Methodological inconsistencies often hamper the extent to which true sentiments can be measured. Therefore, in a more recent study conducted by McGinnity, Creighton and

Fahey (2020), an effort to overcome hidden perceptions regarding attitudes towards immigrants in Ireland was made by adopting a survey experiment method. Using this approach, McGinnity, Creighton and Fahey (2020) found that perceptions of threat predominantly emerge in relation to black African and Muslim populations. This is an important finding and highlights, firstly, that there is an urgent need to respond to such attitudes and understand how such racial biases can be addressed and, secondly, the difficulties in assessing the true attitudes of a population towards social composition changes. Mistrust from the ethnic Irish population can be seen as symptomatic of the break from the traditional, culturally homogenous Ireland towards a pluralistic, global country without the aid of the necessary structures to navigate this transition.

McGinnity and Kingston (2017, p.253) argue that the “attitudinal climate is important as it frames the context for the integration and sense of belonging among immigrants”. In this context, education offers an important platform in which children and families can integrate into society and assumptions and biases can be challenged. However, in terms of meaningful inclusion, many have argued that the highly denominational educational school landscape may not be “fit for such a purpose” (Lumby and MacRuairc, 2020, p.120). As such, a brief outline of the historical context of the Irish Education system will be shared to help illustrate how such educational policy came to be.

Overview of Irish Educational Landscape

Historical Context

Despite the aforementioned shifts in demographics, religious orientation, and migration status, it can be argued that institutionalised Christianity remains “deeply embedded both in European identity and also in its cultural and educational traditions” (Merry, 2015, p.135). To understand how deep these roots remain, it is helpful to outline the historical context of the Irish educational landscape. The Catholic Church’s influence over the Irish education sector dates back as far as the mid-nineteenth century. The national school system of Ireland was first established in 1831. Although it may appear that the Catholic ethos has always been interlinked with Irish education, this was not quite the case. Indeed, in the early years’ schools were largely non-denominational, with religious formation not

being included in the core curriculum (Healy, 2011). This resulted in 50% of all schools being religiously mixed in 1860. However, over many years, pressure from the Catholic Church and its place within the State ensured that Catholic ethos schools would become a dominant feature of education in Ireland.

Catholic schools have long consolidated their position as the key educational governing body in Ireland. At present 89% of all primary schools are Catholic. The current system in place essentially amalgamates State funding with non-State institutions (patron bodies), which are often religious institutions. In recent years, the exact role of the patron has undergone a lot of scrutiny. Literature points to a discrepancy between the stated role of the patron and what takes place in practice. To illustrate, in a statement, O’Keefe (cited in Healy, 2011, p.37) argued that “the patron is in place in terms of ethos but has nothing to do with the overall management of the schools.” Healy (2011, p.38), however, has disputed this claim, by directing our attention towards the school’s principal’s handbook in which he highlights the decision-making power of the patron, which in the case of Catholic schools is the bishop: “The bishop, as leader of the Catholic community in the diocese and as its patron of the school, has ultimate responsibility for the school.”

This refutation from Healy raises several questions. As a country where nearly 90% of the primary schools fall under the patronage of the Catholic Church, questions of religious freedom and accommodation must be addressed. However, a word of caution is required before proceeding with this exploration. To understand how culturally and religiously responsive Irish primary schools are, a critique of the highly denominational landscape is required, yet the purpose of this critique is not to undermine the contribution of the Catholic Church towards Irish education. It is important to note that the Catholic Church’s educational contribution has largely had a positive impact on the educational landscape of Ireland (Griffen, 2020). Indeed, early forms of education systems in Ireland were reserved for the privileged. In response, the Catholic Church offered schools to accommodate the disadvantaged. Furthermore, a report by the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) (Darmody, Smyth and McCoy, 2012) found that Catholic schools, in comparison to other patrons, were highly inclusive in their approach in terms of accommodating race, religion and socio-economic status. As such, the critique of the current educational system is far from a myopic vitriol against the place of Catholic ethos schools in the Irish educational landscape, but rather, an investigation into the homogenous nature of the

educational system, and the extent to which Irish schools have adapted to the transformation within the country.

To countervail the dominance of the Catholic Church within the Irish educational system, the former Minister of Education, Ruairi Quinn, announced the formation of an expert group with the purpose of consulting with stakeholders and identifying approaches to creating a more inclusive educational landscape in Ireland (Coolahan, Hussey and Kilfeather, 2012). Prior to the establishment of the Forum, a number of surveys were conducted in Ireland to capture the attitudes towards religion in schools. The surveys presented “serious divergence of opinion” among parents (Coolahan, Hussey and Kilfeather, 2012, p.41). Although, many parents felt that the Catholic Church should still play an instrumental role in Irish Education, a large percentage of parents also felt that the Catholic Church should give up its control of the Irish primary school sector. On the back of these results, the Forum published a report outlining an action plan to create a more inclusive educational landscape as a response to parental demand. These strategies included the Catholic Church divesting patronage of several schools, protecting the right of parents to opt their children out of RE, and the establishment of policies regarding religious and cultural celebrations (Coolahan, Hussey and Kilfeather, 2012).

Initial proposals to divest patronage was broadly supported in Ireland. The Catholic Archbishop of Dublin, Diarmuid Martin, at the time stated that he advocated for the “divestment of a substantial number of Catholic schools to foster a more pluralist presence which would reflect changing demographics” (McGarry, 2017, p.1). The movement towards a more diverse primary school sector was seen as a positive for both the Catholic Church and those who called for the State to reduce Catholic dominance in education. Indeed, divestment would not only create a more equitable educational landscape, but it would “open the possibility of more clearly defining the nature of Catholic schools” (Martin, 2017, p.1). As such, the government of Ireland set a goal of establishing 400 multi-denominational primary schools in Ireland by the year 2030. However, despite the initial enthusiasm, the process of divestment has been largely unsuccessful. McGraw and Tiernan (2022, p.294) argue that intense opposition to change at both the school and community level “have left individual educational, Church and political leaders with little incentive to force communities to embrace divestment.”

Critics, therefore, have questioned the strategy of divestment and the extent to which it can make meaningful change to the make-up of the Irish primary school sector. It appears that motivation to divest patronage from Catholic to multi-denominational primary schools often comes from fear of school closures and the need to attract larger numbers of families, rather than the desire to introduce the values underpinning the multi-denominational ethos into the community (McGraw and Tiernan, 2022). Over the course of the years, the Catholic Church has received much of the blame for the laboured approach to divestment. However, McGraw and Tiernan (2022, p.345) argue that the “Church’s inaction may be indicative of broader trends in Irish society rather than merely the Church aimlessly resisting change”. Indeed, rather than accusing the Church of obstructing change, McGraw and Tiernan (2022) assert that local and school-level factors are the main drivers as to whether divestment is a possibility. As such, the move towards reaching the goal of 400 multi-denominational primary schools by 2030 has been much slower than predicted and still the majority of primary schools in Ireland remain Catholic.

It is important, therefore, to explore the specific challenges that arise from having a vastly denominational primary school landscape in a culturally and religiously diverse society. For one, the process of “othering” has been highlighted by many critics as an area of concern. In denominational schools, an opt-out option was introduced for children who attend primary schools which are not consistent with their religious beliefs. This gives autonomy to the family to remove their child from religious education (RE) classes. However, this is problematic for numerous reasons. Firstly, primary schools often lack the necessary resources to meaningfully accommodate those who opt-out (Darmody, Lyons and Smyth, 2014). Moreover, with the introduction of the integrated curriculum, religious themes appear throughout the curriculum (Mawhinny, 2007). Therefore, all children, including those who wish to opt-out of RE, will be exposed to religious themes integrated into all facets of the curriculum. In addition, a problem reported in some studies is the feeling of “otherness” that many students feel when they opt-out (Faas, Smith and Darmody, 2018c). It is thus evident that, despite good intentions underpinning the decision to offer all children and parents the autonomy to circumvent segments of the curriculum which are not consistent with their worldview, the freedom to opt-out is accompanied by a nexus of complications.

Similarly, the practice of sacramental preparation has been a highly contested subject in Irish educational discourse (Faas, Smith and Darmody, 2018b; Faas, Smith and Darmody, 2018c; Kitching and Shanneik, 2015). Some researchers have argued that this practice is a strong symbol of traditional Irish childhood (Lodge, 1999), while others suggest that its pre-eminence is yet another reflection of Catholic dominance in the primary school sector (Faas, Smith and Darmody, 2018c). Despite the declining number of individuals who identify as Catholic (CSO, 2017), sacramental preparation remains a key element of schooling in the majority of Irish primary schools. One survey, conducted several years ago, revealed that only 8.8% of teachers are of the opinion that it should be a feature of primary school education, with a large percentage believing that responsibility for sacramental preparation should be divested to the home and the parish (INTO, 2012). Some critics have argued that the fact it remains a large part of the Irish primary school curriculum illustrates the influence the Catholic Church still has over educational discourse (Faas, Smith and Darmody, 2018c).

Furthermore, families from non-Catholic backgrounds have historically encountered challenges when attempting to enrol their child in Catholic schools. Therefore, in conjunction with the divestment of Catholic primary schools, the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism aimed to encourage more inclusive provisions to ensure the rights of all students are respected. For example, in recent years, emphasis has been placed on creating more transparent and inclusive school admission policies. Inroads have been made with the introduction of the School Admission Bill in 2018. This Bill prevented Catholic denominational schools from requiring students be baptised before being admitted (Faas and Fionda, 2019). Although this represents a positive trend towards a more inclusive system, preferential treatment towards those of Irish ethnicity can still be identified in admission policies. For instance, the importance that multi-denominational schools place on community factors, such as the “sibling rule”, have been shown to put new migrants at a disadvantage (Darmody and Smyth, 2018). Furthermore, while parents may have a constitutional right to choose which school to send their child to, social mobility often limits choice (Darmody and Smyth, 2018). Research indicates that parents from middle class backgrounds often travel to ensure their children attend a school which matches their worldview, but many low-income, and often migrant families, do not have this privilege (Darmody and Smyth, 2018).

The Growth of Multi-denominational Schools

In Ireland, how religion is approached is the main differentiating factor when comparing the different school types. Aside from Irish-medium schools that are inclusive of different faith backgrounds (denominational, inter-denominational and multi-denominational) and approach the Irish language differently, most schools, in all other aspects of the school day, are relatively similar. Therefore, as aforementioned, a key strategy of the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism was to ensure Ireland can offer a range of school types that could sufficiently cater for students of all religions and none. Since the formation of the Forum, a marked increase of equality-based and multi-denominational schools nationwide can be observed. Between 2015 and 2020, all 25 new primary schools opened have been equality-based and multi-denominational (Department of Education, 2020). Furthermore, there has been an average decrease of around 8 Catholic primary schools a year (Department of Education, 2020). ET and CNS are the main two types of equality-based and multi-denominational schools offered in Ireland. Below is a brief outline of the ethos found in such schools and their unique approaches to RE.

Table 1.1 Religious Approach in the Main Primary School Types in Ireland

	Catholic Schools	Church of Ireland Schools	Educate Together Schools	Community National Schools
Number	2,750	171	95	28
Ownership	Church Owned	Church Owned	Private Company	State Owned
Ethos	Denominational	Denominational	Equality Based	Multi-Denominational
Approach to Religious Education	Learning in Religion (faith formation, preaching)	Learning in Religion (faith formation, preaching)	Learning about religion and from religion	Learning about religion and from religion (belief nurturing)
Religious Ethos	Religious Monism (Catholic superiority)	Religious Monism (Protestant superiority)	Religious neutrality within the curriculum	Religious pluralism and celebration of diversity

(Source: Department of Education, 2022)

A critical moment in the history of Irish education occurred in the 1970s with the Dalky School Project. The efficacy of this bottom-up approach enabled the first ET primary school to open in 1978. The ET ethos is child-centred and equality-based (ET, 2011). A distinguishing feature is that faith formation does not take place during school hours. Instead, ET implements an ethical-based curriculum called “Learn Together”. This primary school programme is divided into four strands: i) Moral and Spiritual; ii) Equality and Justice; iii) Belief Systems; and iv) Ethics and the Environment (ET, 2011). Although the establishment of ET schools is undoubtedly a major milestone in the history and development of Ireland’s educational sector, the approach through which they first came into existence has been the subject of criticism. It may be argued that it is a cause for concern that this change resulted from active citizenship rather than government initiative, heightening the public's frustration that there is often a discrepancy between the rhetoric of inclusion and practice. Furthermore, despite the demand for alternatives to the largely homogenous denominational school landscape, ET primary schools still account for a small percentage of the primary schools in Ireland.

However, in an unprecedented step in 2008, the Irish State not only established but became patron of a new form of multi-denominational educational institution - CNS. Emerging from an urgent need to respond to the growing multi-ethnic communities in Ireland, CNS have been placed under the Educational Training Board (ETB). A unique feature of CNS is their aim to learn both “about religion” and “from religion” (Grimmit, 1987, p.225). In light of this, the “Goodness Me Goodness You” (GMGY) programme was developed. The initial success of CNS has helped to diversify the primary school sector and respond to the demands of social change.

However, the establishment of CNS has not been without controversy. The GMGY junior programme, as originally devised, was made up of two integrated strands - the core part of the programme was aimed at all students, and the other portion was dedicated to “Belief Specific” training. The latter received national criticism and has since been removed from the programme. Belief Specific training involved separating students into groups for four weeks of the year (NCCA, 2015). In theory, this was to build on principles espoused by the likes of Gardner (2004), who suggested that developing a sound understanding of one's own religious and cultural identity as well as that of others is key to modern RE. However,

in practice, this led to an unintentional process of “othering” (Faas, Smith and Darmody, 2018b). Furthermore, questions around whether CNS had the resources or knowledge to teach different faiths also arose (Faas, Smith and Darmody, 2018b). This led to the gradual abandonment of the Belief Specific strand of the GMGY programme. Nevertheless, despite early challenges, CNS are responding to the call for more multi-denominational schools in Ireland and represent a positive trend towards inclusivity. Indeed, CNS are the fastest growing sector and, importantly, are backed by the Government.

While 126 Catholic schools and 12 COI schools have closed or divested patronage between 2011 and 2021, 80 multi-denominational schools have opened in the same period, partly as a response to parental choice (Department of Education, 2022). The enrolments to Catholic ethos primary schools have been declining steadily over the past several years. At the same time, efforts are being made by the Government to advance towards “the target of at least 400 multi-denominational primary schools by 2030, to improve parental choice” and expand and “prioritise the transfer of viable schools to CNS” (Department of Education, 2022, p.3). However, in practice, change has been slow. Although there has been a marked increase in the number of multi-denominational schools, as aforementioned, there have been numerous challenges with divesting patronage. Consequently, due to the low numbers and geographical position, many multi-denominational schools are oversubscribed. Therefore, still to this day in Ireland, the most accessible school for most families are Catholic schools.

Role of Religion in Schools

Confronted with debates concerning cultural and religious inclusion, an important question emerges: what is the role of religion in schools? As aforementioned, the major distinguishing factor between the different school types in Ireland is each schools’ approach to religion. Consequently, the role of religion in schools has become an increasingly contentious subject. Indeed, RE, in its various incarnations, has fueled many debates over the years. RE holds a unique position in denominational primary schools as it is the only subject that receives a daily amount of instruction time through the integrated curriculum. Historically, the rationale for the inclusion of RE in the former Irish primary school curriculum can be seen below:

The spiritual dimension is a fundamental aspect of individual experience, and its religious and cultural expression is an inextricable part of Irish culture and history. RE specifically enables the child to develop spiritual and moral values and to come to a knowledge of God. (Primary School Curriculum, 1999).

However, the assumptions underlying this statement merit further analysis. For example, regarding coming to a knowledge of God, it is important to raise the question: knowledge of God from what lens? Another avenue of exploration should be concerned with the question of who dictates what values are important. Finally, with regards to Irish culture, a factor to consider is how Irish culture is changing in light of demographic changes. Since the publication of the Primary School Curriculum papers (1999), the population of Ireland and its relationship to religion has changed and therefore, assumptions underpinning RE being an inextricable part of Irish culture and a fundamental part of the curriculum have to be reassessed.

However, some scholars have argued that RE is still a valuable feature of the primary school curriculum. For one, Braggs and Manchester (2011) assert that children must be informed of the religious diversity that shapes their communities and institutions. The most cited defence for the inclusion of RE within the primary school curriculum is the role it plays in creating social harmony and tolerant attitudes (Clayton and Stevens, 2018). Indeed, lack of knowledge regarding different religions and cultures can lead to a feeling of “otherness” and mistrust. Therefore, if one operates under the assumption that religion is an essential feature of the primary school experience, then this begs the question of how religion should be taught in primary schools.

Precisely how religion should be approached in primary schools is a matter of scholarly debate. Indeed, if we observe the Irish school landscape, we can see several approaches have been adopted. These approaches include a *learn-about*, *learn-from* and *learn-in* approach to RE. A *learn-about* approach to religion refers to learning about the beliefs, traditions, and practices of the major world religions (Grimmitt, 1987). *Learning-from* religion refers to what students take from the study of the different religions in terms of discerning religious questions and applying it to their own individual experiences (Grimmitt, 1987). *Learning-in religion*, however, is a confessional approach to religion, in which faith formation is at the heart of the educational experience. In denominational

schools, such as Catholic and COI, they adopt a *learn-in* religion approach. However, in ET and CNS, they approach religion from more of a *learn-about* and *learn-from* religion perspective.

It is important to note that, as the majority of primary schools in Ireland are denominational, thousands of students are being educated in a *learn-in* approach to religion. This has led critics to question whether this is ethical considering the growth in numbers of those who identify with no religion within the country. Indeed, former education Minister Ruairi Quinn was reported to have said that parents, families, and parishes must take responsibility for RE in order that “teachers are left with the professional business of educating children in the classroom” (Journal, 2014, p.1). This is reiterated by Faas, Darmody and Sokolowska (2016) who argue that schools should open a dialogue between parents and the Church in order to provide religious instruction outside of school hours.

As illustrated thus far, discussions concerning the place of RE in primary schools are often concomitant with tension and debate. This is reflected in the spectrum of approaches to RE taken across state schools in Europe (Table 1.2).

Table 1.2 Approaches to Religious Education in Europe

Description	Countries
Compulsory	Austria, Cyprus, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, the Netherlands, Sweden.
Optional	Estonia, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Malta, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Spain.
Combination of Approaches	Belgium, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Portugal.
Ethics/Values as Alternative	Belgium, Finland, Germany, Italy, Lithuania.
Opt-out Possible	Belgium, Ireland, Malta, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, UK.
Opt-in Possible	Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania.
No Provision of RE	France, Slovenia.

(Source: Darmody and Smyth, 2017)

Some countries, such as France and Slovenia, have opted for no provision for RE (Faas, Darmody and Sokolowska, 2016). Conversely, countries where national identity is intimately interwoven with religion, such as Poland and Ireland, view RE to be a critical component of the curriculum (Faas, Darmody and Sokolowska, 2016). The variance in approach to RE across Europe is indicative of the lack of consensus surrounding the role of religion in schools, and, more broadly, in society.

It can be argued that transparency is required in order to assess the role and impact of RE on students in Ireland. Despite this need, there remains a lack of conceptual clarity around its implementation. When assessing the approach to RE in Irish primary schools, due consideration must be given to how it is practiced. A lack of national coherence in relation to the best approach has thus resulted in inconsistent delivery of the curriculum (McCormack et al., 2018). Although, this is predominantly due to the divestment of RE programmes to patron bodies. Research suggests that there is a divergence in opinion amongst teachers, principals, and policymakers regarding the extent to which religion should be featured in school life (Darmody, Lyons and Smyth, 2014). Therefore, further research is required to understand the different perspectives of all key stakeholders concerning the role of religion in public education and how it is approached across the various primary school types in Ireland.

Teaching Religious Education

In recent years, there has been a rather contentious debate around where RE should be delivered, and by whom. Indeed, some critics have suggested that religion should be a subject that is taught at homes and in community spaces (Faas, Darmody and Sokolowska, 2016), whereas other critics have argued for its place within educational settings (Hand and White, 2004; Farr 2020). Regardless of one's position, for most schools in Ireland, RE is a core element of the curriculum. Therefore, it primarily rests on teachers to deliver RE to students. Consequently, over the years an examination into its implementation has taken place, and the question of whether Irish teachers have sufficient training and motivation to deliver the RE curriculum has been explored. A study conducted by Heinz, Davison and Keane (2018) explored the religious affiliations of the teaching body in Ireland. This study found that a high percentage of teachers in Ireland would classify themselves as “non-religious”. They also determined that representation of Muslim teachers was low, despite

the growth of the Islamic community in Ireland. Consequently, Heinz, Davison and Keane (2018) question whether it is ethical to put teachers in a position where they have to facilitate a subject that does not match their worldview, which may deter them from pursuing a career in teaching altogether. Furthermore, Dineen and Lundie (2017, p.109) found that teachers, in an effort to demonstrate their professionalism, often “mask their real attitudes and values”.

This analysis of the teaching body in Ireland would indicate that there remains a homogenous socio-demographic group entering the profession (Heinz, Davison and Keane, 2018; Darmody and Smyth, 2016). This is somewhat problematic as studies suggest that teachers from minority religious backgrounds may have a more nuanced understanding of being marginalised and are thus better equipped to assist migrant students in integrating (White, 2010). One explanation for the unequal entry into the profession relates to cultural differences. For example, in Ireland, teaching is a highly prestigious profession due to historical circumstances. However, depending on one’s culture, different professions fall into categories within the hierarchy of perceived prestige. Furthermore, to teach in the primary school sector, teachers must be fluent in Irish. McDaid and Walsh (2016), therefore, argue that the cultural homogeneity within the teaching body reflects the politico-religious power struggle within the Irish State. Indeed, from a religious perspective, teachers were historically seen as important channels for instilling religious values in students. From a more political perspective, however, the importance placed on the Irish language in primary school education was important to the State for developing a national Irish identity (McDaid and Nowlan, 2022).

McGraw and Tiernan (2022, p.45) argue that another “domain for understanding control is regulation of the teaching body”. The Irish Teaching Council (ITC) is responsible for regulating the teaching profession by outlining the entry criteria for admissions into Initial Teacher Education (ITE) in Ireland and also hold responsibility for vetting teachers coming into the system (McGraw and Tiernan, 2022). Against this backdrop, it has been difficult for both young students from migrant backgrounds and foreign-trained teachers that have migrated to Ireland to find their place within the Irish education system. Indeed, a recent study conducted by McDaid and Nowlan (2022) found that teachers from migrant backgrounds experience significant barriers to entering the teaching profession in Ireland. This study highlighted the challenges migrant teachers encounter when attempting to

register with the ITC. McDaid and Nowlan (2022, p.257) argue that “the misrecognition of legitimate qualifications and extensive experience similarly amounts to a form of symbolic violence”. As a consequence of this time-consuming and costly process, potential teachers self-eliminate from the job market, thus causing major repercussions to the educational landscape.

Furthermore, ITE programmes in Ireland have received criticism in recent years regarding their emphasis on religious studies. Although not an absolute criterion in all circumstances, teacher training colleges encourage all students to take the Certificate in Religious Studies (CRS) to enhance their employability (McGraw and Tiernan, 2022). As most primary schools in Ireland fall under a Catholic ethos, and most dioceses have moved to make the certificate a mandatory step in teaching in Catholic primary schools, many teachers feel pressure to acquire a CRS. With reports suggesting that many Irish teachers identify as having “no religion” (Heinz Davison and Keane, 2018), questions arise concerning the quality of the delivery of RE. As such, the requirement of the CRS has increased in prominence in recent years to mitigate against such concerns. Of course, there are still many teachers currently teaching in Irish primary schools that have not acquired the CRS, as they were employed prior to the dioceses efforts to increase the need for the certificate as a part of the requirement procedure. In recent years, however, ET schools have also created an ethics course as an alternative secular option. Despite this development, one could argue that due to the limited number of ET and CNS, teachers must still take the CRS to ensure their employability. This again, raises questions of religious freedom and power within the Irish educational system.

With regards to the delivery of RE in primary schools, the support teachers receive is the responsibility of the patrons themselves. In Catholic primary schools, the Diocesan Advisors undertake the task of ensuring quality delivery of RE. The extent to which schools receive visits from the Diocesan Advisors depends on the diocese, with visits ranging from once a year to once every three years (McGraw and Tiernan, 2022). However, although primary school teachers receive support and training to deliver RE, critics have questioned the extent to which teacher training colleges are preparing prospective teachers to interact with the cultural and religious diversity (Hannigan, Faas and Darmody, 2022). Consequently, it has been argued that culturally responsive teaching must receive greater attention in ITE. Although pre-service training in Ireland offers modules that address

inclusion, the programmes are treated as standalone modules and not mandatory for student teachers. The lack of mandatory training has raised serious questions amongst critics regarding the gap between policy rhetoric and practice (Hannigan, Faas and Darmody, 2022).

In conclusion, Ireland is undergoing significant transformation in terms of its social composition. This social phenomenon has, in recent years, presented numerous challenges to the largely denominational primary school sector in Ireland. Therefore, this thesis offers an analysis of the approaches the major primary school types take in order to influence students' knowledge of different religions and cultures and students' ability to interact with plurality. This timely study will not only increase understanding of the role of religion in primary schools but will ultimately provide information regarding how inclusive Irish primary schools are to the increased diversity found in Ireland.

Theoretical Framework

Theorising the Religious Changes in Society and the Educational Response

Debates concerning the role of religion in public education have become ubiquitous in policy discourses. In recent decades, the classroom has become a cynosure of how to engage with religious diversity. However, engagement with such debates remains inadequate in the absence of an understanding of the process of transformation that has taken place in many Western European countries. Therefore, prior to addressing this question, this thesis will explore the religious changes that have occurred in Western European countries, such as Ireland.

During modernisation, it was hypothesised that the role of religion would decline rapidly, with its sphere of influence subjected to the periphery of society (Luckmann, 1967). The decline of religion, and the rise of secularism, was seen as an inevitable eventuality of modernity. Indeed, the inverse relationship between modernity and religion was in line with predictions of prominent figures in modern sociology such as Marx and Comte. Comte, for example, theorised that society would pass through three main stages: theological, metaphysical, and positive. The last of these stages was to be the age of scientific reason, where faith would be seen as a system that assisted past civilisations in managing

“ignorance, powerlessness and cultural passivity that plagued early human existence” (Schewel, 2017, p.11). However, the predictions that religion in modern society would play a subordinate role and be confined to the private sphere failed to materialise and thus, no longer hold validity (Berking, Streets and Schwenk, 2018; Habermas et al., 2010).

Indeed, the contemporary world, in all but a few countries, remains deeply religious (Berger, 2014). However, it can be argued that sociologists who predicted the secularisation of the modern world were not entirely misguided in their conclusion (Berger, 2014). Although religion remains a major feature of social reality, modernity did bring about a secular discourse. A significant influence of the rise of the secular discourses was the gradual separation of religion and state. As a consequence of this separation, sociologists have continually engaged in research examining the relationship between religious institutions and the individual. Three decades ago, Davie (1994) first coined the term “believing without belonging” to illustrate the waning influence of religious institutions in the life of the individual throughout the Western world. Where once, religious institutions played a dominant role in dictating various aspects of one's personal life, Davie (1994) argues that such institutions' spheres of influence have lessened in recent years. This phenomenon, although difficult to attribute to a direct cause, has been the subject of intense interest, with many scholars theorising possible explanations for this steep decline.

Due to the theory of secularisation being “empirically untenable” (Berger, 2014, p.19), scholars have arrived at new conclusions regarding the relationship between modernity and religion. In a critical analysis of classical secularisation, Berger (2014) espouses the pluralisation theory. Here, he argues that modernity does not lead to a natural decline in religion; rather, that it moves towards the development of two pluralisms. This entails, firstly, the coexistence of various religious paradigms, and secondly, the coexistence of the religious and secular spheres (Berger, 2014). Furthermore, the interaction between the secular and religious that characterises the pluralism paradigm can be found in post-secular thought. Post-secularism, popularised by Habermas, has been defined as:

...not a period after secularisation - rather it is a perspective on the world that recognises the entanglement of the secular and religious in all aspects of the social. It refuses narrow European definitions of societies as beacons of secular political progress, challenges multiple injustices of colonial capitalism and racial

neoliberalism, and explores what can emerge from the failure of religions, rights, reason to provide absolute common ground for public education. (Kitching, 2020)

Berger (2014) argues that central to arriving at conclusions regarding the place of religion in society, it is imperative that one understands the nature of these two pluralisms. Nowhere is this more evident than in the education sector. Ireland, a country bound for generations by a close connection between church and state, now faces questions regarding how religion should be approached in public education. Despite the growth of movements that call for the removal of religion in public education, Lumby and MacRuairc (2020, p.15) argue that: “tidying away religion as a discrete element of the curriculum or attempting to defuse challenges by seeing all religions as essentially one, may do little to prepare children for tough contestation over how the world is shaped.”

Therefore, operating under the assumption that there is value in learning about religion in one’s formative years, the question then turns to how religion should be approached. On the one hand, denominational schools, by definition, are confessional in their approach to religion. Here, students learn-in religion. Over the past number of years, a huge amount of research has been conducted analysing the limitations of the confessional approach to religion. In particular, critics have levelled concerns regarding human rights violations and the process of “othering” that may inadvertently occur. On the other hand, a learn-about approach to religion has been adopted by multi-denominational and equality-based schools in Ireland. The normative assumptions concerning the learn-about approach to religion have received less attention. Often this approach is seen as value free, and the necessary approach to be inclusive of religious diversity. However, there are numerous underlying assumptions to this approach that merit further analysis.

In a recent essay, Farr (2020) explored some of the normative assumptions underpinning a learn-about approach to religion. This approach is often cited as the most appropriate epistemic process of teaching about religion, as it develops in young people the knowledge of various world religions, which in turn, improve students’ religious literacy and ultimately tolerance. However, Farr (2020, p.512) argues:

While such tolerance may indeed emerge naturally out of the study of various religions, to position it as such a study’s primary educational outcome is to operate

from within a conceptually impoverished understanding of religion. It is to suggest that religion as a phenomenon has little epistemic value of its own to contribute. The approach instrumentalizes the object of its study, flattening its complex conceptual universe and transforming the study of religion into a set of attitudinal techniques required to maintain social stability.

Here, Farr (2020, p.515) challenges notions of state neutrality attached with the learn-about approach to religion, stating that “the enhanced critical distance suggested by the epistemic shift to education about religion suggests that such an approach to religion views it ‘as it really is,’ rather than viewing it as a conceptual construct of political liberalism”. Such debates highlight the challenges before policymakers. Therefore, there is an urgent need to define how one conceptualises religion and understands its role within education.

Theorising Ethos

In light of the cultural and religious changes experienced in Ireland, the question of ethos has become increasingly prevalent. Indeed, in recent years, the ubiquity of discourses concerning ethos have grown, yet, to some extent, the term remains somewhat ambiguous. Moreover, the frequency with which ethos appears in educational parlance has been argued to raise particular concern. In other words, the label appears to have become a buzzword in educational discourse that some argue retains a degree of vagueness (Solvason, 2005). For instance, Braggs and Manchester (2017) argue that the term may be at risk of becoming completely atheoretical. To illustrate, they posit that ethos derives meaning to suit different contexts and purposes, thus becoming bereft of any conceptual meaning or social utility. Finn (2015) echoes these sentiments, suggesting that ethos has become an oversimplified concept. With this in mind, empirical contributions are required to understand how the ethos of a school influences its daily practices.

On the one hand, ethos has been described in rather broad terms as the atmosphere or “characteristic spirit” of the school. However, scholars have attempted to move beyond such vague conceptualisations of ethos, and instead are attempting to bring more precision to the delivery of a school’s ethos. In an effort to bring precision to the implementation ethos, Finn (2015) warns that there may be methodological assumptions which are based on a fundamentally erroneous understanding of ethos. Indeed, Finn (2015) rejects the

positivist paradigm which argues that ethos is measurable and observable. Under a positivist theoretical framework, ethos is experienced as a set of objectives which directly influence the day-to-day operation of the school environment. Here, a school's success is measured by the extent to which these objectives are met. Coolahan (2000) stresses that a school's ethos mirrors wider social processes and is affected by the quality of the broader educational landscape. For example, in Western societies, neoliberal forces have had a profound impact on policy and the value latent within the educational system. Indeed, Braggs and Manchester (2017) argue that these influences have created a competitive environment amongst schools and ethos is primarily used as a means of attracting "customers" through developing one that is unique and appealing.

However, some authors argue that the ethos is more than just a marketing tool and is something that is developed in light of broader social processes. Indeed, McKeon (2020) posits that how a school arrives at a particular ethos is influenced by the historical provenance of a school, institutional hierarchies, patron bodies, broader social processes, belief systems, and what is considered to be of value (McKeon, 2020). This can be observed in Ireland. Indeed, the majority of schools espouse a Catholic ethos as the Church has had a deep-rooted connection with the Irish State and, thus, the educational sector. However, some authors appear to suggest that the ethos of the school may not be static, but rather, something that is subject to change. Indeed, Donnelly (2000) identified two broad viewpoints: one, that ethos is a formal expression of the goals and objectives of a given institution; and two, ethos can emerge as a result of a process of interactions. This conception of ethos offers more flexibility and may answer why it is conceptually challenging to operationalise.

Of course, reports suggest that all school types experience, to some extent, a discrepancy between the stated ethos of the school and how the ethos is interpreted and implemented by the school staff (Faas, Smith and Darmody, 2018b). Previous research has highlighted the discrepancy between what is stated to be the formal ethos of a school and the day-to-day experience therein (Faas, Smith and Darmody, 2018b). It is difficult to attribute this to a single cause, but existing research has highlighted some areas of concern. One such analysis found that although schools in Ireland, such as CNS, espoused an ethos of inclusivity, the social norms and values of the broader educational sector jeopardised these principles (Faas et al., 2018b). Here, Faas, Smith and Darmody (2018b) highlight the

importance of maintaining a well-defined ethos to facilitate its implementation. This study illustrates the clear dangers of vague conceptualisation of the term and the corresponding importance of clarity for the ethos to impact the climate and practices of the school.

Reproducing Educational Inequalities

Discourses concerning ethos have increased in prevalence in light of the epistemic processes of pluralism and questions regarding educational inequalities. Indeed, it has been argued that the sociology of education has a profound contribution to make with regards to understanding social inequalities. In particular, the seminal works of Bourdieu have served as a template for how inequalities are reproduced in educational settings. Bourdieu introduced the concept of habitus to help describe the social inequalities that may arise in educational settings. Habitus has been defined as “deeply rooted assumptions (not explicitly reflected on but held almost unconsciously) which everyone inherits” (Dineen and Lundie, 2018, p102). These inherited dispositions are influenced by one’s gender, class, and race (McClelland, 1990). Furthermore, research indicates that early childhood experiences, both within the family and at school, play a substantial role in the development of such dispositions (Dineen and Lundie, 2018). According to Bourdieu, the “habitus, a product of history, produces individual and collective practices” (Bourdieu, 1990, p.54). Therefore, an individual's habitus has profound implications on one's thoughts and behaviours and thus serves as an important line of inquiry with regards to how it plays out in the social world.

However, habitus has become a rather contentious construct in social research (Reay, 2004; Nash, 1999). It has been argued that habitus is conceptually ambiguous, making it difficult to operationalise (Reay, 2004) - particularly in educational research (Nash, 1999). Furthermore, it has also received criticism for its seemingly latent determinism (Reay, 2004). Indeed, critics have stated that habitus is grounded in a structuralist paradigm, in which individuals are predisposed to behaving in a certain manner (Reay, 2004). However, one can argue that habitus is a much more complex structure. For example, Reay (2004) asserts that choice is at the heart of the construct and that habitus enables individuals to generate a wider repertoire of behaviours - behaviours which predispose individuals towards certain modes of conduct, but also allow for individual agency. As such, Di

Maggio (1979) highlights that, although habitus is a product of early childhood, it is in a continuous process of restructuring through individual interaction with the social world.

From the perspective that habitus is a complex construct which, on the one hand, predisposes individuals towards a certain manner of behaving and, on the other, allows for agency, we can see how certain groups of students may be at a disadvantage in schools. The analogy of the “fish in water,” deployed by Bourdieu to illustrate how certain groups gain advantage in a specific setting, is particularly helpful in this regard (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 127). This demonstrates the manner in which personal habitus interacts with the class, as students who know the “rules of the game” gain ascendancy, while other students, often from migrant backgrounds, feel like a fish out of water. Therefore, in the last two decades a great deal of attention has been placed on understanding institutional habitus, which was first coined by Reay (1998). Institutional habitus highlights that the institutions a child attends can have a profound impact on that child's habitus, choices, and practices. In such settings, there is an interplay between the curriculum, the individual child's history, teaching practices, and teacher bias and prejudice (Reay, 1998). Therefore, it can be argued that teachers possess symbolic power at schools and are thus in a position to reward those students “who closely align with the ‘institutional habitus’ of the school” (Darmody, 2011, p226).

As a result, students may experience a disconnect between the habitus they develop in their family setting to the institutional habitus encountered in their formal schooling. In light of recent social changes experienced in Ireland, the concept of institutional habitus takes on particular importance as the majority of schools would have an ethos espoused by the dominant group, Catholics. Therefore, school leaders have a critical role in ensuring that school environments are open and inclusive in order that all students feel a sense of belonging.

The Creation of Culturally Responsive Classrooms

Over the years, considerable advances have been made in how migration-driven diversity is conceptualised. It has been argued that Vertovec's (2007) concept of super-diversity, first introduced over a decade ago, provides a particularly useful analytical lens from which to understand the complexities of social demographics (Grzymala-Kazłowska and

Phillimore, 2018). Grillo (2015) described super-diversity as potentially operating along four separate axes, these being: ethnicity, political status, socio-cultural diversity, and socio-economic status. The challenges and opportunities associated with super-diversity are acutely discernible in the school environment. The inevitable social changes which have occurred as a result of this social phenomenon have placed a demand on schools to adapt and learn how to respond to the increased diversity in the classroom. Consequently, Gay published a seminal study in 1994 which introduced the concept of culturally responsive pedagogies (CRP). This concept has since become one of the most dominant ideas in modern classrooms. Gay (2000, p.29) describes CRP as a process of

using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them. It teaches to and through the strength of these students. It is culturally validating and affirming.

Building on this conceptualisation, Ladson-Billings (1995) identified three main elements which constitute CRP: high academic expectations and steps to reach such standards; reshaping the curriculum to build on students' knowledge and understanding, while maintaining a strong dialogue and relationship between home and school; and enhancing students' critical consciousness with regards to power relationships. Recent studies analysing the role of teachers in creating culturally responsive environments found that school leaders must be active agents in promoting the values of a culturally responsive pedagogy (Faas, Smith and Darmody, 2018b; Khalifa, Gooden and Davis, 2016). As such, it is critical that all teachers are engaged in a process of responding to cultural and religious diversity (Khalifa, Gooden and Davie, 2016).

Yet, an analysis of the teaching body in Ireland indicates that there remains a homogenous socio-demographic group entering the profession (Heinz, Davison and Keane, 2018; Darmody and Smyth, 2016). Studies suggest that teachers from minority religious and cultural backgrounds demonstrate a nuanced understanding of being marginalised and are thus better equipped to assist migrant students in integrating (White, 2010). Indeed, drawing once more on Bourdieusian theory, it is suggested that teachers possess symbolic power in relation to culture, and thus validate and advantage students who are more aligned with the institutional habitus of the school (Darmody, 2010). This is certainly the case in

Ireland, where most teachers are white, middle class, female and of a Catholic background. Several studies have highlighted the benefits of diversifying the teaching body. For example, recent research suggests that teachers from minority ethnic backgrounds can serve as role models for students from similar backgrounds (Griffin, 2018), and can offer pedagogical advantages to help reduce the achievement gap between the majority ethnic population and minority ethnic groups (Landertinger et al., 2021). Therefore, although a move towards developing CRP is a major step towards inclusion, it can be argued that it is finite in its utility when certain conditions are not in place.

In recent years, there has been somewhat of a backlash towards the epistemological assumption underlying CRP. For instance, not only has it been argued that CRP do not contribute to meaningful change, but that they also inadvertently reproduce racial, cultural, and religious inequalities:

[T]he history of Western civilization articulated in what I have called the “modern/colonial capitalist/patriarchal western-centric/Christian-centric world-system” has privileged the culture, knowledge, and epistemology produced by the West inferiorizing the rest. No culture in the world remained untouched by European modernity. There is no absolute outside to this system. The monologism and monotopic global design of the West relates to other cultures and peoples from a position of superiority and is deaf toward the cosmologies and epistemologies of the non-Western world. (Grosfoguel 2011, p. 24)

Building on Grosfoguel’s assertion, Pirbhai-Illich, Pete and Martin (2017) challenge the assumptions underlying CRP. They argue that, by definition, CRP focuses on the needs of the “other” and therefore adopts a deficit model towards difference. As a result of this study, four themes were identified which particularly affect the learning experience of marginalised students: 1) colonial thinking; 2) the hegemony of Westernised educational ideals; 3) discourses regarding marginalisation and the process of “othering”; and 4) the hegemony of the English language. Although this book is just an exercise in criticality and therefore does not provide a blueprint for change, it does indicate that monumental shifts are required both at the meso and the macro level to generate meaningful change.

Therefore, if change is to occur, the responsibility cannot lie with the teachers alone. Indeed, Gay (2010) suggests that culturally responsive teaching cannot transform the culture of a school in and of itself. Such a transformation also requires change at the level of administration. Leadership must promote and sustain an inclusive school environment which integrates students of all backgrounds and supports the development of teachers to practice culturally responsive teaching (Khalifa, Gooden and Davis, 2016). This thesis will pay particular attention to the shifts which must occur at the meso level that ensure students can develop a sense of school belonging.

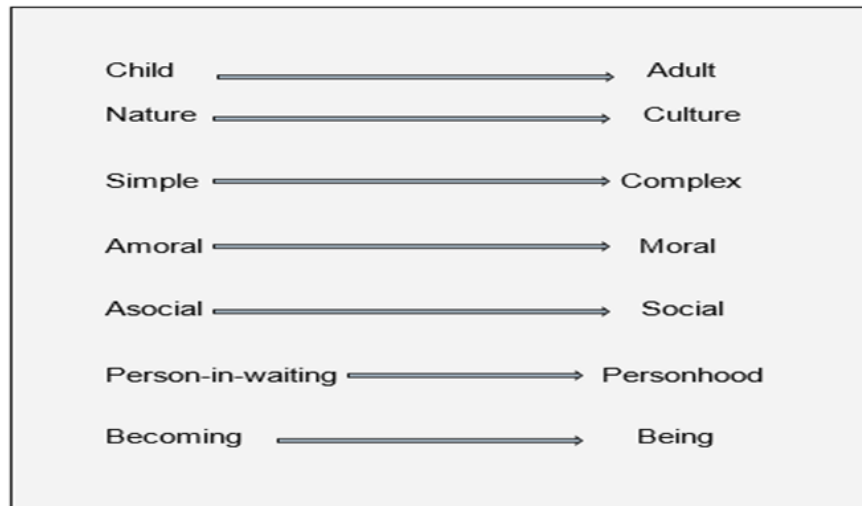
School Belonging and Conceptualising Childhood Agency

Understanding the factors that enable migrant students to develop a sense of school belonging can have major implications regarding integration into wider society. Yet, despite widespread interest in this area, many critics continue to argue that the concept of school belonging remains ambiguous (Slaten et al., 2016). At its heart, school belonging refers to a sense of being “somewhere you can be confident that you will fit in, a feeling of being safe in your identity and at home in a place” (Riley, 2022, p.1). However, in recent years, studies have challenged the normative assumption attached to discourses around belonging (Kuttner, 2023). Indeed, dominant discourses regarding belonging treat the concept as something that is given to the student, rather than something the student can build (Kuttner, 2023). Here, the assumption is that the burden of responsibility regarding cultivating belonging rests upon the school and its staff. Although there is validity in this position, the role of agency in counteracting feelings of “otherness” merits further exploration.

Recognising the ubiquitous nature of agency in contemporary childhood studies is a testament to an advancing understanding of the profound contribution children can make to understanding reality. Yet, despite the prevalence of agency in educational discourses, the construct remains contentious (see Faas, Smith and Darmody, 2018d). Indeed, over the past three decades, agency has been subject to ongoing epistemological and ontological debates. Central to these debates are the conceptions of childhood, as well as the values operating in contemporary Western societies and how they act upon such conceptions.

Historically, assumptions around the nature of childhood have been predominantly conceptualised as a period of transition. This is best captured by Prout and James (1997).

Figure 1.3 Historical Assumptions towards Childhood



Source: (Prout and James, 1997)

As illustrated in Figure 1.3, these historical approaches to understanding childhood are rooted in assumptions that a child's merit lies in what they will become, and meaningful contributions only arise when the child becomes an adult (Prout and James, 1997). Under such assumptions, children lack ontology (Wyness, 2019). Wyness (2019) argues that the lack of ontology stems primarily from a lack of willingness on the part of social scientists to perceive children as a meaningful unit of study and something that "is", rather than something that "will be". This builds on Durkheim's (cited in Jenks, 1982) notion that children are incomplete and unformed social actors, with limited faculties. Such a dichotomy between childhood and adulthood (Wyness, 2019) has major implications for how we understand agency in childhood. Indeed, within such a framework, it is easy to assume that if you need to understand then you must turn to the complex, moral, and being (rather than the simple, amoral, and becoming).

This school of thought is grounded in a structuralist perspective. Under this framework, children are situated within institutions - such as schools - at the bottom of the hierarchy of decision-making and are seen as passive recipients of structural forces (Wyness, 2019; Ansell, 2005). Through the curriculum, children adopt norms, beliefs and values regarding

their broader social standing (Wyness, 2019). However, particularly with regards to children's capacities for agency, the structural perspective is at odds with contemporary conceptions of childhood which suggest that children are co-creators of knowledge and reality and play an active role in negotiating and renegotiating meaning (Kumpulainen et al., 2013). In light of this, post-structuralism arrives at fewer assumptions regarding the position children have within certain institutions (Wyness, 2019). From this perspective, agency is operationalised as an open-ended process which is in a constant flux (Calman and Lundegard, 2013). It is argued that children are not passive, but active agents in the formation of meaning, highlighting the importance of dynamic interaction between teachers and students in this process of formation (Walkerdine, 1984).

A critical milestone in the advancement of contemporary understandings of childhood, particularly in relation to their agency, was the United Nation Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF, 1989). This historic document decreed that children be given the right to participate in decisions that affect them (Article 12); the right to freedom of expression (Article 13); and the right to thought, conscience, and religion (Article 14). Consequently, childhood agency has now become an accepted term in sociology and children can make a contribution to the world around them, with post-structuralist thought moving to the forefront of educational discourses (Leonard, 2016). Indeed, the concept of agency has become synonymous with ideas such as freedom and power, and, consequently, a key construct of Western education (Davies, 2000). Therefore, functioning under the assumption that children possess ontology and bring value to discourses regarding reality, clarity around the conceptualisation of agency is required.

Accuracy in relation to the conceptualisation of agency is essential, as discrepancies may arise as a result of conceptual imprecision. Indeed, Wyness (2019) warns that definitions of agency may risk becoming an aspect of childhood which is taken for granted. Precisely how to conceptualise agency has been widely debated (Valentina, 2011). Through a socio-cultural theoretical framework, agency is understood as an ongoing process which is both historically and contextually situated (Kumpulainen et al., 2013). This framework, pioneered by the works of Vygotsky, views learning and development as a phenomenon that does not take place in isolation, and knowledge and agency is mediated through social interactions (Kumpulainen et al., 2013). Here, the agentic capacities of children are constructed and reconstructed through a continuous dialogue with adults (Kumpulainen et

al., 2013). From this perspective, the process of socialisation is critical for the development of agency. Elkin (1960) identified agencies of socialisation for children as the family unit, the school, and peer groups. Each has a specific role and interacts with the others in the process of the development of agency and identity.

However, Valentina (2011) contends this point by suggesting that a debate remains around the extent to which children possess agency, particularly in relation to their ability to inform change. Furthermore, Valentina (2011) flags that children are incapable of acting upon wider social processes. Indeed, the extent to which children can contribute to meaningful change has been questioned. Whilst children have been given more of a voice in recent pedagogical movements, many argue that these are often tokenistic gestures (Darmody, 2011). The absence of a platform from which children can impact meaningful change may be attributed to their inherent inability to rise to such challenges, or to society's perception of the capabilities children possess. It is particularly in light of religion that we see broader societal norms interact with how children are perceived. Children are often overlooked as possessing agency and, therefore, must adopt the positions and belief systems of their parents (Kitching, 2020). However, drawing on childhood studies - in particular in relation to belief and faith formation - children exercise agency, negotiate meaning, and draw on several internal and external sources to reconfigure meaning (Faas, Smith and Darmody, 2018d; Kitching and Shanneik, 2015).

In addition, it is important to note that education does not operate in a vacuum. Pedagogy is influenced and understood in light of social norms and beliefs operating in society. The ubiquitous nature of neoliberal forces in Western society and the dominance of economic discourses influence educational thought and pedagogy (Sims, 2017). Under this framework, children are seen as economic units, and their value comes from their future contribution to the economy (Gibson, McArdle and Hatcher, 2015). Therefore, education is viewed as an investment. Here, Kitching (2020) warns that our understanding of the agency and participation of children is ultimately exploited by neoliberal values of competition and enterprise, despite it being based upon principles such as democratic communication.

The sociology of childhood studies on agency has centred around the right of children to be heard in sociological research. As aforementioned, the United Nation Convention on the

Rights of the Child did much in the way of advancing agentic thought in this area. However, Wyness (2019, p.255) warns, “is it enough that we now hear children’s voices, that we take children seriously?”. While there is a growing body of research that acknowledges the importance of the child’s voice, some have argued that policies developed to create space for the child’s voice remain tokenistic (Darmody, 2011). Therefore, advancement of thought around the place of children in society is required, and the understanding of agency is not an end in itself but rather an opening to the possibility of social research (Wyness, 2019). This thesis will operate under a social-cultural, post-structuralist paradigm, viewing the agency of children as a construct which is continuously negotiated through interactions with adults.

Research Methodology

This next section provides a detailed overview of the research design, access and sampling strategies, data collection tools, data analysis procedure and ethical considerations. The aim of this section is to outline the key principles behind the selection of the research design, review the procedure of gaining access and collecting data and to justify all steps taken throughout the data collection and analysis process.

Research Design

Historically, case studies have been perceived by many scholars with skepticism (Gerring, 2007). Epistemological and methodological misconceptions have resulted in the research design lacking reliability and empirical validity (Flyvbjerg, 2006). Yazan (2015) observed that the failure to arrive at a full consensus regarding the implementation of case studies has hampered its full evolution and utility. In recent years, however, there has been a growing appreciation of the role of case studies within social research (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Yin, 2017). Not only does this research design allow for an in-depth study of the complexities of social phenomena (Bryman, 2016), it also provides a significant contribution to the generation of empirically reliable and informative data (Yin, 2018). However, the lack of clarity regarding the parameters of case studies has caused conceptual confusion over the years (Platt, 1992).

Consequently, Yin (2018) has conceptualised a twofold operational definition that articulates both the scope and features of case studies. According to Yin (2018, p.15), a case study is an empirical method that “investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the ‘case’) in depth and within its real-world context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident”. This conceptualisation falls within the boundaries of the research questions of this thesis. As this thesis seeks to understand how the ethos of different Irish primary school types are inclusive of cultural and religious diversity and what factors create a discrepancy between policy and practice - the boundary between context and phenomenon must be explored in-depth and within a real-world context.

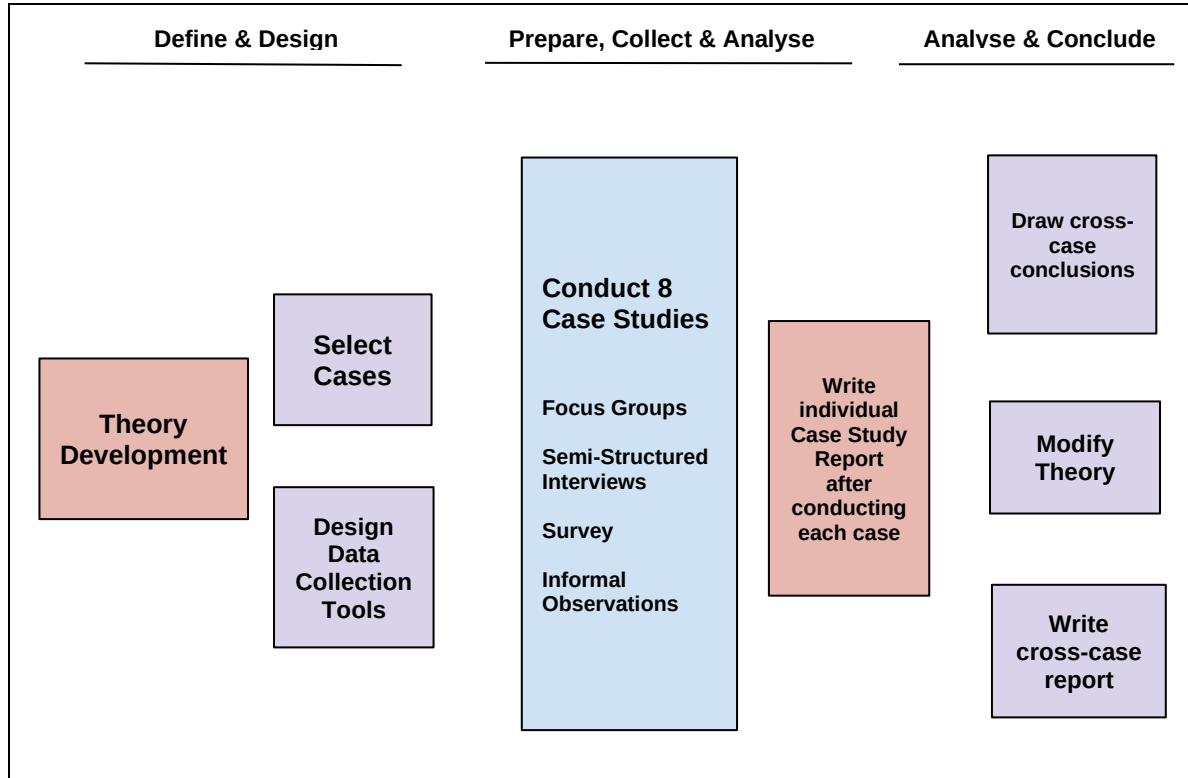
Yin (2018) outlined three main forms of case studies 1) explanatory, 2) descriptive, and 3) exploratory. As this research endeavoured to understand how various school approaches to religion may impact the aforementioned aspects of a child’s life, an exploratory case study approach was adopted. Furthermore, a comparative case study design across multiple settings was favoured in this context. Drawing on a comparative case study, that is exploratory in its approach, allowed for a more nuanced understanding of the different processes occurring within the various schools to emerge.

Furthermore, this study adopted an interpretivist epistemological and ontological theoretical and philosophical position. As this research project sought to develop an in-depth understanding of social phenomena occurring in the various primary school types in Ireland and infer rich insights from numerous social actors operating within these settings, an interpretivist case study approach was deemed most appropriate. Within this paradigm, the researcher operates under the assumption that reality is constructed subjectively through the eyes of the participants sampled. Indeed, as interpretivists do not seek universal truths but rather endeavour to identify patterns of behaviour that give insight into social phenomena (Madill, Jordan and Shirley, 2000), adopting this theoretical position allowed for the collection of rich, vivid data from several key actors connected to the various school environments. Moreover, in light of adopting this theoretical paradigm, the case study drew primarily on qualitative methods while conducting the multiple case studies.

Access and Sampling

Yin (2018) advocates that research designs that consist of multiple cases should deploy a replication logic, as opposed to a sampling logic, as commonly adopted in surveys. The replication logic (Fig. 1.4) suggests that the initial step of research is to both define and design. As such, this project deployed an adapted version of Yin's replication logic model and began with theory development, followed by considerate case selection and the definition of specific data collection tools (Yin, 2018). As illustrated, case selection and sampling strategies require theories to be developed a priori. The primary assumption underpinning the theory for this project was that schools' approach to religion differs across various school types – denominational, equality-based and multi-denominational – thus potentially impacting students' interactions, their understanding of different religions, and likelihood of developing tools that will enhance a student's capacity to interact with diversity. As a result of this theory, cases were selected to best shed light on these social phenomena.

Figure 1.4 Yin's Replication Logic Model



Source: Adapted from: Yin (2018)

Regarding optimal selection of cases and participants, a sampling strategy consistent with the theoretical position was required. Considering this, a purposive sampling strategy was chosen. This sampling strategy is aligned with the ontological, epistemological paradigm of the study as it seeks to arrive at an in-depth understanding of reality by selecting participants that are best positioned to provide information relevant to the research questions. Purposive sampling is built on the assumption that, given the aims and objectives of a study, certain individuals hold a greater insight into a phenomenon and therefore must be sampled (Campbell et al., 2020). Although, research has suggested such sampling reduces external validity (Chittaranjan, 2021), it is nevertheless a useful strategy for gathering information that is most pertinent to the research questions and achieving the aims of this project. To best utilise this sampling strategy, Lucas (2014) posits that it is critical that the researchers identify a conceptual framework to determine participant selection. As such, this research project was orientated by the dimensions outlined by Flick (2018). According to Flick (2018) there are five dimensions of purposive sampling: 1) selection of extreme cases, 2) selection of typical cases, 3) selection of cases of maximal variation, 4) selection of cases that demonstrate intensity of interest, and 5) selection of critical cases that will offer critical understanding of the relations to be studied. For this project, dimension three was utilised - cases of maximal variation. This approach helped to shed light on how diverse groups experience the ethos of different schools.

To this end, cases in this project were selected from the main primary school types – denominational, equality-based and multi-denominational – in Ireland. These included Catholic, COI, CNS and ET primary schools. The vast majority (96%) of primary schools in Ireland are owned and under the patronage of religious denominations and approximately 89% of these schools are owned and under the patronage of the Catholic Church. COI primary schools are the second largest majority, with over 170 schools in Ireland. CNS, since their initial inception, have become the fastest growing school type in Ireland and therefore represent an ever-growing influence in the Irish educational landscape. Finally, ET primary schools have, since the 1970s, grown rapidly as a result of parents advocating for the development of this equality-based school type. This study, however, excluded other minority faith schools (for example Jewish, Muslim, etc.) as the numbers are very small and it was felt they would be easily identifiable as a result.

All school types listed above were sampled in both rural and urban settings. It was anticipated that some rural schools would host a less diverse, more homogeneous student population. Schools in urban centres, however, are often associated with a diverse, heterogeneous composition of students. Moreover, research indicates that urban schools have a higher percentage of migrant-origin students in relation to schools in rural settings (Byrne et al., 2010). In rural areas, schools are often quite small. Indeed, 20% of all primary schools in Ireland have less than 50 students, with many of these schools situated in rural areas (Faas et al., 2015). Although rural schools may acknowledge and celebrate diversity, research indicates that minority faith students in standalone schools located in rural areas are often exposed to a degree of exclusion and ignorance (Devine, 2011; Faas et al., 2015). Therefore, it was envisioned that urban settings may be better equipped to create environments that foster understanding, exploration, and celebration of diverse world views and have access to more resources to manage integration and inclusion. As such, research was conducted in both rural settings and urban settings to explore whether school location influenced the adoption of culturally responsive approaches in schools. To gain access, schools were first approached in May and June 2021. A letter was sent to each school with an overview of the research project, the data collection procedure, and the ethical guidelines that would govern the project.

Table 1.3 Sample School Information

	Location	Size	Ethos	Approach to RE
School 1	Rural	25	Church of Ireland	Learning in Religion (faith formation, preaching)
School 2	Urban	405	Catholic	Learning in Religion (faith formation, preaching)
School 3	Rural	59	Catholic	Learning in Religion (faith formation, preaching)
School 4	Urban	592	CNS	Learning about religion and from religion (belief nurturing)
School 5	Rural	583	ET	Learning about religion and from religion
School 6	Urban	204	Church of Ireland	Learning in Religion (faith formation, preaching)
School 7	Rural	383	CNS	Learning about religion and from religion (belief nurturing)
School 8	Urban	405	ET	Learning about religion and from religion

All data collection instruments were piloted between April and May 2021. According to Yin (1994, p.74) the “pilot case is used more formatively, assisting an investigator to develop relevant lines of questions - possibly even providing some conceptual clarification for the research design as well”. In order to collect the pilot data, a schoolteacher, parent and school principal that were not a part of the project were approached. Once they agreed to take part, the schoolteacher and parent were interviewed using the first draft of the interview guide, and the school principal completed the questionnaire. This was a critical step in the development of the data collection instruments for this project. Indeed, after collecting the pilot data from each participant, questions were removed that distracted from the main aims of the research. Furthermore, prompts were added where necessary and open-ended questions were attached to the interview guide in order to encourage more of a contribution from the participants. Overall, this process allowed us to enhance the quality of the interview guide and questionnaire.

Following the gathering of pilot data and the confirmation of access from all eight schools, the formal data collection process began in October 2021. First, primary school principals in the participating schools were surveyed. The data collected from the school principals provided baseline information on each school. Interviews and focus groups were then conducted with students, parents and teachers, concurrently rather than sequentially, due to time constraints. Therefore, at a time of the teacher’s choosing, focus group interviews were conducted with 10 students in total from 5th class. For the focus groups, where possible, efforts were made to have two in each school. The first group consisted of 5 students from an ethnic Irish, catholic background and the second group consisted of 5 students from diverse religious and cultural backgrounds. To gather such groups, the teachers and school principals’ help was elicited to identify the most appropriate students to join. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with teachers from 5th class and one other teacher from each school. Overall, 15 teachers were interviewed throughout the data collection process. Parents of students from the school were also approached with regards to being interviewed. Overall, 16 parents were interviewed throughout the project. Semi-structured interviews with both parents and teachers lasted approximately between 25 minutes to an hour. The rationale for the selection of all participants will be detailed in the proceeding section.

Furthermore, throughout the data collection process, the researcher made informal observations regarding covert and overt elements of the school ethos and the interactions that occurred within the setting. The overall sample size of this research project consisted of 97 participants. The breakdown of participants can be seen in Table 1.4.

Table 1.4 Sample Overview

Sample	Method	Sample size	Rural/Urban
Students	Focus Groups	60	Both
Parents	Semi-Structured Interviews	16	Both
Teachers	Semi-Structured Interviews	15	Both
Principals	Questionnaires	6	Both

Data Collection Tools

Yin (1994) posits that the use of multiple data collection methods ensure that the research maintains construct validity. As such, this study adopted a multi-method research design. Hunter and Brewer (2015, p.5) define multi-method research as “the practice of employing two or more different methods or styles of research within the same study”. Therefore, this research deployed focus groups with students, semi-structured interviews with teachers and parents, and a questionnaire administered with school principals. This aligns with the second phase of Yin’s (2018) replication model, where the researcher prepares the necessary research instruments and collects and analyses the data. Below we outline the procedure involved with each of the data collection methods.

Focus Group Interviews

Overall, 60 students were sampled using focus group interviews in this study. Focus groups were identified as an appropriate data collection method for several reasons. Indeed, focus groups have become an increasingly popular method in the social sciences as they provide unique data that captures not only participants' perspectives on a phenomenon, but also

provides an opportunity for researchers to observe group interactions and dynamics amongst participants as they discuss the planned subject (Peek and Fothergill, 2009). Prior to conducting the focus group interviews, thought was given how to organise the focus group to maximise its potential. For example, Fern (1982) outlined three dimensions of a focus group that require attention: 1) the size of the group, 2) the composition of the group, and 3) whether the focus group will be conducted with or without a moderator. These three dimensions will be addressed below.

With regard to the size of the focus group, although there is no magic number, the literature posits that the researcher must find the balance of a group size where the breadth of information on a particular subject can be explored without members of the focus group being silenced by the size (Peek and Fothergill, 2009). Therefore, this study included two focus groups in each school with five participants in each group. Having only five students in each group allowed for a rich, dynamic discussion to occur and ensured that the participants contributing to the discussion were not overwhelmed by large numbers. Throughout the data collection process, the researcher remained cognizant of the importance of creating an environment where all members felt able to share openly and freely. Here, the interviewer remained conscious of dynamics where louder individuals may dominate the discussion (Peek and Fothergill, 2009). By keeping the group size to five individuals, however, it was easier for all members to share their views. Furthermore, starting with simple questions at the beginning of the focus group interview ensured that each participant involved had an opportunity to share from the start. Particular attention was also placed on ensuring that all students felt comfortable and not judged, and that there are no “right” or “wrong” answers to the questions.

With regard to composition, as aforementioned, efforts were made to have two focus groups in each school. The first group consisted of 5 students from an ethnic Irish Catholic background and the second group consisted of 5 students from diverse religious and cultural backgrounds. Students were sampled from 5th class. 5th class is the second last year of primary school and accommodates students from the ages of 10–11. It was felt that this age group would be best placed to explore questions related to the role of religion in schools, what practices in the school help integrate students from various backgrounds and how intercultural friendships are nurtured. Students from 6th class also could have been

chosen for this reason, however, as they were being prepared for their transition to secondary school it was envisioned that scheduling difficulties would arise.

The rationale behind sampling two groups with different cultural and religious backgrounds, was that it was felt that having one focus group of students from diverse backgrounds would help demystify the social experience of how students from different cultural, religious and ethnic backgrounds experience the ethos of the school and respond to the various approaches to religion in Irish primary schools. Collecting this data would open up the possibility to compare and contrast the responses of this group to that of the students from the ethnic Irish, Catholic group. The data collected from both groups provided rich insights into how the different groups interact with the ethos in different primary school types in Ireland, and helped to highlight the factors that assist certain groups to develop a sense of belonging within the school environment.

In terms of making sure that the focus groups gathered quality data, emphasis was placed on ensuring the interviewer was well prepared. Bryman (2016) suggests the interviewer's involvement is twofold. On the one hand, the interviewer must allow discussion to flow freely, and, on the other hand, the interviewer must intervene to draw out salient issues, especially when the group does not naturally raise these subjects. Kandola (2012) identified a strategy for the interviewer to ensure the flow of conversation. This strategy involves the interviewer acknowledging what has been said, summarising, and stimulating reflection on what has just been shared, avoiding intervening by agreeing or disagreeing, sharing personal thoughts, or interrupting. These strategies were continually drawn upon during the focus group interviews.

Furthermore, Kitzinger (1994) notes that researchers often fail to report the interactions that occur, and reports focus group data as if they were one-to-one interviews. Therefore, during the data collection process, an audio device recorded the dialogue verbatim, and the interviewer recorded in a notebook any interactions, feelings, or body language which were felt at the time to be pertinent to the research questions. It is also important that the researcher was cognizant of the various forms of interaction. Kitzinger (1994) suggests that there are two main forms of interactions: complementary and argumentative interactions. Making references to these was particularly useful for this project as the divergent understandings of students regarding religious and cultural beliefs were able to be captured.

Munday (2006) further illustrates that the group's achievement of consensus or failure to arrive at consensus is particularly useful for understanding collective identity. This was especially pertinent for this project due to the nature of the research question.

Although focus groups as a means of collecting data, particularly from students, boast many advantages, the limitations should also be acknowledged. With focus groups, the researcher has less control as opposed to other forms of data collection, such as individual interviews (Peek and Fothergill, 2009). There is also a possibility that the conversation may not reach the depths achieved during individual interviews and a lot of opinions of the participants may remain hidden. Nevertheless, the researcher was cognizant of all such limitations and made efforts to ensure the focus groups were well planned, created an interview guide that elicited answers to the research questions, and created an open environment in each interview to ensure full participation.

Semi-Structured Interviews

To collect data from parents and teachers, this study deployed semi-structured interviews. Overall, this project sampled 16 parents (15 female and 1 male: 7 of Irish ethnicity and 9 immigrated to Ireland) and 15 teachers (14 females and 1 male: 14 of Irish ethnicity and 1 immigrated to Ireland). The primary aim was to generate rich, vivid data that allow the researcher to gain a deep understanding of the subject (Kallio et al., 2016). This active exchange that occurs during semi-structured interviews allows the researcher to investigate complex behaviours, opinions, and emotions that may be difficult to capture from quantitative methods, such as surveys (Longhurst, 2016). This form of interview differs significantly from that of the focus group interview. For one, the semi-structured interviews take place one-to-one. Therefore, semi-structured interviews allow the researcher to capture more details about the individual than would be possible within a focus group setting as they “offer more insight into a respondent’s personal thoughts, feelings and world view” (Guest et al., 2017, p.693).

The inherent nature of semi-structured interviews allows for both focus and flexibility. This was able to be achieved by creating a carefully crafted interview guide. The interview guide is a set of questions that are framed to guide the unfolding conversation (Bryman, 2016). However, both the interviewer and the interviewee have leeway to extend the scope of the

discussion if the researcher believes it is beneficial towards the project. Bryman (2016) suggests that it is essential the questioning allows the interviewer to glean participants' perspective of their social world. As such, Lofland and Lofland (1995) suggest that the researcher should continually ask themselves two critical questions: 1) "Just what about this is puzzling me?" 2) "What information is required in order to answer the research question?" Bryman (2016, p.470) further expands upon this by suggesting the researcher should continually ask themselves "What do I need to know in order to answer each of these research questions I'm interested in?".

To design a research schedule, Kvale (1996) identified nine different types of questions that could be utilised during semi-structured interviews. These include introduction questions; follow up questions; probing questions; specifying questions; direct questions; indirect questions; structuring questions; silence; and interpreting questions. Therefore, when developing the interview guides, these nine types of questions were considered and applied. Prior to the formation of the interview guide, a thorough literature review was carried out to familiarise the researcher with the field and ensure questions were of social relevance. Once the literature was reviewed and the interview guide developed, interviews took place with selected parents, the 5th class teacher and one other teacher within the school.

Regarding teachers, semi-structured interviews were judged to be the appropriate data collection method as they allow for an in-depth exploration into what culturally responsive practices are taking place in their schools, how teachers are supported to respond to cultural and religious diversity, and what barriers prevent teachers from responding effectively. Interviews were conducted with one teacher from 5th class and one other teacher from within the school. Teachers from 5th class were sampled as it was felt that 5th class students would have more questions regarding religious and ethical education than their younger peers. Therefore, it was anticipated that teachers of 5th class students would be engaged in more challenging situations when implementing religious or ethical elements of the school curriculum. Furthermore, one other teacher from the school was sampled to triangulate the data received from the 5th class teacher. Two separate interview guides therefore were prepared. The interview with the 5th class teacher focused on the specifics of the class, whereas the second interview with another schoolteacher focused broadly on

the school's approach to diversity and religion. This process of triangulation helped enhance the rigor and quality of the findings.

Semi-structured interviews were also conducted with parents of students from the different primary schools. This method of data collection was deemed most appropriate for gathering data from parents as it allowed for a great deal of flexibility. Flexibility was particularly important when interviewing parents due to their intensive schedules. Furthermore, parents were interviewed both face-to-face, over the phone and online via the Zoom app. As data was collected in 2021, many schools were still affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, for some schools, most of the data was collected over video and phone calls. Interviews with parents focused on how they understood the ethos of the school, what elements of the school's ethos they particularly valued and to what extent they collaborate with the school staff.

Although some researchers suggest that the interview process may be beneficial, even therapeutic, to the interviewee, (Rossetto, 2014), this is often determined by the quality of the interviewer. Indeed, a prerequisite to ensuring good quality data depends on the extent to which the interviewer builds a strong rapport with the interviewee, allowing them to feel at ease and to share freely (Willig, 2008). The building of rapport helps mitigate against the extent to which interviewees share socially desirable answers. Therefore, throughout the interview process efforts were made by the interviewer to build rapport with all participants sampled. Indeed, with both parents and teachers, simple introductory questions were asked to ease the participant into the interview and create an open and relaxed environment.

Questionnaires

A brief questionnaire was conducted with six school principals across all four school types. The primary purpose for surveying the school principals was to collect baseline data which would outline background information and key school characteristics. Although quantitative methods are primarily associated with generating data that can be generalised, the purpose of this data was to provide baseline information about the participating schools. Therefore, the questionnaire helped to shed light on how principals understood their role in terms of developing the ethos of the school, exercising culturally responsive leadership and

collaborating with teachers in order to develop inclusive classrooms. To ensure the questionnaire would capture the data required, it was essential that the questionnaire was both “designed meticulously and validated before use” (Yaddanpudi and Yaddanpudi, 2019, p.335). Therefore, as recommended by Yaddanpudi and Yaddanpudi (2019), the questionnaire was reviewed by experts in the field prior to its dissemination.

As part of the questionnaire, background information on the principal was collected, such as, the principal’s employment history; whether they taught in other schools/type of schools before; whether their position was purely administrative or were they also teaching; and the number of years they have worked as a principal. The questionnaires also helped to collect data pertaining to school’s characteristics, such as, the school’s demographic composition; the school’s ethos; inclusive practices that were occurring within the school; and the training received by staff. Finally, the questionnaire gathered data pertaining to the challenges of teaching in multicultural settings; and whether parent-school interactions are occurring. School websites were also drawn upon in order to collect information pertaining to the demographics, ethos and policies of the school. This helped with the rigour and reliability of the data, as information could be triangulated, and all missing information from the questionnaires could be drawn from the school website. As a result of collecting questionnaires from school principals and analysing the school websites, we were able to capture a detailed picture of what was taking place in each school sampled.

Data Analysis

Once the data collection process was complete, the qualitative data collected was analysed through thematic analysis (TA). TA is a process of “identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p.6). This approach, first pioneered by Braun and Clarke (2006), although often associated with qualitative research, is not attached to any epistemological or theoretical paradigm, and thus offers enormous flexibility. Furthermore, King (2004) argued that TA is a useful method for exploring the various perspectives of research subjects, allowing the researcher to identify similarities and differences within the data. As such, TA provided an ideal method of data analysis as this project explored the different perspectives of several key-stakeholders regarding the approach to religion in various school types in Ireland. However, as TA grants the researcher theoretical freedom, it was necessary for the researcher to ensure the analytical

process maintained rigor. Achieving trustworthiness, therefore, is a primary concern of every researcher adopting a TA approach. By way of illustration, Nowell et al., (2017, p.3) argue that trustworthiness is “one-way researchers can persuade themselves and readers that their research findings are worthy of attention”. Therefore, questions regarding how to achieve trustworthiness were addressed prior to data analysis.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) helped define trustworthiness by conceptualising a criterion which includes credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Therefore, throughout the process of analysis, these criteria were constantly referred to. For example, to achieve credibility, efforts were made in the data collection process to triangulate the data by deploying different data collection methods and interviewing several participants. To achieve transferability, the researcher aimed to generate “thick descriptions” in order that the reader can determine for themselves the utility of the findings (Nowell et al., 2017, p.3). Dependability was achieved by deploying a rigorous and systematic process of data analysis, ensuring that the research findings are traceable. As such, a continuous and thorough process of documenting took place throughout the data analysis process. By clearly documenting how conclusions were arrived at, conformability was also achieved. Reflexive journaling, therefore, served the purpose of keeping track of emerging impressions and the meaning attributed to them.

As illustrated, the criteria outlined above were utilised throughout the data analysis process to ensure trustworthiness. This ensured that a rigorous TA procedure took place. Finally, it is important to note, that due to the TA being widely deployed and not attached to a particular epistemological or theoretical paradigm, TA is often poorly demarcated (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Nowell, et al. (2017) warn that a lack of conceptual clarity around what defines TA has implications on the quality of the analysis. Therefore, Braun and Clarke (2006) identified a framework to mitigate such issues. Below is the framework in which the data analysis procedure followed:

Phase 1 : Familiarisation

The first step of the analytical process was to become intimately familiar with the data corpus. This involved a process of reading and re-reading the transcripts. Here, we read through the interview and focus group transcripts and data gathered from the questionnaire.

Field notes were also analysed thoroughly to understand additional information collected. This process helped to familiarise the researcher with the entire body of data collected.

Phase 2: Coding

The second phase of the analytical process was dedicated to generating initial codes. The coding process was aided through the analytical software NVivo. It has been argued that NVivo enhances the rigour of the analytical process as it helps manage data (Bazeley and Jackson, 2013). This process allowed the researcher to begin to understand and query the data to formulate ideas.

Phase 3: Search for Themes

During this phase, the codes were collected and organised into potential themes. This process involved analysing different sets of codes and identifying an overarching theme as a result of this analysis. A mind-map structure was drawn out to understand the codes. This thematic map assisted in an analysis of the relationship between the different codes and themes, which eventually was organised into overarching themes and sub-themes.

Phase 4: Reviewing Themes

At this point, the objective of the analysis was to refine and narrow down the themes. There were two stages to this process. The first simply involved rereading all the extracts collected for each theme and searching for patterns. Whether a pattern forms or not, this process involves settling on a theme or reworking the theme and creating new themes for data that does not necessarily match the previously outlined themes. The second stage in this process involved a similar process but this time with the entirety of the data set. Here the validity of the individual themes was assessed. This procedure enhanced the quality and rigour of the thematic map. Braun and Clarke (2006) further distinguish two levels of themes. These include semantic and latent. Semantic refers to face value information received in the data collection process. Braun and Clarke (2006, p.84) note that semantic themes can be found “within the explicit or surface meanings of the data and the analyst is not looking for anything beyond what a participant has said”. In contrast, latent themes denote information that goes beyond what has been shared. Here the researcher delved into

the underlying ideas and issues, identifying assumptions that may cause the participant to share what they have shared.

Phase 5: Defining and Naming Themes

The primary aim of this stage of data analysis was to identify the essence of what each theme is about (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest that it is imperative to conduct a thorough analysis for each individual theme. Once we completed this process, it was important to clarify which themes are over-arching and which are sub-themes. Finally, the names of each theme were determined at this point.

Phase 6: Writing Up

The final stage of this process was to write up the findings by producing journal articles.

Ethical Considerations

There were several ethical considerations that arose when implementing this project. Indeed, according to Kimmel (1996), when a researcher is asking themselves whether they should study a topic, a moral issue is most likely at hand. To navigate through the research process, the researcher followed the Social Research Association (SRA) ethical guidelines. This ensured that all research was undertaken in line with commonly accepted ethical principles. Furthermore, Diener and Crandall (1978) identified four main questions a researcher should ask throughout the data collection process: 1) Whether there is potential harm to a participant, 2) Whether there is a lack of informed consent, 3) Whether there is an invasion of privacy, 4) Whether deception may be involved.

To begin, the researcher consulted the ethical guidelines outlined by Trinity College Dublin (TCD), to ensure that the data collection procedure was consistent with the University's policies and received approval to conduct research. The researcher created consent forms to ensure all participants of the study consented before proceeding. The consent forms shared a broad outline of the purpose of the project, the commitment of the researcher to operate within the bounds of ethical principles, and a place for their signatures. In the case of children, each school received a form to sign on behalf of the child.

Furthermore, the children participating had to consent themselves as this project operates under the assumption that all children possess agency and therefore can voice whether they would wish to participate or not. To ensure full consent was achieved prior to the data collection, the researcher spent several minutes explaining the purpose of the research and asked each participant if they were happy to proceed. Each participant was also informed that if at any time they did not wish to proceed they could end the data collection process, and if they did not want their data to be used in the project, they could withdraw consent at any time. Indeed, the SRA ethical guidelines (2015) suggests that:

In voluntary inquiries, subjects should not be under the impression that they are required to participate. They should be aware of their entitlement to refuse at any stage for whatever reason and to withdraw data just supplied. Information that would be likely to affect a subject's willingness to participate should not be deliberately withheld, since this would remove from subjects an important means of protecting their own interest.

Therefore, this was presented in full and with clarity to all research participants. Furthermore, for many of the participants, English was an additional language. Therefore, effort was made to ensure that all the information was communicated in plain English. Furthermore, to maintain anonymity, pseudonyms were given to all participants. Indeed, pseudonyms were assigned to individual participants and to schools. This ensured that the privacy of all parties was maintained.

The aim of this project was clearly stated to all stakeholders in plain language both in writing and verbally. Repetition was exercised to ensure all participants fully understood what they were consenting to. Furthermore, a potential ethical consideration for this project was the student focus groups. As focus groups dealt with questions of how children understand different religions, the researcher was conscious that it might create a situation where students from minority backgrounds might experience a feeling of "otherness." This was mitigated by the creation of a carefully planned interview guide that ensured that no questions were asked that may exacerbate feelings of "otherness." Furthermore, as children participated in this project, a child safeguarding procedure check was carried out.

Structure of the Thesis

This section of the thesis will outline the structure of the proceeding chapters:

Chapter 2 presents the first empirical paper of this thesis. This article titled “Preserving ethos: facilitating factors and barriers for implementing ethos in primary schools in the Republic of Ireland” was published in *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*. The objective of the paper was to examine the facilitators and barriers to implementing ethos in Irish primary schools. Furthermore, this journal article explored how responsive the ethos of denominational, multi-denominational and equality-based primary schools are to religious and cultural diversity. The comparative case study design allowed the researcher to highlight the obstacles to managing diversity across the different school types. Drawing on data from school principals, teachers and parents, helped clarify both the school level and wider societal processes that influence the preservation of school ethos.

The second journal article (Chapter 3) titled “The creation of culturally responsive school environments in Ireland: Factors that assist in reducing the gap between policy and practice” was published in *Policy Futures in Education*. The purpose of this study was to provide an analysis of the responsiveness of Irish primary schools to the culturally diverse student body now present in Ireland, with particular focus on the factors that can contribute to a discrepancy between national policy and practice in primary schools. Drawing again on the sample of school principals, teachers and parents, this study highlights key factors that influence the extent to which schools can respond to cultural and religious diversity. Here, the paper outlines the structural factors that prevent primary schools from being culturally responsive.

The next chapter (Chapter 4) introduces the paper “Parental School Choice in Post-Secular Ireland: Insights from Irish Primary Schools”. This paper was submitted to *Irish Educational Studies* and is currently at revision stage. Here, we examine the religious changes that have occurred in Western societies, such as Ireland. Against this backdrop, we begin to analyse how these changes in religiosity may impact parental preference for their children’s education. Interviewing parents and teachers across eight primary schools,

in both rural and urban locations, helped to demystify assumptions regarding what different parents want for their child's educational experience.

The final paper (Chapter 5) is titled "Negotiating Belonging in Irish Primary Schools: The Role of Childhood Agency". This paper has been submitted to *Educational Studies* and is currently under review. This study adopts a post-structuralist paradigm, in that it views children not as passive recipients of structural forces, but rather, as active agents in the creation of meaning. Operating under this assumption, we begin to understand that students play a key role in influencing the educational environment. Therefore, this paper explored how young people draw on their agency to negotiate their place within the educational environment, particularly those from non-Catholic backgrounds. The findings from this study offer key insights into how students draw on their agency, not only to negotiate their own place within the school environment but are also in an active process of helping their classmates to find their place.

Preserving Ethos: Facilitating Factors and Barriers for Implementing Ethos in Primary Schools in the Republic of Ireland

Aron Foley^a, Daniel Faas ^a and Merike Darmody^b

^aDepartment of Sociology, Trinity College Dublin, Dublin, Ireland; ^bEconomic and Social Research Institute, Dublin, Ireland

Abstract

The question of ethos has become increasingly prevalent in Irish primary schools as the demographics of the country have changed dramatically in recent years. However, little is known about the factors that influence the implementation of ethos across the numerous school types in Ireland. To address this gap in the research, this article focuses on the factors that impact the implementation of ethos in Irish schools and whether these factors vary based on location of the school. This multi-method study analyses data collected from eight primary schools, drawing on the perspectives of teachers, parents and school principals. The findings indicate that the positionality of all key actors within a school influences the implementation of the ethos. Furthermore, clarity achieved through training, support and leadership assists teachers to maintain the ethos of the school. This study has international relevance as it sheds light on adjustments schools can make to preserve ethos.

Keywords: Ethos, Primary Schools, School Identity, Religious Education, Ireland

Introduction

Ethos is a term with growing ubiquity in the field of education. The ethos of a school determines, to a large extent, the educational experience of pupils, yet its definition often remains ambiguous (Luo and Forbes, 2019). The necessity of arriving at conceptual clarity regarding how ethos is understood by key actors, such as teachers, school principals and parents and what factors influence its implementation has a particular significance in Ireland. Indeed, the Irish primary school landscape has received copious criticism in recent years, with several authors highlighting the inequitable mismatch between an increasingly diverse population and the largely denominational primary school system (Faas, Smith, and Darmody, 2018). Due to the historical development of the educational system, in Ireland, the ethos of a school has traditionally been synonymous with religion, particularly Catholicism. However, as a result of countervailing trends of secularization and the emergence of diverse religious affiliations, previously accepted approaches to the “traditional” ethos associated with Irish education have been increasingly questioned.

To illustrate the religious transformation that has occurred in Ireland, between 2006 and 2016, those who identified with no religion grew significantly from 186,318 to 468,421 (CSO, 2016). Indeed, drawing on this data, it is evident that Ireland, to some degree, has loosened its once strong ties with the Catholic Church, particularly amongst the majority ethnic Irish population. Therefore, as this population are becoming increasingly secular, the continued dominance of denominational school raises serious question regarding how ethos is interpreted and enacted. However, concurrent to this decline, Ireland is also experiencing an increase in numbers of people affiliated with minority faiths. The aetiology of this transformation can be explained, at least in part, by the increased migration status of Ireland. According to recent data, 12% of the population in Ireland are non-Irish nationals (CSO, 2022). Consequently, homogeneous definitions of cultural and religious identity, once associated with Ireland, no longer hold validity, as contemporary Ireland is now defined as a diverse, global society, hosting a range of faiths, ethnicities and cultures. Despite such changes, there remains a paucity of research on how the religious transformation that has occurred in Ireland is influencing the relationship between ethos and practice in Irish primary schools.

As such, this article provides a timely contribution to knowledge by conducting the first empirical study to analyse the complex factors that influence the implementation of ethos across the four main primary school types in Ireland, and whether these factors vary based on location of the school. In doing so, greater clarity will be achieved regarding the conditions and factors that allow a school to implement its ethos and moderate factors that may impact the fidelity of the ethos. Ireland serves as a useful case study as the social phenomenon that has occurred in the country over the past three decades mirrors that of several European countries, yet the educational landscape of Ireland remains somewhat unique within the European context. Thus, the importance of this study to discourses on ethos extends beyond Ireland and demonstrates social utility internationally.

This article, therefore, will attempt to answer the following questions: (1) What are the factors that act as a barrier to implementing the ethos in the major primary school types in Ireland? (2) What are the factors that act as a facilitator to implementing the ethos in the major primary school types in Ireland? (3) To what extent do these factors vary based on the location of the school? Accordingly, this article will begin by exploring the Irish primary school system before moving on to the conceptual framework that will guide this research. After which an outline of the methodology will be presented. Finally, the results of the findings will be presented and critically analysed and a conclusion summarising the findings and implications of the results will be put forward.

The Irish Primary School System

In Ireland, whilst the state funds the building and running of school properties, most primary schools are privately owned and supported by different patrons who are responsible for the development of the ethos or “characteristic spirit” of the educational institution (Education Act, 1998). This approach is somewhat unique within an international context and brings with it an array of challenges. Indeed, despite demographic shifts, institutionalised Catholicism remains deeply embedded within Irish educational traditions. With around 89% of all primary schools in Ireland falling under Catholic patronage and espousing a Catholic ethos (Department of Education, 2022), children from diverse religious backgrounds often feel marginalised as a result of their beliefs (Faas, Smith and Darmody, 2018). This is not only problematic for pupils whose personal values

do not align with the religious values of the school, but it also challenges the established ethos of the school. These long-standing tensions have confronted policymakers with questions regarding how to reduce the gap between ethos and practice, whilst at the same time, being inclusive to the plurality of beliefs and cultures within Ireland.

The vastly denominational educational landscape has long been perceived as contradictory to the statement outlined by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child that every child has the right to learn about the religion of their family, even if not shared by the majority (Article 30) (UNICEF, 1989). Therefore, in an effort to diversify the Irish educational system, an expert group, the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism, was established with the purpose of identifying approaches to creating a more inclusive educational landscape in Ireland (Coolahan, 2000). In 2012, the Forum published a report outlining an action plan to create a more inclusive educational landscape, principally by encouraging the Catholic Church to divest patronage of several schools (Cranston, 2012). This has led to an increase in the number of equality-based schools, such as, Educate Together (ET) schools and multi-denominational schools, such as, Community National schools (CNS). The establishment of ET schools in the 1970s and the development of CNS in the late 2000s, has paradoxically resulted in Ireland's primary education system being both highly denominational, but also, one of the most heterogeneous in Europe. In 2022/23, the main types of primary schools by ethos in Ireland were as follows: 2,730 Catholic schools (88.5%), 184 Church of Ireland including Presbyterian schools (5.9%), 164 inter- and multidenominational school (5.3%) and five other schools including two Muslim and one Jewish school (0.2%).

However, the ambition to diversify primary school patronage by reducing the number of Catholic schools and increasing the number of multi-denominational and equality-based schools has been met with several obstacles. Numerous factors have been cited for this protracted development and are largely dependent on source. For example, recent surveys conducted by Catholic education groups found that some parents are reluctant to see a change to the ethos in Catholic schools. However, alternative sources point towards the disinclination of the Catholic church to divest patronage as the main issue (see for example McGraw and Tiernan, 2022). Nevertheless, 126 Catholic schools and 12 Church of Ireland (COI) schools have closed between 2011 and 2021. In contrast, 80 multi-denominational schools have opened in the same period, partly as a response to parental choice (Department

of Education, 2022). However, it is important to note that despite these developments, Catholic schools still represent the majority of all primary schools.

Conceptual Framework

Although studies have found that school ethos is a critical determinant for influencing parental school choice (Cohen-Zada 2006), questions remain regarding how ethos is defined and practised. International studies have long explored how to operationalize institutional ethos. For example, some scholars have conceptualised ethos broadly as the atmosphere of a school (Donnelly, 2000). Whereas others have defined ethos as the values and norms that permeate an educational environment and underpin its policies (see Glover and Coleman, 2005; Modin, Låftman, and Östberg, 2017). Due to inconsistencies in conceptualising ethos, the term remains highly nebulous and thus challenging to “bring into focus within educational contexts” (Luo and Forbes 2019, p.825). In Ireland, the term “characteristic spirit” was introduced in the Education Act (1998) in an effort to detach from the religious connotations associated with the term ethos (O’Flaherty et al., 2018). Yet, the two terms are often used interchangeable, thus further exacerbating issues regarding clarity.

In an effort to achieve perspicuity, Donnelly (2000) identified two broad viewpoints for understanding the nature of ethos: one, that ethos is a formal expression of the goals and objectives of a given institution; and two, ethos can emerge as a result of a process of interactions between key actors within the school. Therefore, it has been argued that ethos is not a static entity, but rather is continually negotiated and renegotiated (Donnelly, 2000). In Ireland, this viewpoint is particularly interesting, as although the largely Catholic primary school landscape promotes an ethos governed by Catholic teachings, the ethos is continually challenged and renegotiated as a result of key actors within such settings interacting with a diversity of beliefs. As such, Donnelly’s (2000) conceptualisation of ethos will be used as the working definition of ethos throughout this article.

The process of arriving at a particular ethos is influenced by the historical provenance of a school, institutional hierarchies, patron bodies, broader social processes, belief systems, and what is considered to be of value (McKeon, 2020). Publicly managed schools that are

state established, such as CNS, are in a somewhat difficult position as the process of “identifying and collectively agreeing the values” that underpin an educational establishment is both complex and often contested (McCormack, O’Flaherty and Conboy, 2022, p.3). In an increasingly pluralistic society, questions regarding what and whose values should underpin the school become progressively more challenging (McCormack, O’Flaherty and Conboy, 2022). However, not only are there challenges in establishing an ethos, but research also indicates that often there are numerous barriers to implementing ethos. Consequently, ambiguity persists regarding the extent to which the ethos is similar between primary schools of the same ethos. Faas (2016) notes that school dynamics, different interpretations of curricula, and different external community dynamics may all influence the extent to which the ethos is played out between classrooms. Hence, it has been suggested that the ethos of each institution is unique (McLaughlin, 2005). In this light, it is imperative to understand what school and societal factors influence the implementation of a school’s stated ethos.

When attempting to answer these questions, Bragg and Manchester (2017) suggest that there may be methodological assumptions which are based on a fundamentally erroneous understanding of ethos. Accordingly, Bragg and Manchester (2017) reject the positivist paradigm which argues that ethos is measurable and observable. Under a positivist theoretical framework, ethos is experienced as a set of objectives which directly influence the day-to-day operation of the school environment. Here, a school’s success is measured by the extent to which these objectives are met. Consequently, Bragg and Manchester (2017) argue that these influences have created a competitive environment amongst schools and ethos is primarily used as a means of attracting customers through developing one that is unique and appealing. Neoliberal interpretations of ethos fail, however, to reflect the evolving nature of ethos, insomuch as a school’s ethos is continually influenced by broader social, political and religious processes and renegotiated through interactions amongst key actors.

Furthermore, recent studies have highlighted the discrepancy between what is stated to be the formal ethos of a school and the day-to-day experience therein (Faas, Smith and Darmody, 2018). It is difficult to attribute this to a single cause, but several studies have highlighted some areas of concern. One such analysis found that although schools in Ireland, such as CNS, espoused an ethos of inclusivity, the social norms and values of the

broader educational sector jeopardised these principles (Faas, Smith and Darmody, 2018). For example, although the practice has since been amended, in previous years the obligation to provide sacramental preparation challenged the ethos of equality and inclusivity by privileging Catholic children (Faas, Smith and Darmody, 2018). Such studies illustrate the danger of vague conceptualisations of the term and the corresponding importance of clarity in order for the ethos to impact practices of the school. As such, this study will aim to achieve clarity regarding the factors that influence the implementation of ethos, in both urban and rural schools in Ireland.

Methodology

This study deployed a multi-method, comparative case-study design across eight primary schools in Ireland. Overall, this study involved 37 participants. These participants included 16 parents (15 female and 1 male: 7 of Irish ethnicity and 9 immigrated to Ireland), 15 teachers (14 females and 1 male: 14 of Irish ethnicity and 1 immigrated to Ireland), and six school principals (5 females – 1 male: 5 of Irish ethnicity and 1 immigrated to Ireland). Pupils were excluded from this paper as traditionally the implementation of a school's ethos is the responsibility of the teachers and the school principal. It was felt, therefore, that by drawing primarily on their perspectives, greater clarity would be achieved regarding how the ethos is implemented daily and what challenges they encounter implementing the ethos. Furthermore, parents were also included in the sample as some schools in Ireland, for example ET schools, rely heavily on the input of parents for the design and implementation of their ethos. Cases in this study were selected from the main primary school types in Ireland: denominational, equality-based and multi-denominational. These include Catholic, COI, CNS and ET schools (see Table 2.1). Other school types were excluded from this study mainly due to their small numbers which also makes them easily identifiable. Gaelscoileanna, despite representing 8% of all primary schools in Ireland, were also excluded from the sample as although they espouse an ethos based on preserving the Irish language, there is variability in the religious ethos of Gaelscoileanna.

Table 2.1 Religious Approach in the Main Primary School Types in Ireland

	Catholic	Church of Ireland	Educate Together	Community National
Number	2750	171	95	28
Ownership	Church owned	Church Owned	Private Company	State Owned
Ethos	Denominational	Denominational	Equality-Based	Multi-Denominational
Approach to Religion	Learning-in Religion	Learning-in Religion	Learning from and learning about	Learning from and learning about
Name	Religious Saint or Irish Names	Religious Saint or Irish Names	Mostly Geographical School Names	Mostly Irish Names

(Source: Department of Education, 2022)

All school types listed above were sampled in both rural and urban settings. It was anticipated that some rural schools would host a less diverse, more homogenous pupil population. Evidence suggests that there is a higher percentage of Catholics in rural areas of Ireland (CSO, 2016). Schools in urban centres, however, are often associated with a diverse, heterogeneous composition of pupils. Although rural schools may acknowledge and celebrate diversity, it was envisioned that urban settings may be better equipped to create environments that foster understanding and would have access to more resources to manage integration and inclusion.

In each school, semi-structured interviews were conducted with parents and teachers. Interviews would often last between 20–60 minutes and were conducted both in-person and online. All participants consented to be a part of this research project prior to data collection. Interviews were conducted with one teacher from 5th class and one other teacher from within the school. 5th class is the second last year of primary school and accommodates pupils from the ages of 10–11. Teachers from 5th class were sampled as it was felt that 5th class pupils would have more questions regarding religious and ethical education than their younger peers. Therefore, teachers would be engaged in more challenging situations when implementing religious or ethical elements of the school curriculum. Furthermore, one other teacher from the school was sampled to triangulate the data received from the 5th class teacher.

Parents were also interviewed both face-to-face and over video calls. As data was collected in 2021, many schools were still affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, for some schools, most of the data was collected over video and phone calls. Interviews with parents focused on how they understood the ethos of the school and what elements of the school's approach to ethos they particularly valued. Furthermore, principals in the participating schools were asked to fill out a questionnaire where they could write down answers to open-ended questions relating to the reality of the school. The data collected from school principals provided baseline information on each school. Finally, in order to maintain anonymity, pseudonyms were given to all participants and schools.

The qualitative data analysis adopted a thematic analysis approach. This framework includes six phases: familiarisation, coding, search for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and the writing up phase (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This approach was used to analyse the data collected from teachers and parents. To analyse the quantitative data gathered through the questionnaires, SPSS was utilised. Descriptive statistical analysis was carried out to understand the overall picture of the schools sampled. Here patterns were identified and used as baseline data to complement the qualitative findings.

Findings and Discussion

Barriers to Implementation

Positionality of Key Actors and Negotiating Ethos

As anticipated, there were several factors outlined by teachers, school principals and parents that served as barriers to implementing the ethos of the school. Although the different school types each espoused a distinct ethos, several patterns across the various school types emerged. The first theme to emerge from the data was the role teachers play in implementing the ethos. Studies have found that not only are teachers responsible for teaching the subjects of the curriculum, but they also play a central role in transmitting the ethos of the school (Donnelly, 2004). This was particularly evident when teachers felt a level of discomfort teaching subjects associated with the ethos of the school. Here, the complex injunction between the teachers' own religious convictions and the values espoused by the ethos of the school came to the fore. This was anticipated as research

indicates that teachers often suppress their personal beliefs in order to not adversely influence their employability and promotion prospects (Heinz, Davison and Keane, 2018). This is important to note, as although teachers may not openly articulate their religious standpoint, the extent to which they agree and can align themselves with the ethos of the school may influence the extent to which a particular topic or concept is covered and therefore, impact what the curriculum is hoping to achieve. Below is an example of a teacher who felt uncomfortable approaching certain subjects with the pupils in an urban Catholic school:

In primary schools it is just the Catholic ethos and Catholic teachings. Sometimes I find if something does come up about another religion and I would be like ‘oh that is very interesting’. But . . . I find that I shouldn’t, it has to come from a Catholic perspective. So, I am always conscious . . . this is our curriculum . . . Last year was my first year teaching RSE (Relationship Sexuality Education). And I did find that I know that there are children in my class that don’t identify as being heterosexual . . . so I felt like, this is a script that I am reading here . . . I was nervous about teaching it.

Urban Catholic Teacher (Ethnicity: Irish)

These sentiments are in line with previous research that found that teachers, in an effort to demonstrate their professionalism, often “mask their real attitudes and values” (Dineen and Lundie, 2017, p.109). Here, the teacher adopted the approach of reading from a script to navigate the situation. In a recent study, Heinz, Davison and Keane (2018) enquire whether it is ethical to put teachers in a position in which they must facilitate a subject that does not align with their own beliefs. This presents a twofold problem. On the one hand, ethical questions regarding teacher well-being come into play and on the other hand, although teachers are willing to demonstrate their professionalism and mask their personal values by reciting a “script”, a question arises regarding the extent to which a teacher’s disparate values may influence the implementation of the ethos. Furthermore, a teacher in an urban Catholic school, navigating this aperture between personal beliefs and the expectations imposed by the ethos, described feeling ill-equipped to respond to some of the questions raised by pupils:

A child was like, “what about IVF?” And I was like ‘can I talk about IVF?’ . . . So, there was a kind of split-second moment, I don’t know if I can talk about this because you know because of the Catholic ethos in our school . . . And for the child . . . conceived through IVF, they would be like, where do I fit into this.

Urban Catholic Teacher (Ethnicity: Irish)

Interactions, as illustrated by the quote above, echo Donnelly’s (2000) statement that the ethos of a school is continuously negotiated by students and teachers who are active agents in developing and defining school ethos. The above statement demonstrates that not only are teachers attempting to navigate the complexities of the school’s ethos, but also the pupils in the school actively challenge and navigate their place within the school’s ethos. Therefore, the position and personal beliefs of pupils can also challenge and modify an institutional ethos. Insofar as both pupils and teachers are active agents in negotiating and defining the institutional ethos, there are certain practices imposed by the ethos of the school that challenges the personal ethos of the teacher. One such practice is the treatment of pupils that choose to opt-out of Religious Education (RE). Although previous research has found that Catholic ethos schools have varying strategies for promoting inclusion for those from non-Catholic backgrounds (Smyth and Darmody, 2011), most teachers felt uncomfortable excluding pupils that wished to opt-out:

I just always thought this was just bizarre, you know, the way that it’s literally segregation . . . But at the same time there was 30 something kids you’re trying to teach religion. You literally just need to busy these kids. You’re giving them extra Maths, extra English . . . It’s . . . like a punishment. And it wouldn’t be my kind of philosophy or like my ethos for education.

Rural CNS Teacher (Ethnicity: Irish)

The challenge of providing “busy work” for pupils who opt-out of RE in Catholic schools was highlighted by several parents and teachers. Furthermore, it would be erroneous to assume that interactions that challenge the ethos of a school only occur within denominational schools. Within CNS and ET schools there is a commitment to ensuring the classrooms reflect the rich tapestry of cultures, ethnicities and religious beliefs found in present day Ireland. The challenges and opportunities associated with Ireland’s increasing diversity are acutely discernible in these environments. This has placed a demand on such schools to adapt and learn how to respond to the increased diversity in the classroom. Within such environments, teachers are faced with not only delivering the

curriculum but also navigating complex social questions that arise from the diversity of beliefs:

There are a few topics in our class that would be difficult to approach . . . LGBT is really difficult to approach in our class because some faiths are so against it and the children would be really vocal . . . Even simple things like Halloween or Santa . . . The kids would be very vocal about what their parents' beliefs are and what they believe in and what they are not allowed to support.

Urban CNS teacher (Ethnicity: Irish)

Reviewing the sample of teachers interviewed and an analysis of the teaching body in Ireland indicates that there remains a homogenous socio-demographic group entering the profession (Heinz, Davison and Keane, 2018). This is somewhat problematic as studies suggest that teachers from minority religious backgrounds demonstrate a nuanced understanding of being marginalised and are thus better equipped to assist pupils from culturally and religiously diverse backgrounds (White, 2010). One could question the extent to which teachers, brought up within a Catholic educational framework, are sensitive to how pupils from diverse backgrounds may experience feelings of marginalisation. This presents challenges for all school types, particularly schools catering to a more heterogeneous pupil demographic. For such schools, the largely white, Catholic raised teaching body found it challenging to respond to the diversity encountered in the school:

Well, I think the biggest challenge for me . . . is that when you come from Ireland, you're more or less have be brought up in a Catholic school . . . When you're trying to teach them about the Muslim celebrations or Jewish celebrations . . . you don't really have the same knowledge as you do with the Christian or Catholic religion, if you've been brought up that way.

Urban ET Teacher (Ethnicity: Irish)

Furthermore, the personal beliefs of teachers may, to some extent, influence the status subjects such as religion are designated in both denominational and multi-denominational schools. A recent study conducted by Heinz, Davison and Keane (2018) found that the majority of the teaching body in Ireland, despite coming from a Catholic background, would categorise themselves as non-religious. For example, in this study one teacher argued that although religion may be important, subjects such as Maths and English should be placed higher within the hierarchy of subjects: "Religion is important . . . but . . . a kid

can survive in this world if they don't know. Whereas they need to be able to write and read" (Urban CNS teacher, Ethnicity: Irish). The assumption underlying this positioning of religion at the bottom of the hierarchy of subjects is rooted in neoliberal thought. The ubiquitous nature of neoliberal forces in Western society and the dominance of economic discourses influence educational thought and pedagogy (Sims and Hui, 2017). Under this framework, children are seen as economic units and their value comes from their future contribution to the economy (Gibson, McArdle and Hatcher, 2015). Such assumptions are problematic as pupils that fail to develop their cultural and religious literacy may struggle to interact with a pluralistic society in their adult lives. Furthermore, when considering how much time to dedicate to religious or ethical education, teachers articulated experiencing curriculum overload, which was further exacerbated by the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. As such, it is evident that alongside time pressures, a teachers' positionality and the positionality of other key actors that interact with the curriculum influence the delivery of elements of the curriculum that support the school ethos.

Conceptual Confusion Delivering Religious and Ethical Education

Regardless of the school type, the challenges of implementing elements of the ethos were further augmented by a lack of conceptual clarity around the implementation of key programmes that underpin the school's ethos. In the case of CNS, the Goodness Me Goodness You (GMGY) programme is a key feature of the school day and is essential in aiding the school to implement its ethos. However, as the programme is relatively nascent in its development, it has been subject to change over the years:

It is still being developed. So, we do a lot of training days around it . . . it has been like chopped and changed loads of times . . . We used to have a really structured curriculum . . . but then it was changed again . . . And then you're supposed to make them up yourself . . . the CNS model is still very new. So, it's not entirely like put in place yet.

Urban CNS teacher (Ethnicity: Irish)

Although research has found that shared decision making enhances implementation (Durlak and DuPre, 2008), the process of "chopping and changing" the curriculum appears to create conceptual confusion for teachers implementing the programme. The expectation

of teachers to be co-creators of the curriculum appears to be a challenge. Irish primary schools, for example, have a comparatively short school year compared to the rest of Europe. Consequently, teachers have many demands on their time. As such, teachers struggled to find time to design lessons for GMGY. Therefore, due to conceptual confusion and time-constraints, the quality and fidelity of the GMGY programme was impacted, and thus became as one teacher (Urban CNS, Ethnicity: Irish) describes “a little bit messy”. This resulted in some teachers not giving adequate attention to the programme.

In denominational schools, the religious ethos of the school is played out throughout the school day by way of daily prayers, RE classes, assemblies, religious celebrations, and songs. However, variability was found between how teachers taught religion throughout the week. The variability of approach was often dependent on the teachers’ personal preference. For example, one urban Catholic teacher (Ethnicity: Irish) shared: “I can’t do it in half an hour. I need longer than that. And . . . I like . . . to do a lesson in one day and . . . that’s our topic”. The quality of implementation may, however, rely on the extent to which teachers feel they have support implementing RE. In one interview, an urban Catholic school teacher (Ethnicity: Irish) argued that there is little support for teaching RE and that it is necessary that the church takes a bigger role in helping teachers. In a country where there is a decline in the number of people going to mass, teachers are often the primary educators of religious studies. This places a great deal of responsibility on teachers as they navigate teaching this increasingly contested subject that is fundamental to the ethos of the school.

Parental Involvement

This study found that parents can play a key role in facilitating the implementation of school ethos. For example, the CNS model views the parent as a “partner” of their child’s education. However, the extent to which a parent may buy-in to the ethos of the school may be moderated by the degree to which the parent’s personal beliefs align with the ethos. A recent study found that parents often feel they have little choice with regards to where they send their children to school due to the hegemony of Catholic schools (Darmody and Smyth, 2018). Therefore, parents may struggle to find their position in religious celebrations and traditions ingrained in the ethos of the school. Sacramental preparation, for example, is often seen as a strong symbol of traditional Irish childhood and despite the

declining number of individuals who identify as Catholic, remains a key element of schooling in Ireland. To illustrate the difficulties experienced by parents when navigating the challenge of ensuring their children do not feel excluded by the ethos but also maintaining their religious convictions, one parent shared:

For confirmation, few of the parents that their kids . . . weren't going to the confirmation asked me that they didn't want to go to the Church themselves because they felt they really didn't want to involve their children in the whole ritual aspects of the school. But their kids had insisted that they want to go and watch their friends . . . I ended up taking other kids with me.

Urban Catholic School Parent (Ethnicity: Iranian)

However, within the practices espoused by the Catholic ethos there are practices that also resonate with parents of children from different faith perspectives in Ireland. Some parents pointed towards the commonalities with their own faith and that of Catholicism, primarily a belief in a higher power. Consequently, such parents tend not to sharply differentiate between their own religion and Catholicism, but rather, underscore the common spiritual teachings between religions and see the Catholic faith in this sense, reinforcing their own religious convictions. From this perspective, the Catholic ethos could be viewed as at least partly inclusive since it is able to encompass and reinforce the faith perspective of others. This suggests that Catholic education is not always seen as a threat to a pluralistic and inclusive education in Ireland, but in some cases capable of being inclusive to difference. One parent, who is a practicing Muslim, shared that:

The majority of the schools fall into the Church, which personally, I really adore because . . . I really feel that humanity should have certain kind of guidelines and even if you follow into a church or a temple or a mosque. Humans would already have predetermined guidelines, which I think makes them more disciplined.

Urban CNS parent (Ethnicity: Pakistani)

Statements such as the one above highlights the complexity of developing an ethos that is inclusive to a diversity of beliefs. Kitching (2020) directs us to the theory of post-secularism in an effort to understand the social transformation that is occurring in urban centres across Western Europe and magnified particularly in school settings. Kitching (2020, p.12) argues that post-secular “is not a period after secularisation – rather it is a perspective on the world that recognises the entanglement of the secular and religious in

all aspects of the social.” This “entanglement” suggests a more nuanced discourse of the role of religion within schools is required to ensure parents feel that the ethos of the school caters to their family’s beliefs. However, the elevation of particular religious practices and the process of defining traditional “Irish childhood” by such practices, may place parents from different religious or cultural backgrounds outside the institutional habitus of the school. This was particularly telling when teachers from Irish backgrounds were articulating the challenges of achieving the community aspect of the CNS ethos by trying to engage parents from diverse backgrounds:

We do have a parent association here. But I definitely don’t think it’s as strong here as it would be in a Catholic school . . . when we do GAA (Gaelic Athletic Association) and bringing kids to matches . . . we’ve never had a parent come to our matches . . . Whereas it’s just not that important to them . . . they’re very academic focused . . . Even trying to get parents involved in confirmation classes is very difficult.

Urban CNS Teacher (Ethnicity: Irish)

The means for engaging parents outlined above are based on Irish cultural norms, such as GAA and confirmation classes. Therefore, challenges engaging parents from diverse backgrounds may be based on flawed assumptions regarding integration, where the responsibility is on the non-native individual to assimilate, adapt, and find their way in a new culture and society. These quotes demonstrate that there are cross-culture differences in how education is understood. As such, parents from non-native backgrounds may view education as different from traditional Irish education. Consequently, their involvement in school life may differ to those from Irish backgrounds. It should be noted, however, that parents from CNS were reported to be present for the intercultural days offered by the school. Thus, it is important to question what practices can be put in place in order to facilitate the community aspect of the school’s ethos.

Implementing Ethos: Facilitating Factors

Effective Recruitment and Teacher Buy-In

From the data, it is evident that all schools sampled were able to maintain their ethos to various extents. This was achieved through different means such as recruitment, training, supervision, the hidden curriculum, teacher buy-in, leadership, composition of the

classroom and the extent to which teachers were able to integrate key elements of the ethos throughout the curriculum. The first theme that emerged from the data was teacher recruitment. As aforementioned, teachers play a critical role in implementing the ethos. Effective recruitment and staffing can support improved educational outcomes (Cranston, 2012). According to Cameron and Grootenboer (2018), improved recruitment practices provide schools with the opportunity to plan towards a desired culture and ethos. Consequently, the schools sampled had numerous strategies for identifying teachers that would reinforce the ethos of the school. For example, CNS have developed their own application form to attract teachers that would fit seamlessly into the school culture. In a rural COI school, one teacher shared when asked whether a teacher's religious beliefs are a criterion for recruitment:

So, the way it is phrased is that you should employ the best candidate, but all things being equal you should employ the COI one. So, if someone applies who is exceptional, then you take the exceptional teacher. But certainly, ethos forms part of the criteria and there will always be a question on the ethos. You know very quickly from their answers whether they are bluffing or whether they fully understand. So, we have four teachers and all of us are from Protestant backgrounds.

Rural COI Teacher (Ethnicity: Irish)

However, a principal from an urban COI school disagreed with the statement that teachers must have certain religious convictions in order to teach at the school. Nevertheless, teacher buy-in appeared to be a major facilitator to implementing the ethos. Buy-in is characterised by "an alignment between teacher beliefs and the goals of a change or reform, as well as feelings of competence in implementation" (Briggs, Russell and Wanless, 2018, p.126). A study conducted by Kunter et al. (2008) found that teachers that demonstrated greater enthusiasm about what they were teaching provided higher quality instruction. Indeed, it appeared that when teachers would buy-in to the ethos of the school they would think of innovative means to implement the ethos, dedicate the required time to the different elements of the curriculum that reinforce the ethos and take great pride in how the ethos was impacting the pupils. Buy-in also appears to develop over time, as some teachers working in CNS and ET schools noted that they did not originally have a strong desire to work under the ethos but once they started working in the school they could not envision working under another ethos:

Once I came into an ET there was no going back because of the diversity and how much you get from interacting with all of these different people. My class is 5th and they have so much to bring to the table . . . They have amazing debates, because it's not just the same child 28 times.

Urban ET Teacher (Ethnicity: Irish)

In terms of preserving ethos, studies have found that the religious belief of a teacher plays a significant role in the way a teacher approaches the subject. For example, Nelson and Yang (2023, p.13) found that teachers who shared the religious beliefs of the school could bring “authenticity to their practice”. Rural Catholic schools, that catered to a somewhat religiously homogenous demographic and COI schools, due to their admission policies, experienced fewer parents requesting that their child opts-out of religious instruction classes and less pressure to amend their ethos due to the relatively religious homogeneity found within the school. With regards to pupils opting out, one urban COI teacher (Ethnicity: Irish) shared: “We’ve never really had that, everyone is quite happy with what is being done”. Consequently, the key tenets of a religious ethos, such as prayer and RE, were able to be implemented without complication. Teachers in a rural COI school even noted the importance of developing their pupils Protestant identity. Protestants represent a minority religion in Ireland, therefore, facilitating aspects of the curriculum that builds this identity takes on added importance. One teacher described feeling a sense of responsibility in providing a strong Protestant identity in the pupils before they enter more religiously diverse secondary school environments:

They are a minority faith. When they are in a COI school, they don’t realise how much of a minority they are in. And so, it is to leave school with a strong sense of pride and belonging, this is who I am, and I might have different views to other people but that’s ok.

Rural COI Teacher (Ethnicity: Irish)

Training, Support and Leadership

To preserve ethos and assist teachers to develop clarity around implementing the various elements of the curriculum that are related to the ethos of the school, training and ongoing support was reported to be essential. Some teachers from ET and CNS noted that pre-service teacher education provided by universities did little to assist them to teach and interact with a more multicultural curriculum, particularly if they were in teacher training

several years ago: “When I trained it wasn’t part of my training . . . In college, there was definitely no training for that” (Urban ET Teacher, Ethnicity: Irish). In recent years, however, the Teaching Council of Ireland highlighted in a report – *Céim: Standards for Initial Teacher Education (ITE)* – that modules such as “Inclusive Education” and “Global Citizenship Education” are required to be included in all ITE programmes. Although this represents a move towards developing a more culturally responsive teaching body, a recent study conducted by Hannigan, Faas and Darmody (2022) found that addressing ethno-cultural diversity as a standalone module and not a subject that influences all areas of the curriculum fails to prepare teachers to manage diversity adequately.

Nevertheless, schools offered several opportunities for teachers to take Continuous Professional Development (CPD) courses. However, these courses are often optional. In one school, a teacher shared that they receive additional support from outside agencies in order to maintain fidelity of implementing aspects of the curriculum that reinforce the ethos. For example, one urban Catholic school sampled drew on additional support from Diocesan Advisors (DA), who observe how religious elements are implemented in the classroom. Based on their observations, the advisors make recommendations to ensure consistency of implementation across classrooms. Furthermore, this study found that school principals play a critical role in maintaining the ethos of the school. Not only have studies established a link between strong leadership and student outcomes (Trimmer, Dixon and Guenther, 2021) but have also identified school principals as key actors in shaping and maintaining school ethos. This was particularly the case when schools were striving to be inclusive to pupils from a diversity of backgrounds. In the questionnaire administered to all school principals participating in the study, more than half of the school principals either agreed or strongly agreed that school principals play a critical role in deciding how to accommodate different religions ($n = 4$). Both teachers and parents from several schools acknowledged the role of the school principal in setting the tone for the ethos of the school. Parents argued that the school principal’s actions would often exemplify how the ethos of the school should look in practice. For example, in a rural CNS, one parent observed that the school principal played a crucial role in ensuring the community element of the ethos was felt by all pupils:

The headmistress stands at the gate every morning. She welcomes every child by name. Which is amazing . . . She usually has something to say to them. Like you know, that is relevant as well. It was December and it was quite cold. So, she was standing there for 45minutes to welcome every child through the gate . . . Which I was blown away by. Just the whole sense of care.

Rural CNS Parent (Ethnicity: British)

Demonstration of leadership, as articulated above, not only covertly communicates to teachers the expectations and culture the school aims to achieve, but also appears to develop the buy-in of teachers and parents to the ethos of the school. It was evident that in the absence of a culture of support and leadership, delivery of elements of the curriculum related to the ethos were inconsistent.

Integrating Ethos and the Hidden Curriculum

Another key feature that appeared to facilitate the implementation of the ethos was the extent to which the ethos could be integrated throughout the school day. In Catholic and COI schools, the ethos is upheld through practices, such as, daily prayer, school assemblies, RE, integrating religious themes throughout the curriculum and covert expressions of religiosity through the hidden curriculum. One teacher noted that “we are a Catholic ethos school; everything comes from that . . . the prayers it would be expected that will happen. I try to bring it in as much as possible in various other areas of the curriculum” (Teacher, Urban Catholic School, Ethnicity: Irish). Having religious elements embedded throughout the school day assisted the school to maintain the religious culture as envisioned by the ethos, without adding additional time pressures to the curriculum.

However, this was not just present in denominational schools. In ET schools and CNS, teachers described how the ethos would permeate all elements of the school day: “the ethos goes across the whole curriculum. It’s all about diversity, inclusiveness and that permeates throughout the whole curriculum the whole day” (Teacher, Rural ET, Ethnicity: British). As noted in a study by Faas, Smith and Darmody (2018), the ethos of CNS is upheld through non-discriminatory admission policies, multi-belief RE programmes, culturally responsive practices and encouragement of children’s different languages. This is somewhat similar for ET schools too. Integrating these practices that are associated with the ethos through-out the school day helped teachers to not become overwhelmed and

develop feelings of curriculum overload. For example, one teacher from a rural ET school (Ethnicity: Irish), stated that “integrated learning is the way forward because it is impossible to fit everything in”.

Finally, it was observed that all schools sampled communicated their institutional ethos through their hidden curriculum. The hidden curriculum can be viewed as a means of social and cultural reproduction, covertly conveying the institutional habitus of the school (Regalsky and Laurie, 2007). In Catholic and COI schools, this was often expressed through religious monuments, such as crucifixes. However, although the ethos in such schools is synonymous with religion, other aspects of the school’s ethos could also be detected through the hidden curriculum, such as community projects and their codes of conduct. Conversely, in multi-denominational and ethical-based schools, art displays highlighting the diversity of its pupils were commonplace. Visual images depicting diverse languages, religious symbols and national flags could be observed throughout the schools. This highlights the importance of the covert messages communicated through the hidden curriculum. The hidden curriculum assisted all schools sampled to preserve their ethos and to ensure the ethos of the school was communicated to all key actors within the school environment.

Conclusions

Although still predominantly denominational in its schooling, Ireland has one of the most heterogeneous primary school landscapes in Europe, with diverse denominational, multi-denominational and equality-based primary schools. Consequently, classrooms in Ireland have become increasingly contested spaces in which issues regarding the formation and implementation of ethos have been brought to the fore of public and policy discourses. Therefore, the necessity of understanding how ethos is implemented and what factors create a dissonance between ethos and practice across the different primary school types cannot be underestimated. This study highlights the influence both school level and wider societal processes have on the preservation of school ethos across the four major school types in Ireland. These findings support the theoretical assumption that ethos is not a static entity, but rather is continually negotiated and renegotiated through an ongoing dialogue amongst

key actors within educational settings and the responses from these actors to the many changes in Irish society.

Although challenges were somewhat different depending on ethos and location, this study found that all school types sampled encountered numerous obstacles to managing diversity. Namely, navigating conversations that explore diverse world views, adequately teaching about various world religions and cultures, collaborating with parents from diverse backgrounds, and particularly in Catholic schools, being fully inclusive to pupils that do not follow the religious ethos of the school. The demand on teachers and school principals to respond swiftly to the increasingly diverse student body is growing, and despite the best efforts of school staff, many pupils still feel marginalised as a result of their culture and religion. It was evident from this study that teachers are too often placed in difficult positions and require more institutional support to navigate the increasing complexity of teaching in a pluralistic society.

This study highlights the necessity of reaching the goal of developing a more diverse educational landscape, as delineated by the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism. Not only would this be of great benefit to the increasingly pluralistic student body, but it would also allow more teachers to operate in teaching environments that closely align with their educational ethos. As such, this study has policy implications, for both Ireland and beyond, as it highlights the need for an educational landscape to mirror the social phenomena that is occurring within the society and the necessity of providing more institutional support for teachers to develop capabilities to navigate the challenges and opportunities that emerge when interacting with diverse beliefs and cultures. In the absence of such a landscape, several barriers to implementing the ethos can arise.

Notes

1. This study is part of a wider project that collected data from pupils, parents, teachers, and school principals across 8 schools.
2. The Admissions Act (2018) ensures that minority faith schools, such as COI schools, can prioritise the enrolment of pupils from a Protestant background.

The creation of culturally responsive school environments in Ireland: Factors that assist in reducing the gap between policy and practice

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Aron Foley and Daniel Faas 

Department of Sociology, Trinity College Dublin, Dublin, Ireland

Merike Darmody

Economic and Social Research Institute, Dublin, Ireland

Abstract

Ireland's cultural identity has transformed significantly in the past few decades as a result of large-scale inward migration. Consequently, the creation of culturally responsive school environments has become a major concern in policy discourses in recent years. Despite the prevalence of such discourses, research on the cultural responsiveness of the four major primary school types in Ireland, and what factors influence the gap between policy and practice across these school types has remained sparse. Addressing this lacuna in research, this exploratory multi-method study draws on data collected from teachers, principals, and parents. This study highlights several factors that assist students from culturally and religiously diverse backgrounds to develop a sense of school belonging and explores the challenges associated with implementing policies related to creating culturally responsive classrooms in Irish primary schools. This study holds international relevance as it highlights key factors facilitating schools' response to the growing migration trend experienced throughout Europe.

Keywords

Culturally responsive pedagogy, inclusion, policy, school ethos, Ireland

Introduction

Questions regarding how to integrate students from migrant backgrounds have long been a concern for many countries in Europe. However, reports suggest that students from migrant backgrounds often fail to match the educational outcomes of their native peers, particularly first-generation immigrant students (Cathles et al., 2021). To understand why this gap in attainment persists, studies have explored the various efforts made across European countries to introduce culturally responsive policies and practices (Brown et al., 2022). Such studies have found that, despite several European countries adopting specific legislative frameworks for integrating students from migrant backgrounds, a gap remains between policy and practice (Brown et al., 2022). As such, there is an urgent need to understand the factors that may help in reducing this gap.

In Ireland, a similar pattern can be found. Indeed, despite the introduction of several government policies to support cultural inclusivity in the Irish educational system, such as the Equality Act (2005), National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) Intercultural Education in the Primary School, Intercultural Education Strategy (2010–2015) and others, reports have highlighted a misalignment between policy and practice (Adebayo and Heinz, 2023). Although previous studies in the Irish context have indicated that most migrant students adapt to the new educational system relatively quickly, following a brief transitional period (Smyth et al., 2013), the Irish educational landscape has, nevertheless, been criticised regarding its somewhat laboured response to cultural and religious diversity. It has been argued that the mostly denominational educational system in Ireland, not only limits parental school choice, but also does not adequately prepare students to interact with an increasingly pluralistic society (Faas, Smith and Darmody, 2018). As such, there have been calls for all schools to be more culturally responsive.

Culturally responsive schools have been described as environments in which the diverse cultures within the classroom are drawn upon as a vehicle for learning and empowerment (Ladson-Billing, 1995). It has been reported that countries across Europe often fall short of creating such environments, and remain somewhat inadequate with regards to curriculum development, increasing the cultural heterogeneity of teachers and engaging parents and pupils in meaningful discourses concerning the educational environment (Brown et al.,

2022). However, countries with a longer history of culturally responsive practices, such as the United States of America (USA) and Canada, highlight the positive impact of culturally responsive teaching on students' academic outcomes (Ensign, 2003) and developing their critical consciousness (Caingcoy, 2023). This underscores the necessity of developing robust school-wide strategies for the creation of culturally responsive school environments, particularly as international population movement accelerates.

In Ireland, discourses concerning the creation of such environments have advanced significantly due to the social transformation experienced over the past three decades. As a result of the economic boom in the mid-1990s, Ireland has experienced an upsurge in migration unparalleled in the country's history. In 2021, 12% of the population were non-Irish nationals from some 200 countries (CSO, 2021). Consequently, Ireland has experienced a transformation in both its cultural and religious identity, which in turn has implications for Irish primary schools, most of which have a Catholic ethos. Allied to this, Ireland has also become more secular. This can be seen in the decline of those who identify themselves as members of an organised religion (CSO, 2022). Consequently, policy discourses concerning how to meaningfully respond to different cultures and religions have dominated educational debates in recent years.

The urgency to develop such policies becomes apparent when exploring the experience of migrant students within the Irish educational system. Studies have found that some migrant students in Ireland experience cumulative disadvantages in education (Darmody, Byrne and McGinnity, 2014) and high rates of racism (McClure, 2020). Furthermore, some teachers adopt a 'deficit racialised construction' of ethnic minority students (Ni Dhuinn and Keane, 2021, p.5). Limited proficiency in the language of the host country, for example, has sometimes been misconstrued by teachers as indicators of low academic ability (Darmody, Byrne and McGinnity, 2014). While there is a gap in educational outcomes between native and migrant students, it varies between generation of migrants and subjects (Cathles et al., 2021). In an effort to integrate migrant students and support their learning, various governmental policies, such as the Intercultural Educational guidelines, have been introduced. These guidelines set out ways in which intercultural education can influence all areas of the curriculum. Considering the different linguistic backgrounds of many migrant students, additional English language tuition was made available by the Department of Education (Gardiner-Hyland, 2021). However, the economic downturn in

2008 saw many school-based supports reduced or changed. Since the 2012/ 2013 academic year, the Special Educational Needs (SEN) support and the language support has been amalgamated through the General Allocation Model as a result of monetary restrictions. This current model has been heavily criticised, with critics describing it as an ‘ad hoc, add on to SEN’ (Gardiner-Hyland, 2021, p.178). This again, demonstrates a gap between policy rhetoric and practice.

However, it can be argued that the long-standing tension between policy and practice can best be observed when analysing the gap between parental demands for greater school choice and the predominantly denominational nature of the primary school sector. At present, 96% of all primary schools in Ireland are denominational, with 89% falling under a Catholic institutional ethos. As a response to parental demand, equality-based primary schools, such as Educate Together (ET) were established in the late 1970s, followed by the introduction of multi-denominational schools, such as Community National Schools (CNS) in more recent years. Presently, there are 96 ET primary schools and 28 CNS in Ireland, and with the formation of the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism, an expert group dedicated to developing a more inclusive educational landscape, there is currently a national ambition to grow the number of multi-denominational and equality-based schools significantly by 2030. Although these schools represent the fastest growing sector in the Irish educational system, ET and CNS still only represent a minority of all Irish primary schools and are not available in all geographical areas. Several factors have influenced this protracted development, namely, demands for change being concentrated only in certain areas of the country and that a family’s religious background may not necessarily correspond to their school choice (McGraw, 2023).

Furthermore, studies have also highlighted concerns regarding the imbalance between the greater cultural diversity among the student population and the largely monocultural teacher population (Heinz and Keane, 2015). The diversity gap between teachers and students in Irish schools has prompted efforts to increase the diversity of entrants into Initial Teacher Education (ITE). This can be seen in the National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education (2015–2019). However, critics have argued that despite such efforts, there remains an underrepresentation of minority religious groups, non-Irish entrants, and people with disabilities (Keane and Heinz, 2015).

This study, therefore, provides a timely analysis of the responsiveness of Irish primary schools to a more culturally diverse student body, with particular focus on the factors that can contribute to a discrepancy between national policy and practice in schools. Ireland serves as a particularly interesting case study as a new immigrant receiving country that possesses a relatively heterogeneous primary school landscape, in terms of different school types, compared to many other European countries. Although previous studies have explored different approaches schools in Ireland have taken to respond to diversity (Faas, Smith and Darmody, 2018), this is the first empirical study to explore whether the different primary school types in both rural and urban Ireland differ in developing culturally responsive classroom environments and what factors may contribute to a discrepancy between policy and practice. This study holds international relevance as it captures the features of teaching and school leadership that support migrant students in adapting to educational settings and identifies what factors may impede this integration.

This article, therefore, will explore the following questions: (1) What are the factors that assist schools in developing a culturally responsive environment? (2) What are the barriers to developing culturally responsive environments? (3) What factors lead to a discrepancy between policy and practice? To explore these questions, this article will begin by outlining the conceptual framework that will guide this research, followed by an overview of the methodology. Finally, the results of the study will be presented, before arriving at the conclusion.

Conceptual Framework

As a result of upward trends in migration, educators in countries around the globe have been learning how to create culturally responsive environments. Consequently, several educational frameworks have emerged over the years. Banks' Multicultural Education is one such framework that gained considerable attention since its introduction in the USA in the late 1960s. Multicultural Education adopts the notion of 'e pluribus unum'— out of the many, one' (Banks, 1993, p.24). Of course, debates have occurred over the years regarding how the 'one' is understood, and thus achieved. Indeed, many efforts that strive to be inclusive of diverse religions and cultures adopt narrow assumptions of cohesion based on assimilation, where the diverse ethnic and religious groups are expected to adopt the norms

of the majority culture or religion (Banks, 1993). Multicultural Education, however, challenges these assumptions and holds to the conviction that unity is achieved by means of consultations and negotiations so that the classroom environment is reconstructed to reflect the diverse groups (Banks, 1993).

However, critics have highlighted that the tendency to oversimplify and the lack of conceptual clarity regarding how to implement educational frameworks (Goodwin, 1990), prohibits frameworks, such as Multicultural Education, from being implemented with fidelity. Indeed, critics have warned that culturally responsive policies are often ‘high on aspiration but low on implementation details’ (Smith et al., 2023, p.4). Furthermore, amongst the challenges in being inclusive of the diversity of cultures is arriving at precisely what is meant by culture and, therefore, how to respond appropriately. It has been argued that ambiguity persists as cultural groups are “internally heterogeneous and contain individuals who adhere to a range of diverse beliefs and practices” (OECD, 2016, p.8). This fluidity of cultural identity and the heterogeneity of cultural experience must be acknowledged by educators (Ladson-Billing, 2014). Brown et al. (2022, p.583) argue that cultural responsiveness is not a process of definitively linking “a person to a given version of culture, but rather materialises as preparedness to attend to different expressions of needs and to reflect one’s own ways of coping with situations of difference”. Indeed, critics have warned that in the absence of garnering accurate and nuanced knowledge regarding specific cultures, stereotypical perceptions can develop amongst educators (Takafor Ndemanu and Jordan, 2018). Therefore, efforts to ensure educators are responsive to the varying needs of students have given impetus to the development of the concept of a Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP).

Ladson-Billings (1995) identified three main elements which constitute CRP: high academic expectations; reshaping the curriculum in order to build on students’ knowledge and understanding, while maintaining a strong dialogue and relationship between home and school; and enhancing students’ critical consciousness with regards to power relationships. In failing to address these elements, tension can emerge between what is taught at home and the cultural norms embedded in Irish education (Adebayo and Heinz, 2023). Therefore, the development of democratic decision-making processes that draw heavily on both student and parent voices is an urgent requirement in all educational settings. A recent study conducted by Adebayo and Heinz (2023, p.15) highlighted the need to include the voices of

marginalised groups, as parents from culturally diverse backgrounds are “uniquely positioned to support the development of intercultural competencies and inclusive education practices”.

Developing a sense of school belonging is a primary goal for culturally responsive school leaders. Gay (2010) highlights the critical role school leaders play in the student integration process. Furthermore, Riley (2022, p.115) argues that “leadership values shape action and leadership action shapes belonging”. However, Khalifa (2018) found that white, westernised epistemologies have shaped how we understand school leadership, which consequently puts minority students at a disadvantage. Drawing on Bourdieusian theory, Darmody (2011, p.226) suggests that educators possess symbolic power, particularly in relation to culture, and thus reward students “who closely align with the ‘institutional habitus’ of the school”. This demonstrates the challenges of developing a culturally responsive classroom. Indeed, Ladson-Billings (1995, 2019) has been critical of recent efforts to adopt culturally responsive practices into schools, arguing that reductive interpretations of CRP, not grounded in theory, have hampered its full evolution. In pursuit of developing culturally responsive classrooms, Ladson-Billings (2019) asserted in a recent interview, that educators must understand that they are operating within an inequitable system and therefore, their responsibility lies not just in assisting students to fit within the system, but rather, they must assist their students to develop the tools, skills, and knowledge to tackle such inequities and be agents of change. In failing to understand such nuances, educators become passive agents perpetuating traditional forms of education that exacerbate inequity. Therefore, further research is required to address the gaps between policies that seek to develop a more culturally responsive educational landscape.

Methodology

This study deployed an exploratory multi-method, comparative case study design across eight primary schools in Ireland. Overall, the study sampled 37 participants, including 15 teachers (14 females and 1 male: 14 of Irish ethnicity and 1 immigrated to Ireland), 16 parents (15 female and 1 male: 7 of Irish ethnicity– 9 immigrated to Ireland), and six school principals (5 females– 1 male: 5 of Irish ethnicity and 1 immigrated to Ireland). Cases were selected from the four main primary school types in Ireland; Catholic, Church of Ireland

(COI), ET and CNS. Although Irish speaking schools, *Gaelscoileanna*, represent a major sector within the Irish education system, they were excluded from the sample due to the variability in their religious ethos. Furthermore, this study differentiated between rural and urban areas in order to explore whether school location influenced the adoption of culturally responsive approaches in schools.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with parents of students within each school. Interviews with parents focussed on their impressions of how inclusive they found the school and to what extent they collaborate with the school staff. Furthermore, in-depth semi-structured interviews were also conducted with one teacher from 5th class in each school and one other teacher from the school. 5th class is the penultimate year of primary school, and teachers were selected from this class as it was felt that students around 10–11 years old would have more questions regarding cultural and religious identity than their younger peers. The purpose of the interviews was to explore what culturally responsive practices were taking place in the school, how teachers are supported to respond to cultural and religious diversity, and what barriers prevented teachers from responding effectively. A limitation of this method of sampling was that parents and teachers were initially contacted through the school. Therefore, there may have been selection bias and parents who had a more favourable impression of the school may have been chosen.

Finally, questionnaires were conducted with the school principals. The purpose of the questionnaires was to provide general information about the characteristics of the school (school size, demographics of student population, and policies and procedures adopted by the school) and give principals an opportunity to respond to open-ended questions regarding culturally responsive practices occurring within their school. Prior to the data collection, all participants provided informed consent to be involved in the research project. Anonymity was ensured by using pseudonyms.

Once the data collection process was complete, the qualitative data collected was analysed by deploying a thematic analysis framework. This approach, first pioneered by Braun and Clarke (2006), adopts a six-phase framework. These are, familiarisation, coding, search for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and the writing up phase (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This method of data analysis was adopted for the semi-structured

interviews. The quantitative data in this project was analysed with SPSS software. Here, patterns were identified and used as baseline data to complement the qualitative findings.

Findings and Discussion

The Importance of Ethos

The gap between national policy and practice can best be observed by analysing the protracted development in creating an educational landscape that reflects parental demand for more varied provision. This study found that teachers and school leaders across all school types made substantial efforts to be inclusive of students from diverse cultural and religious backgrounds. However, a sharp distinction was observed between schools that adopt an ethos that is specifically tailored to cater to the diverse student body and schools that adopt an ethos that, although stated to be inclusive (CPSMA, 2023) and encourage and celebrate diversity (Church of Ireland General Synod Board of Education, 2011), are tailored for the purpose of developing an identity based on a religious ethos.

This study found that in CNS and ET schools the ethos strives to promote a fully inclusive education that recognises the plurality of identities held by students, parents, and staff. Consequently, there is an expectation on teachers and school leaders to create environments that respond to the diversity of society. Furthermore, programmes such as Goodness Me Goodness You (GMGY) in CNS and Learn Together in ET schools are value-based education curricula that enable students to learn about a variety of religions and cultures. Such curricula replace the traditional Religious Education (RE) classes found in denominational schools in which students learn-in religion and the ethos tends to privilege the teachings of one religion in particular. When exploring how schools can be inclusive of students from diverse cultures and religions, teachers from both CNS and ET schools, observed that such practices are firmly embedded within the climate of the school:

...it's definitely the climate in the school. Like you can have as many frameworks as you want, but if... your school doesn't have the vibe of an inclusive school, you're not going to get anywhere... Like the community, literally in the name of our school, it's community national school.

Teacher Rural CNS (Ethnicity: Irish)

Here, the teacher asserts that regardless of the approaches a school adopts, if inclusivity is not rooted at the core of the school ethos, children will inevitably feel excluded to some extent. For example, one principal from an urban ET primary school noted that the “diversity of culture and religious beliefs (and more) is what makes our school what it is. We do not require any special adaptations to accommodate any particular family”. In denominational schools, however, particularly those in urban settings, teachers are entrusted with the responsibility of both implementing a curriculum that gives precedence to a certain religion while being inclusive of the increasingly religiously and culturally diverse classroom. Although such curricula may not explicitly offer time for learning about the various religions and cultures present within the classroom, teachers can be proactive and respond to the needs of the class, by making slight adjustments to their teaching approaches. One urban, Catholic school teacher (Ethnicity: Irish) highlighted several ways in which they are culturally responsive to the needs of students from diverse backgrounds:

...we do things...spontaneously... I feel that that's more beneficial than for me to you know have a sole lesson on it... Other ways is through religion. We have a variety of children... with different religious backgrounds...we used to classify those as 'they just don't do religion.' So, we have to give them busy work...I don't know how beneficial that is for them...I either have those children doing...a side project, maybe on a...person...famous from their own religion, or they can do a project on their own religion.

Although the teacher here demonstrates sensitivity to the different needs of the students within the classroom, there are clear structural limitations that impact a child's inclusion. In this Christian-centric model of education, students from Christian backgrounds are privileged, while those who practice other religions or none, are inadvertently treated as the “other”. In Ireland, an opt-out option is available to parents who do not want their child to be exposed to religious instruction. However, the freedom to opt-out is accompanied by various challenges, namely, schools lacking sufficient resources to meaningfully accommodate those students who wish to opt-out (Darmody, Lyons and Smyth, 2014). Furthermore, when schools adopt a reactive as opposed to proactive approach to developing cultural literacy in their students, two major challenges arise. On the one hand, if careful planning and training for teachers is not deployed, it can be challenging for teachers to navigate sensitive, complex questions around cultural and religious identity. On the other hand, when conversations concerning diversity are a response to the degree to which cultural diversity is present, questions arise regarding what happens in classrooms that are

more culturally homogenous. For example, in this study, the classroom composition in rural denominational schools was much less religiously and culturally heterogeneous. It can be argued that students in these classrooms may be at a disadvantage in developing essential tools to assist them in interacting with a multicultural society if these topics are not introduced by teachers. In ET and CNS, however, there is a conscious focus on developing tools for young people that will serve them in a pluralistic society. For example, one teacher (Ethnicity: Irish) in a rural CNS shared the importance of instructing students to use “appropriate language” and develop certain attitudes for interacting with diversity:

...another huge aspect of the curriculum is teaching children...appropriate language and respect for others and to be able to discuss differences in beliefs, but to do it in a really respectful and kind of a meaningful way so that it's not something that you don't talk about. That we're different because we are different. So, it's like acknowledging difference. And it's teaching the kids how to talk about that...

The findings of this study show that the institutional ethos of a school matters. Multi-denominational and equality-based schools, for example, were less bound by structural limitations found in denominational schools. Therefore, the findings highlight the necessity of achieving the Government's goal of increasing the number of multi-denominational primary schools to provide greater choice for parents and for denominational schools to adopt more ways in which to be inclusive of migrant parents and their children. Failing this, it is difficult to see how policies, such as those outlined in the Education Act (1998) that suggest that each student should receive an educational experience that “respects the diversity of values, beliefs, languages and traditions in Irish society” can be achieved.

Developing Culturally Responsive School Environments: The Role of Teachers and Principals

This study found that both teachers and school principals play a vital role in creating and maintaining inclusive learning environments. Encouraging migrant students' use of their native language, acknowledging and celebrating various cultural and religious festivals, learning about specific cultures and religions in classes, integrating cultural and religious themes throughout the school day, displaying artwork that depict the various religions and cultures within the classroom and adopting a curious and open-minded approach to learning about different religions and cultures were all steps implemented by school principals and

teachers to enhance the inclusivity of the school environment. This study, however, found that teachers encounter several challenges in their efforts to enhance students' cultural and religious literacy. Several teachers highlighted time-constraints due to pressures such as curriculum demands but also the recent COVID-19 pandemic. Teachers noted that, in light of such pressures, subjects such as religion and ethical education are often sacrificed. Emphasis on core subjects, such as Maths and English, is the hallmark of an education system embedded in neoliberal values (Lynch and McGarr, 2016). Narrow conceptions of education primarily serving economic purposes, ensures subjects, such as, ethical and RE, that have a potential for wider personal development, remain peripheral. Therefore, an institutional ethos based on inclusion is not always sufficient in enhancing school belonging for students from diverse backgrounds, but efforts to challenge the neoliberal and Eurocentric assumptions regarding education must also be addressed. Continuous Professional Development (CPD) is essential to ensure teachers can navigate the complexities of identity and assumptions regarding the role of the teacher and education:

I would love to do a bit more training on it even with...different religions as part of the Learning Together curriculum...if I'm very unaware or unsure about a topic, I'd be more inclined to shy away from it because there's a lot of self-teaching that needs to be done.

Teacher ET Rural (Ethnicity: Irish)

The largely homogenous teaching body in Ireland and insufficient preparation during ITE (Hannigan, Faas and Darmody, 2022) presents another challenge to being inclusive of the various cultures and religions represented in a classroom. This can be problematic as teachers often find it challenging to understand the perspectives, attitudes, and experiences of migrant students due to cultural and religious differences (Adebayo and Heinz, 2023). Despite initiatives from the Programme for Access to Higher Education (PATHS) strand 1 to increase the number of entrants from underrepresented groups into ITE programmes, and the introduction of the Migrant Teacher Bridging Programme, that aims at assisting aspiring migrant teachers to develop knowledge, skills, and confidence to gain employment in the primary school sector, a diversity gap persists. In the Learn Together curriculum in ET schools and the GMGY programme in CNS, teachers are expected to share information about diverse religions. However, challenges arise when teachers must move out of their comfort zone and teach about religions and cultures they know little about:

I think the biggest challenge for me... is that when you come from Ireland, you more or less will be brought up in a Catholic school. So, you're very much all about the Catholic religion and all the Catholic festivals... When you're trying to teach them about the Muslim celebrations or Jewish celebrations, you really have to go do a little bit of research.

ET Urban Teacher (Ethnicity: Irish)

Of course, this is not to say that teachers of Irish ethnicity cannot advance CRP. Although teachers from minority religious backgrounds may have a more nuanced understanding of being marginalised and are thus better equipped to assist migrant students develop a sense of belonging (White, 2010), this study found that all teachers, regardless of their backgrounds, can adopt CRP when supported by appropriate training, systemic changes and culturally responsive leadership. For instance, this study found that school principals play a critical role in creating and maintaining a culturally responsive ethos in schools. School principals appeared to set the tone for an inclusive school environment by creating open lines of communication with parents, welcoming new families to the school, greeting students each morning, and exemplifying culturally responsive attitudes. Several teachers and parents noted that they felt that the school principal is the key figure within the school for setting the tone for the creation of an inclusive school environment:

The principal sets the tone for a very open relationship with students and parents...And it's a very nice kind of community atmosphere, everybody knows everybody... It's very supportive and very friendly and we are really happy with the school. There is a very nice atmosphere and I think that comes from the principal.

COI Urban Parent (Ethnicity: Northern Irish)

Power and the Complexity of Managing Diversity

This study found that the gap between policy and practice can emerge as a result of how and where decisions concerning the school are made. Historically, schools have had the power and autonomy to determine how students and families are characterised and what behaviours are acceptable and thus rewarded (Khalifa, 2018). Here, the marginalised group internalises the understanding of the world from the dominant group, in this case, school

leaders and educators. In Ireland, there remains a discrepancy between a school's staff make-up and the community the school represents. Thus, a gap may emerge between national rhetoric to empower diverse backgrounds within the school setting and practice, as minority groups are marginalised in the decision-making processes of the school.

Noting these difficulties, Khalifa (2018) calls for greater community epistemology in policy decisions concerning school improvements. Failure to involve the community more in decision making and develop a more “bottom-up” approach, can allow for tensions to emerge between the messages students receive from their home culture and the accepted social and cultural norms of Irish society (Adebayo and Heinz, 2023). For example, depending on the cultural and religious background, a parents' framework for raising children may differ greatly from what they encounter at school. To illustrate, one parent from Pakistan shared that the moral relativism embedded in the ethos of the CNS curriculum was at odds with their framework for raising children:

...they end up teaching a child that... your right, can be right. And my right can be right...humanity has to have certain kinds of guidelines in order to live in harmony. For example... my daughter...I served her meal...And she started sobbing...‘why are you crying?’ And she’s like...‘I don’t feel like eating that.’ I said, ‘you’re very hungry, you just come back from school.’ ‘No, but my teacher has said that I’m a human being and I have my right to choose’.... There has to be a fine line, where the wrong is a wrong.

This highlights an acute challenge for all educators in Ireland. Although certain practices have allowed for greater representation of the various religions and cultures, the curricula deployed in Irish schools are based on Eurocentric approaches to education. Although the merit of different curricula from around the globe goes beyond the scope of this research, it is still critical to recognise that parents from various cultures and religions possess various expectations regarding education and, therefore, simply acknowledging different religions and cultures may not satisfy all parents' aspirations for their child's education. To address this, some countries have introduced separate minority religion schools. To a certain extent, this is also happening in Ireland, with the introduction of Muslim and Jewish schools. However, the number of schools is very small. Furthermore, efforts to involve parents and students in the decision-making process have resulted in the establishment of Parent Councils and Parent Associations, as well as student councils.

Although there is a growing body of research that acknowledges the importance of student and parent voices in relation to introducing changes to school practices, it has been argued that efforts to include parents and students in decision-making can at times be tokenistic and inconsequential to the day-to-day running of the school (Darmody, 2011). Studies have found that schools often adopt a ‘one-size fits all’ approach to increasing parental involvement (Bajaj, 2009). Consequently, erroneous assumptions regarding involvement of parents from migrant backgrounds may materialise. Indeed, many migrant parents may conceptualise involvement somewhat differently from traditional Irish forms of involvement in school life. For instance, one urban CNS teacher of Irish ethnicity found that parents from migrant background rarely got involved with extracurricular school activities “when we do GAA (Gaelic Athletic Association) and bringing kids to matches . . . we’ve never had a parent come to our matches . . . Whereas it’s just not that important to them . . . they’re very academic focused”. This example illustrates how parental involvement may be conceptualised differently amongst various cultures and ethnicities.

The inability of Irish primary schools to meaningfully engage parents from migrant backgrounds presents a clear problem for Irish schools as studies have found that drawing on the views of parents from migrant backgrounds is essential for understanding how best to respond to the needs of children from different cultural backgrounds (Adebayo and Heinz, 2023). As such, a dynamic, ongoing dialogue between the educator and parents that moves beyond tokenistic gestures of inclusion is required. This is particularly evident in diverse classrooms where teachers are tasked with navigating the complexities that arise from encountering diverse worldviews. Several teachers, in such classrooms, expressed difficulties in approaching certain subjects. For example, one urban CNS teacher (Ethnicity: Irish) described the difficulty navigating topics such as religion:

I think the biggest challenge...having such different beliefs in the classroom. Just because some of them are so vocal about what they believe in... some of them would be... like... ‘I don’t believe in that.’ And that can sometimes put down people a little bit... Because that’s what they’re obviously taught at home.

Furthermore, teachers expressed challenges in covering subjects such as gender, and LGBTQ+. Here, a tension between cultural relativism and promoting universal educational values was observed. Indeed, within the classroom, children seem to be experiencing a clash between their “home culture and the generally accepted cultural norms within Irish

society” (Adebayo and Heniz, 2023, p.3131). Studies suggest that in such scenarios, teachers often tend to avoid the subject matter entirely. Adebayo and Heinz (2023, p.14), for example, argue that the “complex interplay of teachers’ lack of cultural knowledge and intercultural experience, socio-political assumptions, and insecurities” may result in teachers seeking to avoid an exploration of such topics. This further highlights the necessity of a strong dialogue between the school leaders and parents. However, a study conducted by Smyth et al. (2009) found that schools often reported low levels of parental involvement, particularly from migrant parents. Factors highlighted by Smyth et al. (2009) for lack of involvement from newcomer parents included language difficulties, shift work, and not knowing what the expectation of involvement are. Therefore, although structures such as Parent Associations exist, the question arises, whose voices are being represented in such spaces. The findings from this study also found that cultural differences and the extent to which families feel they are already part of a community can act as potential barriers for parent involvement. For example, one teacher from an urban CNS (Ethnicity: Irish) highlighted some challenges in involving parents in school life. Here, the teacher shares several assumptions regarding the barriers that prevent families, particularly from migrant backgrounds, becoming involved in the life of the school:

It’s really difficult to get like parents to become involved in the school. I think because they have their own community outside of school...that they don’t feel the need to be part of the school. Like cultures really stick together and don’t really mix that well in the schools...

Another topic that emerged from the data pertained to the role of the students in creating culturally responsive environments. Previous studies have demonstrated the role of agency in developing interethnic friendships and developing religious knowledge (Faas, Smith and Darmody, 2018). When schools had a whole-school approach for developing student voice, it appeared that students were in a better position to influence the environment of the school. For example, a rural ET school adopted an initiative by UNICEF as a means of enhancing students’ agency and voice within the school setting. This initiative seeks to enhance young people’s understanding of their basic human rights. In doing so, children develop confidence to speak out against violations of human rights towards themselves and others:

...the nice thing about it is children who didn't have a voice beforehand, they suddenly do, and they can speak up for other people... It gives the children who didn't have a voice kind of these ideas and these phrases that they stock use to like defend their own rights.

Rural ET Teacher (Ethnicity: British)

Conclusion

This article set out to explore the factors that can assist in reducing the gap between policy and practice in relation to creating culturally responsive school environments. As evidenced, efforts are being made across the different school types in Ireland to respond to the increased cultural diversity within the country. However, in a vastly denominational educational landscape, navigating the expectation of an institutional ethos and being responsive to the diverse identities within the classroom has become a daily challenge for many educators. Failure to accelerate towards the goals of the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism and respond to parental choice in Ireland is exacerbating tensions between policy and daily experiences in primary schools across Ireland. The responses from the study demonstrate that teachers in denominational settings, although able to make adaptations to the curriculum based on the classroom composition, are limited in the extent that they can respond due to structural factors and expectations placed on them by the institutional ethos.

Moreover, although developments have been made to ensure the educational landscape in the primary school sector reflects the plurality of cultures in Ireland, namely, by increasing the number of multi-denominational and equality-based primary schools, obstacles to ensuring schools are fully responsive to cultural diversity persist. As illustrated, despite developing an ethos and curriculum that is inclusive to diverse religions and cultures, challenges are encountered in its implementation. A key factor highlighted in this study is the cultural homogeneity of the teaching body and the somewhat limited training opportunities to develop tools to manage diversity. This, coupled with neoliberal pressures and, consequently, the positionality of cultural, religious, and ethical education within the school curriculum suggests that sufficient time is often not always available in schools to adopt practices that allow for a more comprehensive approach to creating culturally responsive environments.

In light of these findings, this study proposes three policy recommendations to reduce the gap between policy and practice. Firstly, it is necessary that all stakeholders involved with implementing culturally responsive practices within the school have access to a clear understanding of what it means to be a culturally responsive educator. Here it is important to avoid oversimplification and adopting a checklist approach to culturally responsive teaching, but rather, there is a need for teachers and school principals to be connected to CPD opportunities in which they can gain clarity regarding the key tenets of culturally responsive teaching. This is essential for educators in all school sectors. Furthermore, culturally responsive teaching must receive greater attention in pre-service teacher training. Although pre-service training in Ireland offers modules that address inclusion, critics have argued that they are treated as standalone modules (Hannigan, Faas and Darmody, 2022). This study, therefore, echoes the calls for a more robust pre-service training. Secondly, it is important to involve different stakeholders in the decision-making process. Efforts to move beyond “top-down” approaches to educational decision-making and encouraging “bottom-up” initiatives can result in school environments that reflect the needs of the communities where the schools operate. Although policies and practices concerning developing student and parent voices are present in the Irish educational system, challenges persist regarding how to engage parents from diverse backgrounds and how to assist parents and students to feel they are co-creators of the school environment. Finally, it is necessary to accelerate efforts to increase the number of multi-denominational and equality-based schools and achieve the goals outlined by the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism.

The factors outlined in this study shed light on how a discrepancy between policy and practice can emerge with regards to creating culturally responsive school environments. The findings presented are of social utility as they contribute to a body of knowledge that can assist in reducing this gap and aid the development of a culturally responsive educational landscape, and thus ultimately, contribute to the creation of a more cohesive society.

4: Parental School Choice in Post-Secular Ireland: Insights from Irish Primary Schools

Aron Foley with Prof. Daniel Faas and Dr. Merike Darmody
(Revision has been submitted to *Irish Educational Studies*)

Abstract

The countervailing trends of secularisation and the emergence of diverse religious affiliations, due in part to upward trends in migration, have raised many important questions for parents in Ireland when considering their child's educational experience. In a highly denominational educational landscape, school choice is often limited, with many children attending schools that may not align with their family's belief system. Understanding the educational preferences of a diverse demographic of parents regarding school choice can assist policymakers with the development of a more equitable educational landscape. As such, this study draws on rich qualitative data from parents across the four main types of primary schools in Ireland. This study sheds light on post-secular factors that influence parental preferences, and the challenges parents encounter when choosing primary schools. The findings of this study have policy implications as they highlight key factors that educational systems situated in pluralistic societies must consider.

Keywords: Parental School Choice, Primary Schools, Ireland, Post-Secularism

Introduction

Discourses concerning parental school choice have become ubiquitous in educational and sociological research in Europe. As the demographic profile of many European countries has transformed, due to upward trends in migration and the growing secularisation of societies, there is a necessity to capture the choice preferences of religiously and culturally diverse groups of parents. Indeed, understanding the factors that influence parental school choice can have a major influence on both educational policy and practice. In recent years, international studies have highlighted the importance of factors, such as, reputation (Garganourakis, Dimopoulos and Loutsampelas, 2022), academic performance (Burgess et al., 2014), and parental education levels (Darmody and Smyth, 2018) in influencing school choice. Practical considerations, such as, location and siblings' attendance (Jerrim et al., 2023) also have been found to play a significant role in shaping parental preferences. However, given the legacy of religious schools in many European countries, questions regarding the role religion plays in influencing school choice have been increasingly analysed.

In Ireland, the ethos of primary schools has traditionally been synonymous with religion, particularly Catholicism. Consequently, the spiritual dimension of the Irish curriculum has been perceived as an “inextricable part of Irish culture and history” (NCCA, 1999, p.58). However, it is important to question the role of religion within schools and the extent to which religion is an important factor in influencing parental school choice, in light of recent shifts in demographics. A study by Darmody and Smyth (2018), drawing on Growing Up in Ireland data, found that while religion continues to remain an important determinant for many parents in Ireland, other factors matter more. The importance of religious ethos for school choice for some parents has raised concerns regarding the institutional habitus of schools across Ireland, with several critics highlighting the mismatch between the largely Catholic primary school landscape and the increasingly diverse social demographic in Ireland (Faas, Smith and Darmody, 2018b). Indeed, given the centrality of education for the transmission of cultural, ethical and religious values (Cohen-Zada and Elder, 2018), such an educational landscape fails to represent the values of a modern, pluralistic Ireland.

Ireland has seen a major transformation in its religious and cultural demographics over the past three decades. To illustrate, between 2011 and 2022, there has been a 187% increase in those who identified as having no religion, which accounts for over 14% of the population (CSO, 2022). However, parallel to this decline in religiosity, still a large percentage, 69% of the population, identify as Roman Catholic (CSO, 2022)¹. The diversity of religious beliefs in Ireland is in part due to the increase in migration in recent years. Although many migrants have arrived from traditionally Catholic countries, Ireland has experienced an increase in those who identify with minority faiths too. For example, there are currently around 83,000 Muslims living in Ireland, which represents a 29% increase since 2016 (CSO, 2022). Currently, 12% of the population immigrated to Ireland from some 200 countries (CSO, 2022). This rich tapestry of religious, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds has direct implications for the primary school sector.

Although embedded in the Irish Constitution (1937) is a commitment to ensure every parent has a choice when deciding what school they should send their child to, in practice, this has not quite been the reality in Ireland. As aforementioned, studies have found that religion plays a significant role in the decision-making process of parents, however, the role of religion interacts in a somewhat complex manner with socio-economic factors and location (Darmody and Smyth, 2018). Indeed, it has been found that the level of a family's income determines the extent to which a family are capable of making an active choice with regards to what school they should send their child to (Jheng et al., 2022). For example, previous research suggests that families from middle-class backgrounds often are in a position to travel to ensure their children attend a school that aligns with their belief system (Darmody and Smyth, 2018). With this in mind, it is essential to identify the preferences of parents from diverse religious and cultural backgrounds in order that these preferences can inform policy and, consequently, assist with the development of a more equitable primary school sector that is widely accessible.

As such, this paper provides a timely, in-depth analysis of the factors that influence parental school choice in a post-secular society. Building on existing research (see Hyland and Bocking 2016; Darmody and Smyth 2018; Darmody and Smyth forthcoming), this paper draws on rich qualitative data from parents to explore how post-secular forces are influencing parents' choice of schools. This paper will begin by outlining the historical development of the primary school sector in Ireland, then it will present the conceptual

framework that underpins the study. This is followed by the methodology section and the findings and discussion section. Finally, a brief conclusion summarises the key findings and implications of the study.

Historical Development of the Primary School Sector in Ireland

The national school system in Ireland was first established in 1831. Although it is commonly perceived that the Catholic Church has always been interlinked with the Irish school system, this is not quite the case. Indeed, in the early years, schools were largely non-denominational, with religious formation not a part of the core curriculum (McGraw and Tiernan, 2022). However, despite ambitions to have a largely non-denominational primary school system in Ireland, in which private patrons were responsible for the management of publicly funded schools, the system that emerged looked quite different (McGraw and Tiernan, 2022). Although the patronage system has been retained, at present, 95% of all primary schools in Ireland are denominational, with 89% of these falling under Catholic patronage. There are also some minority faith schools, mainly COI. The preponderance of Catholic primary schools in Ireland has led many to criticise the lack of choice before parents who wish to opt for an alternative school ethos (McGraw, 2023). Therefore, over the years, efforts have been made to ensure the educational landscape reflects the demands of parents for a more heterogenous school system.

Indeed, a critical moment in the history of Irish education occurred in the 1970s with the Dalky School Project. Prompted by a lack of school choice, parents and educationalists worked for the establishment of ET schools. ET schools are equality-based schools, in which faith-formation does not take place during school hours. In more recent times, another milestone was reached when the Irish State, not only established but became patrons of a new form of multi-denominational educational institution - CNS. Emerging from a need to be responsive to the multi-ethnic communities in Ireland, CNS have been placed under the patronage of the ETB. Although both CNS and ET primary schools both aim to be inclusive of the growing religious and cultural diversity in Ireland, the two school types differ somewhat in their approach to religion. For example, McGraw and Tiernan (2022) argues that ET schools are multi-denominational in name only and that, in reality, ET schools adopt a more non-denominational ethos, with all religious instruction placed outside of the school day. The CNS model, on the other hand, aims to ensure religious

identity is “explicitly not left at the school gate but used as a means of enriching the learning experience on the basis of mutual understanding and integration” (Bruton cited in The Irish Independent 2017, p.1). The initial success of CNS and ET primary schools has helped to diversify the primary school sector and respond to the demands of parents for greater school choice. However, although these schools represent the fastest growing sectors, they still only represent a minority of all primary schools in Ireland (Table 4.1).

Table 4.1 Religious Approach in the Main Primary School Types in Ireland

	Catholic	Church of Ireland	Educate Together	Community National
Number	2750	171	95	28
Ownership	Church owned	Church Owned	Private Company	State Owned
Ethos	Denominational	Denominational	Equality-Based	Multi-Denominational
Approach to Religious Education	Learning-in Religion	Learning-in Religion	Learning from and learning about	Learning from and learning about
Names	Religious Saint or Irish Names	Religious Saint or Irish Names	Mostly Geographical School Names	Mostly Irish Names

(Source: Department of Education, 2022)

Another key milestone in the development of a more diverse educational landscape was the establishment of the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in 2011. The Forum was an expert group with the purpose of consulting with stakeholders and identifying approaches to creating a more inclusive educational landscape in Ireland (Coolahan, Hussey and Kilfeather, 2012). In 2012, the Forum published a report outlining an action plan to create a more inclusive educational landscape. These strategies included the Catholic Church divesting patronage of several schools, protecting the right of parents to opt their children out of RE, and the establishment of policies regarding religious and cultural celebrations (Coolahan, Hussey and Kilfeather, 2012). Since the formation of the Forum, there has been a marked increase in the number of equality-based and multi-denominational schools nationwide. Between 2011 and 2021, 126 Catholic schools and 12 COI schools have closed

or divested patronage, while in this same period, 80 multi-denominational schools have opened.

Further efforts to provide more equal access to schools, especially in those more likely to be oversubscribed, were made by revising the school admission policies in Ireland. In 2018, the School Admission Bill was introduced in order to prevent Catholic denominational schools from requiring pupils to be baptised before being admitted (Faas and Fionda, 2019). It also introduced new criteria regarding siblings and past pupils. Concurrent to this development, the Equal Status Act 2000, was further amended in 2018, to ensure that children from minority faith backgrounds can still access a school of their faith (Department of Education, 2021). Although such provisions ensure parents now have a constitutional right to choose which school to send their child to, the social background of families and many schools being oversubscribed often still limits the choices before parents (Darmody and Smyth, 2018). As such, although advances towards a more equitable educational system have been made, the commitment enshrined in the Irish constitution to ensure parents have the right to send their children to their school of choice often is not realised and middle-class parents are often in a better position to exercise this choice.

In light of such developments, this study will explore the following two questions: What factors influence school choice in a post-secular society? What challenges do parents encounter when identifying primary schools in post-secular Ireland?

Conceptual Framework

Given the social transformation that has occurred in Ireland over the past three decades, it is imperative to understand the diverse preferences of parents for their children's education. Critical to responding to this is a requirement to arrive at conceptual clarity regarding the social transformation that is occurring. Ireland, a country bound for generations by a strong connection of Church and State, has seen a loosening of its once strong ties to the Catholic Church (CSO, 2022). Although the Catholic faith still represents the majority religion in Ireland, statistics over the past three decades indicate a steep decline in adherents (CSO, 2022). Indeed, with the progressive modernisation and individualisation in the Western world, it was expected that the role of religion would decline significantly, with its sphere

of influence subjected to the periphery of society (Luckmann, 1967). However, recent trends, although indicating a rise in those who identify with no religion, suggest that this has not quite been the case. The expectation that religion in modern society would play a subordinate role and be confined to the private sphere has been argued to no longer hold validity (Berking, Streets and Schwenk, 2018). As such, Berger (2014, p.29) instead argues that the relationship between modernity and religion “is not a matter of either/or, but rather both/and”.

This is particularly evident in Ireland. Parallel to the decline in those who identify as Catholic, there has been an increase in minority religions and minority faith practices (CSO, 2022). This has led sociologists to redefine the social phenomenon that is occurring in the West. In recent years, the theory of post-secularism, popularised by Habermas, has taken precedence in the Western world. Kitching (2020, p.12) elaborates on this term by suggesting that:

[p]ost-secular is not a period after secularisation - rather it is a perspective on the world that recognises the entanglement of the secular and religious in all aspects of the social. It refuses narrow European definitions of societies as beacons of secular political progress, challenges multiple injustices of colonial capitalism and racial neoliberalism, and explores what can emerge from the failure of religions, rights, reason to provide absolute common ground for public education.

In light of such shifts, several heuristics have been deployed to replace the theory of secularisation. In a critical analysis of classical secularisation, Berger (2014) espouses the pluralisation theory. He argues that modernity does not lead to a natural decline in religion; rather, that it moves towards the development of two pluralisms. This entails, firstly, the coexistence of various religious paradigms, and secondly, the coexistence of the religious and secular spheres. This coexistence is readily observed in Ireland. Furthermore, the way in which religion is understood and practised in Ireland has transformed significantly as a result of this coexistence. Although Catholicism has been synonymous with Irishness for centuries, it has been argued that this particular form of Catholicism has been replaced. For example, Inglis (2014) argues that Catholicism has become increasingly fragmented in

Ireland, with many incarnations of lifestyle and practice. In light of this reassessment of how religion, and particularly Catholicism, is understood in Ireland, studies have endeavoured to articulate the complexity of how religion is positioned and practised by the individual, communities and institutions.

Although studies have found many factors influence parental school choice in post-secular societies, recent findings in Ireland appear to suggest that parental school choice may not be rational, but rather dictated by economic class, social networks, and sources of information. Drawing on the Bourdieusian theory of capital, we begin to understand how school choice is a powerful means of social reproduction. Studies have found, for example, that parents from more socially affluent backgrounds can draw on economic, cultural, and social resources to send their children to schools in which they can develop their capital further (Yoon, 2019). These findings do not discredit studies that highlight factors that influence school choice, but rather, shed light on the fact that, although the primary school sector has become more heterogenous due to the two pluralisms experienced in Ireland, a large majority of parents without access to higher degrees of capital, will more likely than not, be unable to avail of these choices and, ultimately, send their child to the dominant form of schooling.

The theories outlined above offer an insight into the factors that influence parental school choice. In failing to understand the nuances of the social forces at play in Ireland, it is difficult to appreciate the complexity of parental preference for their child's education. It is evident that primary schools in Ireland have become contested spaces in recent decades, in which key stakeholders are navigating the challenges of catering to a diverse student body. Consequently, parents are faced with difficult choices in determining whether a denominational or an alternative school ethos would most benefit their child. As such, it is important that clarity is achieved regarding how the social phenomena occurring in post-secular Ireland influence this choice.

Methodology

This study adopted a multi-method comparative case study design. For the purpose of this study, 17 parents (2 male – 15 females: 8 of Irish ethnicity – 9 immigrated to Ireland) were

sampled. Parents were selected from the 4 major primary school types in Ireland. These included Catholic, COI, ET and CNS. Gaelscoileanna were excluded from the sample due to their variability in religious ethos. Furthermore, minority religious schools were also excluded from the sample due to their low numbers. In order to understand the influence of location on parental choice, each school type was sampled in both an urban and rural location. This study is part of a larger project that sampled teachers, school principals, students and parents. For the purpose of this study, only data from parents was drawn on.

In each school, semi-structured interviews were conducted with parents. Each interview explored themes such as the enrolment process, the factors that influenced their school choice, reflections on the ethos of the school, perceptions of their involvement with the school and to what extent each parent was happy with their child's educational experience. Interviews, on average, lasted 20-60 minutes. A hybrid approach of conducting the interviews both in person and online was deployed in order to work around the schedules of the parents. This flexibility was critical to ensuring maximal participation, particularly as data was collected in 2021 when many of the Covid-19 pandemic restrictions were still in place. All parents were informed of their rights as participants of the research project and signed a consent form prior to data collection. Anonymity was ensured by the use of pseudonyms.

Once the data was collected, it was analysed under a Thematic Analysis framework. This 6-stage process allowed the researcher to become familiar with the data and identify key themes that would shape the study. This approach to data analysis, that was first established by Braun and Clarke (2006), consists of a process of familiarisation, coding, searching for themes, reviewing the themes, defining the themes and then finally writing up the findings. This procedure was followed throughout the data analysis process.

Findings and Discussion

Post-Secular Influences on Parental Choice

There has been growing public and policy interest in the factors that influence parental school choice as the social demographics of Ireland have been changing (see Darmody and

Smyth, 2018). However, relatively little research has been conducted into how post-secular factors impact parental school choice. This study found that the “entanglement” between the religious and the secular (Kitching, 2020) in post-secular societies can be seen in the decision-making process of parents. This complexity becomes apparent when analysing the family unit and their cultural and religious backgrounds. Although Ireland has always experienced cultural and religious diversity, the vast majority of families would have been relatively homogenous in relation to religious beliefs and cultural upbringings (CSO, 1991). However, in recent decades, due to upward trends in migration, the individual members of many families come from vastly different cultural upbringings (CSO, 2022) and thus may not subscribe to the same religious paradigms and cultural expectations of education. As such, school choice grows in complexity:

We’re mixed since my husband is atheist and he has very strong views around that. And I’m religious, so trying to have a balance there is very difficult... some people are laid back and they don't care either way. He does. And ..I, as myself do care. So, it's trying to have a balance...

Urban Catholic Primary School Mother, Ethnicity Iranian

The above example illustrates the complexity of parental school choice when different members of the family unit hold contrasting paradigms with regards to religion. As such, it may be more difficult than anticipated to respond to the various needs of such families. Indeed, in an effort to respond to parental preferences for more diverse provisions, a national strategy to expand the number of multi-denominational and equality-based schools to 400 primary schools has been set for the year 2030. However, the increase of such schools in itself does not always respond to the preferences of parents. For example, one parent interviewed, from an Islamic background, found more connection with Catholic ethos schools than multi-denominational schools due to their overt religious ethos, which is keenly felt in all aspects of the school day:

... when I came in, majority of the schools fall into the Church, which personally I really adore...I really feel that humanity should have certain kind of guidelines, even you follow into a Church, or a Temple or a Mosque. So of course, humans would already have a predefined guidelines which I think it just makes them more disciplined... begin the day with a prayer, they would be thanking God and things like that. But of course, nowadays in these primary schools, as they want to keep it diverse and they want to make sure that everybody fits in perfectly, my daughter does not have all these prayers and everything...I personally admired that because they could say, okay, you know, there is an entity we need to thank.

Urban CNS Mother, Ethnicity Pakistani

As such, it can be argued that the national strategy of increasing the number of multi-denominational schools is rooted in the assumption that value-based curricula can meet the needs of the diverse range of families migrating to the country. However, this approach may fail to appreciate the nuances of families from various religious backgrounds' preference for their child's education. A movement from religious-oriented curricula towards a more value-based curriculum, that is adopted in schools such as ET, may not always be inclusive of the varying expectations of parents, particularly those from religious backgrounds. Although the CNS approach to religion differs from ET primary schools, in that they aim to deepen each student's religious identity while concurrently developing their understanding of other faith traditions, it appears from the above quotation that some parents from more religious households may value the overtly religious ethos found in denominational schools, where religion is integrated into all aspects of the school day. The demand for such schools can be further attributed to the migration patterns found in Ireland in which waves of migrants from largely Catholic countries have been arriving in recent years (CSO, 2022).

However, with regards to RE, it was evident from the interviews that there was a great deal of polarisation concerning how religion should be taught. Opinions were divided regarding whether students should "learn-in" religion or "learn-about" religion. As aforementioned, some parent's felt schools are important sites for developing religious identity. However, on the other hand, there were several parents from mixed backgrounds who felt that religion

should be treated as a subject rather than adopting a faith-formation approach. One parent, from an Italian background (Urban ET Primary School) shared that: “I truly believe that schools should be... like institution. You know, you shouldn't be presenting religion, as a moment of praying and all these things, religion, in my opinion, should be a subject that you study”.

Furthermore, it is also important to note that the fastest growing group in Ireland is “no religion” (CSO, 2022). As such, schools such as ET schools appear to meet the demands of parents for faith formation to be removed from the curriculum. However, regardless of their religious position, many of the parents interviewed were keenly aware of the social phenomena occurring in Irish society and were, consequently, eager for their children to develop the tools to interact with a pluralistic society. Therefore, several parents acknowledged that the approach schools, such as ET, adopt to informing students about various cultural and religious traditions, was a major factor in influencing their decision to send their child to that school:

I love the fact there are so many cultures in the school, so many different religions... I just think that is so important, the kids would come home to me and are educating me just from their friends, not even from what they are learning from through the teachers, but you know from their friends, some of the kids doing the Ramadan... it's stuff that they're learning and what they're being taught... I think it's more important than, than anything really. Especially with the change in Ireland now. Like 20 years ago...even when my husband came here, like there was very little foreign people around. Where now, I mean, in the kid's classes, it's so mixed...it's such a mixed school...I just think it's really good. I think it's very important...

Urban CNS Mother, Ethnicity: Irish

Similarly, families that send their children to Catholic primary schools highlighted the need for the Catholic approach to RE to expand and include elements from different religions. For example, one parent indicated that they saw little to no change in the manner in which RE is approached in Catholic primary schools since the time that they attended school themselves, despite the transformation in social demographics:

the teaching itself was really what we would've learned really. It was a very kind of closed education. I'm not sure they learned about Hinduism or Muslim people or Buddhism. I don't think they learned about any other religions. I think they just, it was strictly Roman Catholic

Urban Catholic Primary School Father, Ethnicity: Irish

The Impact of Post-Secularism on Religious Practices in Schools

This study found that post-secular forces impacted the institutional ethos of all schools sampled, and thus influenced parental preference with regards to ethos. This echoes recent findings that suggest that the institutional ethos of a school is influenced by both school level and wider social processes (Foley, Faas and Darmody, 2023). For example, one parent (Father, Urban COI, Ethnicity: Irish) characterised the religious approach in a COI primary school as a more “soft religion” approach. It can be argued here that wider social processes, such as secularism, are having a major influence on the ethos of schools, particularly in more urban areas. In this sense, the religious ethos of a school can be seen more as a preservation of culture for many parents rather than a desire for their child to develop a strong religious identity.

The preservation of Catholic traditions can most clearly be seen in the practice of sacramental preparation. This practice, deemed as key elements of Irish education, has become increasingly questioned as the social composition of the countries has been transforming (Kitching and Shanneik 2015). Some researchers have argued that this practice is a strong symbol of traditional Irish childhood (Lodge 1999), while others suggest that its pre-eminence is yet another reflection of Catholic dominance in the primary school sector (Faas, Smith and Darmody, 2018). Reports have highlighted that an emphasis on practices, such as, sacramental preparation can lead pupils who do not participate to feeling a sense of “otherness” (Devine, 2005). However, in ET schools’ sacramental preparations is offered as an extra-curricular option. CNS have also removed sacramental preparations from the core curriculum due to recent research and media pressure. Consequently, in an effort to ensure their children do not feel marginalised, parents may wish to avoid schools in which sacramental preparation is a key element of the curriculum:

Again, out of all my friends, my kids would be the only one who haven't made their communion or confirmation...And truth be told half of them would be like God I would love to get away with it myself. You know... yourself it's turned into a mini wedding these days. The kids don't even know what they're doing. You know, I think with the Irish it's more of a culture, is a tradition growing up it's just a tradition.

Urban CNS Mother, Ethnicity, Irish

Although, to some extent, there may be a weakening of religious identity in Irish schools, due to factors such as secularisation, the growing plurality of religions, and the non-religious identity of teachers, amongst other factors, in Catholic primary schools, there is still commitment to nurturing Catholic identity by embedding Catholic practices throughout the school day. Emphasis on practices, such as making the sacrament, appears to make it even more challenging for children that are not Catholic to become involved, even despite parents being open to their child attending RE classes. Indeed, one parent (Urban Catholic Primary School, Ethnicity: Iranian) shared the challenges they experienced despite their original openness for their child to join in on the religious elements of the curriculum:

The first thing is they have religious activity every day. Whether it's in form of a prayer or the religious class. So, from that perspective, we talked with the kids and they said they were happy to do either way...for the first year I said to the teacher that I don't mind her to actually join the class, we found out that quite a lot of the work that they did was very much so around...the practices, the practical practices of the Catholicism. So...we weren't involved, we didn't know what was going on...So for example, they were saying... what did you wear for your confirmation, or can you bring some token from your baptism? ... the design of the class was very much so aimed at Catholic children...So she didn't get much of it because practically half of her book was empty... a lot of it would be around the rituals or preparation for communion and confirmation...Wouldn't have been very relevant to my daughter.

This example highlights the structural challenges religious primary schools encounter when attempting to preserve their ethos, while at the same time, trying to be inclusive of the increasingly diverse student body. Of course, this challenge may be felt more in urban

settings, where there is greater diversity of religions and cultures. To this end, it is evident that religious schools are being influenced by the countervailing trends of secularism and religious pluralism. As such, emphasis on particular traditions and practices associated with Catholicism are being increasingly questioned. Consequently, parents may opt for schools with a softer approach to religion and, therefore, ultimately decide to send their children to schools where they will not be exposed to the ritualistic aspects of Catholicism, in order that the child does not feel marginalised as a result of their beliefs.

Challenges Parents Encounter When Choosing Schools

This study found that parents encounter numerous barriers when identifying and selecting schools in which to send their children to. This is particularly the case for parents that are outside the dominant group, which in Ireland is Irish Catholics. Although the introduction of the Admission Act in 2018 helped to remove barriers for non-Catholic students to enter Catholic schools, the legacy of such policies is still felt by parents across Ireland. The repercussion of this restrictive rule remains in the memory and for many parents may have played a significant role in the trajectory of their children's education. Indeed, one parent, from a non-Catholic background shared the challenges her family encountered due to the "Baptism Barrier"²:

Originally, I wanted to send my daughter or my kids generally to a school that were multi-denominational...I wasn't looking for a Catholic ethos in the school...in my locality, there was none... So that option went away...then I was left with two school...both of them schools were based on the Catholic ethos. However, when we went to put my sons name in one school, we found out, and he met all the criteria... unfortunately he didn't get accepted and based on our understanding was purely on the fact that he wasn't baptised, and we couldn't demonstrate a baptism cert to the school... there is a sense of discrimination there. But the law wasn't on our side... In the admission policy it is stated that the kids, that basically were Catholic would have been given preference versus not Catholics... that's not the case today, but 15 years ago was, and basically, we couldn't put his name down there.

Urban Catholic Primary School Mother, Ethnicity: Iranian

Although advances have been made regarding the access to entry for non-Catholic students to Catholic ethos schools, the above quote highlights the numerous challenges parents from non-Catholic backgrounds have been encountering for several years. Indeed, the above quotation also highlights the limited choice due to the hegemony of Catholic schools in Ireland. With 89% of primary schools in Ireland under Catholic patronage, parents often feel they have little choice and must ultimately send their child to a Catholic school as these are often the local school. Furthermore, this study found that parents from migrant backgrounds were often at a disadvantage when identifying a school in which to send their child to as they could not tap into the same social capital as parents from an ethnically Irish background. In other words, parents from migrant backgrounds encounter difficulties negotiating the educational landscape of Ireland:

Here...it's not that straight forward. And again, for parents that don't come with personal knowledge, there...is not much information available that explains you how this works. Sometimes you get lucky, you may have other great parents that you know that you can ask questions. Sometimes you don't because maybe let's say you just relocated. Maybe you... just arrived in this country and...you don't have the network that you can rely on...I was one of the first in my network to have a kid in this age and therefore not much help that I could leverage. Right...so yeah, lots of research online. You try to pick up the phone as well and ask a few questions on the school. And sometimes you find some people useful, some other ones, they just say, listen, you need to come here when there's a school presentation and then you just close your eyes and guess.

Urban ET Primary School Mother, Ethnicity: Italian

In the absence of social networks that can provide relevant information regarding their children's education, parents from migrant backgrounds can encounter difficulties accessing useful information that would aid them in making a more informed decision regarding what school to send their children to. Although school websites have all relevant information and include admission policies, which they need to publish by law, these may not be accessible to all parents, particularly parents who are not fluent in English. However, information regarding what school environment would be the best fit is more difficult to access, particularly without prior knowledge of the school system and a large network to tap into. One mother (Rural ET Primary School) who recently moved from Brazil to Ireland

shared their challenges accessing relevant information regarding what school would be the best fit for their child:

To me to have more options, to know about options, to have more information about the options also, where you really like, ah, let me try. And if it doesn't work, then I need to find another. Yeah, but I wouldn't be sure what the best is anyway but try, you know, it would be great to have more information before it would make the decision.

Finally, in recent decades, new school types have emerged, such as CNS, due to the demands of an increasingly diverse population. Although this meets the demands of parents for a more diverse educational landscape, often parents know little about the schools due to the more recent changes that have taken place in the primary school sector. As such, it is natural that many parents may have questions regarding the quality of education their child will receive and the impact that attending such a school may have on their child's educational trajectory. In this sense, sending their child to such a school can be perceived by parents as taking a risk:

They only had two choices and a completely new school that they didn't know anything about. And they only heard that there were 5 or 6 pupils and basically for them, they didn't know what's going to be the plan with secondary school and so on. So, they decided to send their child to [another primary school] ...so that was the reason why they did not decide to send their kids to a brand-new school, there was very little on and they didn't know where the school was going to go from the first year and where it was going to end up. So, we took the risk, and we are just amazed by how my kids are doing in school and they're the most happy kids ever...

Rural CNS Mother, Ethnicity Polish

Conclusions

This study found that the “entanglement” (Kitching, 2020) between the secular and diverse religious affiliation in Ireland, particularly in urban centres, is having an impact on the ethos of primary schools, the primary school's approach to religion and the decision-

making process of parents with regards to which primary school they send their child to. Although Ireland has a relatively heterogeneous primary educational landscape compared to other European countries, the parents who can avail of this diversity of choice, tend to be those with access to higher levels of social and economic capital. Yet again, this highlights the role of socioeconomic status and the subsequent capital that privileges parents with greater means to navigate the educational landscape, identify schools that align with their personal beliefs and enrol their children in such schools. Therefore, more often than not, Catholic primary schools may be the only school choice accessible for most parents as these tend to be the local schools due to the sheer number of such schools in Ireland. CNS and ET primary schools, on the other hand, are not found everywhere in Ireland, particularly in more rural areas. However, as a large percentage of the population in Ireland identify as Catholic and families from diverse religious backgrounds may value aspects of the Catholic “learn-in” approach to religion, the Catholic hegemony over primary school education may not always be considered a problem. In fact, such schools are using a variety of approaches to engage with non-Catholic parents and children who attend these schools.

Simultaneously, this study also highlights the growing demand for multi-denominational and equality-based schools that adopt a “learn-about” rather than “learn-in” approach to RE. Indeed, considering the rapid increase of those who identify with no religion in Ireland, there has been an aim to establish 400 multid denominational and equality-based primary schools in Ireland by 2030. Failing this, many parents, particularly those who identify with no religion, may feel a sense of injustice with the lack of non-denominational options, depending on where they live and the extent to which they can travel. Furthermore, the importance of such schools also lies in their ethos of nurturing understanding around different cultures and religions. As demonstrated in this study, parents from all backgrounds see the need to develop their children’s cultural and religious literacy in order that they can interact with an increasingly pluralistic society.

Finally, the findings of this study have clear policy implications. Firstly, there is a growing need for more accessible information regarding primary schools to be available for all parents, particularly those that do not have access to the same social networks and economic capital as higher-income, Irish ethnicity families. While school websites and those of the Department of Education provide information, this may not be accessible to everybody, particularly parents who are not fluent in English. Secondly, although Catholic

ethos schools meet the demands of many families in Ireland, there is a rapidly growing pool of parents that wish for their children to attend schools with a more multi-denominational ethos. Therefore, there is an urgent need to accelerate efforts to diversify the primary educational landscape in Ireland and increase the number of multi-denominational and equality-based schools. Finally, this study found that the social transformation in Ireland has diversified the expectations and preferences of parents with regard to their child's educational experience. As such, this paper highlights the need to capture the diversity of voices to understand more clearly the preferences of parents and to inform educational policies.

Notes

1. This does, however, represent a steady decline in those who identify as Roman Catholics.
2. The Baptism Barrier refers to instances where oversubscribe Catholic schools were allowed to preference students that could demonstrate a Baptism Certificate.

5. Negotiating Belonging in Irish Primary Schools: The Role of Childhood Agency

Aron Foley with Prof. Daniel Faas and Dr. Merike Darmody
(Submitted to *Educational Studies*)

Abstract

Ireland has experienced significant changes in its socio-cultural make-up in the past 30 years. Consequently, it is important to understand how students in Ireland are negotiating this change and to what extent schools are preparing young people to respond to cultural and religious diversity. Building on previous research concerning the role of agency and school belonging, this study will focus on individuals from non-Catholic backgrounds. Given the highly denominational primary school sector and relatively homogenous teaching body in Ireland, an exploration regarding how students from minority culture backgrounds exercise agency to develop a sense of belonging helps to inform policy and practice in schools. The findings from this study highlight the capacity of students to draw meaning from different cultures and religions, negotiate their own place and provide a valuable contribution to discourses concerning the inclusion of diverse religions and culture in Irish primary schools. While this study is situated in the Irish context, it is of interest to the international audience as it highlights the role agency plays in negotiating belonging for both the individual student and their peers.

Keywords: School Belonging, Childhood Agency, Primary Schools, Ireland.

Introduction

The study of school belonging has garnered considerable attention in recent years, in part due to the changing demographic profile of several countries across Europe. Indeed, understanding what factors enable migrant students develop a sense of school belonging can have major implications regarding integration into wider society. Yet, despite widespread interest in this area, many critics continue to argue that the concept remains ambiguous (Slaten et al., 2016). In simple terms, school belonging relates to the feeling of students being “safe in their own skin and comfortable with their own identity” (Riley 2022, p.117). However, the complex nature of the concept becomes apparent when considering the various dimensions of belonging. For instance, questions regarding what an individual belongs to and who determines what students should belong to, underscore the challenge with discourses related to understanding this concept. These considerations become increasingly pertinent as the demographic profiles of countries across Europe continue to become more culturally and religiously diverse. In many respects, schools have become contested spaces (Murphy and McDowell, 2023), in which various cultural and religious outlooks on life interact. Consequently, the longstanding hegemony of public denominational schooling in numerous European countries has been highlighted by critics as “not fit for purpose” (Lumby and MacRuairc 2020, p.130). Although studies suggest that denominational schools can be highly inclusive in their approach (Foley, Faas and Darmody, 2024), the secularisation and the concurrent growth of minority faiths in countries across Europe ensures that there remains an ongoing inquiry into the position of denominational schools.

It is within this context that school belonging becomes an increasingly important area of analysis. With figures indicating that as many as 1 in 3 students in OECD countries do not feel they belong in their school environment (OECD, 2020), the necessity of arriving at how belonging is achieved becomes ever more apparent. In terms of developing a greater understanding of how belonging is achieved, student experiences provide a critical lens through which to understand the concept. The epistemic propensity towards drawing on the voices of students has undoubtedly accelerated in recent years. Indeed, the ubiquity of agency in contemporary childhood studies is a testament to an advancing understanding of the profound contribution children can make to educational discourses. In particular, understanding how students that do not identify with the hegemonic culture of a country

draw on their agency to develop a sense of school belonging and overcome feelings of “otherness”. To this end, the voice and perspective of children may aid educational discourses and assist policymakers in understanding how students are negotiating their place in an ever-changing educational landscape.

Building on existing research concerning school belonging, this study focusses on the 4 major Irish primary school types in Ireland with regards to how students from non-Catholic backgrounds draw on their agency to develop a sense of school belonging and counteract feelings of “otherness”. Over the years, studies have highlighted the importance of institutional context (Foley, Faas and Darmody, 2023; Riley 2022; Faas, Smith and Darmody, 2018). Therefore, this study will explore whether the different types of primary schools in Ireland hinder or facilitate an individual's sense of belonging within the school community.

Ireland: A Changing Educational Landscape

Similar to many European countries, the demographic profile of Ireland has transformed significantly in the past 30 years. Recent statistics suggest that, at present, 12% of the population come from non-native Irish backgrounds as a result of large-scale inward migration (CSO, 2021). Consequently, the religious make-up of the country has also transformed. Traditionally a Catholic country, Ireland has seen a rapid increase in those who identify with minority religions, such as Islam and Hinduism (CSO, 2022). However, concurrent to this increase, an increase can also be observed in those who identify with no religion. Indeed, in the past 13 years, the number of people who report having no religion has risen by 187% (CSO, 2022). Considering such changes, primary schools have become important platforms for “preparing students for the practical task of engagement with the rich variety of religious encounters in everyday life” (Dinham and Shaw, 2015, p.3). As such, the development of cultural and religious literacy during the formative primary school years to ensure students are prepared to interact with an increasingly pluralistic society has become a key part of public and policy discourses.

Efforts to respond to diversity and develop cultural and religious literacy are evident in the developing guidelines that inform policy and practice within the Irish educational system. At the primary school level, new school types have been introduced to cater for parental

demand for greater diversity of choice. Although the Irish primary school landscape has remained largely denominational in nature (95%), there has been a gradual increase in the number of multi-denominational primary schools. With the establishment of equality-based schools, such as ET schools in the late 1970s, and the development of multi-denominational CNS in the late 2000s, the educational landscape in Ireland now offers much more choice to parents. However, due to their low numbers and geographical position, many of these schools are oversubscribed. Catholic schools, privately owned but publicly funded, remain, more often than not, most families' local schools. The Intercultural Education Strategy (IES), published in 2010, recommended that all primary schools in Ireland “respect the diversity of values, beliefs, languages and traditions in Irish society” (Government of Ireland, 1998). Studies have found, however, that there is often a gap between policy and practice, with critics pointing to a need for greater cultural heterogeneity with regards to schoolteachers and leaders and CPD to ensure teachers are prepared to respond to the diversity of cultures present within the classroom (Brown et al., 2022).

In light of recent demographic changes, this study provides a timely analysis of how students negotiate belonging within the primary school educational sector, and whether there are differences between denominational and multi-denominational schools in how they are responsive to cultural diversity and developing in their students the capabilities to interact with different cultural contexts. This study builds on previous research that explored children’s agency in the multi-belief settings of CNS (Faas, Smith and Darmody, 2018d). Existing research has noted that, in order to analyse wider social processes, a comparative case study approach is required to see how the ethos of different schools interact with agency and understanding (Faas, Smith and Darmody, 2018d). Consequently, this study will draw on the 4 major primary school types in Ireland, with each school sampled in both rural and urban areas, to understand how children’s agency is empowered in Irish primary schools, particularly in terms of developing tools to interact with cultural and religious diversity.

Therefore, this article explores the following questions: 1) How are students from diverse backgrounds negotiating belonging within the Irish educational system? 2) How are students drawing on their agency to develop a sense of belonging and counteracting feelings of “otherness”? 3) How are Irish primary schools helping young people develop the tools to interact with cultural and religious diversity? To situate the discussion, this

paper will start by outlining the theoretical framework. The next section outlines the methodological approach, followed by the findings and discussion sections. The final section summarises the key findings and discusses policy implications.

Theoretical Framework

The conceptual ambiguity attached to the concept of school belonging has made it difficult to measure. In one sense, school belonging is a “multidimensional concept, encompassing psychological, behavioural, and community perspectives” (Alink et al., 2023, p.9). However, at its heart, it is a sense of being “somewhere you can be confident that you will fit in, a feeling of being safe in your identity and at home in a place” (Riley 2022, p.1). Previous research has analysed belonging in terms of special needs (Prince and Hadwin, 2011), sexual orientation (Hatchel, Merrin and Espelage, 2016), ethnicity (Graham, Kogachi and Morales-Chicas, 2022), amongst others. Nevertheless, regardless of how one conceptualises school belonging, it is important to reflect on the political dimension of belonging (Kuttner, 2023). Here, one may question “what exactly do students belong to?”. For example, in a highly denominational educational landscape, to belong, to some extent, requires operating under the assumption that an individual from a minority background is expected to assimilate to the social norms, values, and customs of the majority population - White, Irish Catholics.

Drawing on Bourdieusian theory, we begin to understand how students who sit outside the hegemonic culture may be at a disadvantage in schools. The analogy of the “fish in water”, deployed by Bourdieu to illustrate how certain groups gain advantage in a specific setting, is particularly helpful in this regard (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 127). This demonstrates the manner in which an individual’s personal habitus interacts with the class, as students who know the “rules of the game” gain ascendancy, while other pupils, often from migrant backgrounds, feel like a fish out of water (Darmody, 2011). Therefore, growing attention has been placed on understanding institutional habitus, which was first coined by Reay (1998). Institutional habitus posits that the particular institutions a child attends can have a profound impact on that child’s habitus, choices, and practices. Therefore, it can be argued that teachers possess symbolic power at schools and are thus in a position to reward those pupils who align themselves with the institutional habitus of the school (Darmody, 2011).

As a result, students may experience a disconnect between the habitus they develop in their family setting and the institutional habitus encountered in their formal schooling. Considering recent social changes experienced in Ireland, the concept of habitus takes on particular importance as the majority of schools have an ethos espoused by the dominant group, Catholics. Therefore, school leaders have a critical role in ensuring that school environments are open and inclusive in order that all pupils feel a sense of belonging. However, research suggests that the normative assumption attached to discourses around belonging can be challenged (Kuttner, 2023). Indeed, dominant discourses regarding belonging treat the concept as something that is given to the student, rather than something the student can build (Kuttner, 2023). Here, the assumption is that the burden of responsibility regarding cultivating belonging rests upon the school and its staff. Although there is validity in this position, the role of agency in counteracting feelings of “otherness” merits further exploration.

Despite the prevalence of agency in educational discourses, the construct remains contentious (see Faas, Smith and Darmody, 2018d). Indeed, over the past three decades, agency has been subject to ongoing epistemological and ontological debates. Central to these debates are the conceptions of childhood, as well as the values operating in contemporary Western societies and how they act upon such conceptions. Historically, assumptions around the nature of childhood have been predominantly conceptualised as a period of transition. This is best captured by Prout and James (1997). Indeed, historical approaches to understanding childhood are rooted in assumptions that a child's merit lies in what they will become, and meaningful contributions only arise when the child becomes an adult (Prout and James 1997). Under such assumptions, children lack ontology (Wyness, 2019). Wyness (2019) argues that the lack of ontology stems primarily from a lack of willingness on the part of social scientists to perceive children as a meaningful unit of study and something that “is”, rather than something that “will be”.

This school of thought is grounded in a structuralist perspective. Under this framework, children are situated within institutions - such as schools - at the bottom of the hierarchy of decision-making and are seen as passive recipients of structural forces (McCormack, O’Flaherty and Liddy, 2019; Wyness, 2019; Ansell, 2005). Through the curriculum, children adopt norms, beliefs, and values regarding their broader social standing (Wyness, 2019). However, particularly with regards to children’s capacities for agency, the structural

perspective is at odds with contemporary conceptions of childhood which suggest that children are co-creators of knowledge and reality and play an active role in negotiating and renegotiating meaning (Kumpulainen et al., 2013). Considering this, post-structuralism arrives at fewer assumptions regarding the position children have within certain institutions (Wyness, 2019). From this perspective, agency is operationalised as an open-ended process which is in a constant flux (Calman and Lundegard, 2013). Furthermore, it is particularly in terms of religion that we can observe a structuralist perspective on childhood. Children are often overlooked as possessing agency and therefore must adopt the positions and belief systems of their parents (Kitching, 2020). However, drawing on childhood studies - in particular in relation to belief and faith formation - children exercise agency, negotiate meaning, and draw on several internal and external sources to reconfigure meaning (Faas, Smith and Darmody, 2018d; Kitching and Shanneik, 2015).

Of course, the understanding that students possess agency, does not foreclose investigations into power and the systemic barriers that obstruct an individual from developing a sense of belonging (Kuttner, 2023). Indeed, an exploration concerning the role of agency in school belonging would not be complete without analysing the concept of bounded agency. Bounded agency suggests that despite the individual having the capacity to demonstrate agency “they are also bounded by the structures and contexts and by the features of the self that constrains choice” (Reubenson and Desjardins, 2009, p.192). Drawing on this definition, not only is an individual’s agency bounded by the structures in which they operate but also may impact their perception of their “opportunity structure” (Reubenson and Desjardins, 2009, p.192). Therefore, it is helpful to draw on Ahnallan, Suyemoto and Carter’s (2006) conception of power and choice dynamics. Ahnallan, Suyemoto and Carter (2006) posit that there is a dynamic interaction between power structures that prevent belonging and the individual’s choice to demonstrate agency to overcome feelings of “otherness”. As such, this study will explore how institutional context (denominational/multi-denominational) may impact an individual student's sense of belonging and how students draw on their agency to overcome these feelings of “otherness”.

Methodology

This study adopted a multi-method, comparative case study design. For the purpose of this project, 8 primary schools were sampled. These included Catholic, COI, CNS and ET primary schools. Each school type was sampled in both an urban and rural location in Ireland to analyse the differences and similarities in ethos within different locations. Gaelscoileanna were excluded from the sample due to their variability in religious ethos and smaller religious ethos schools were also excluded due to their size.

This study drew on data from a larger research project that sampled students, teachers, school principals and parents. However, for the purpose of this project, the data from students and teachers was utilised. Overall, 60 students were sampled using focus groups and 15 teachers were sampled using semi-structured interviews. For the focus groups, where possible, efforts were made to have two focus groups in each school. The first group consisted of 5 students from an ethnic Irish, catholic background and the second group consisted of 5 students from diverse religious and cultural backgrounds. This, however, was not possible in all schools due to several factors, such as class size, time pressures and not having enough pupils that met the criteria. This was particularly true of rural denominational schools. The questions in each focus group focused on areas such as how schools are responding to cultural and religious diversity, how schools enhance the voice of students and how intercultural friendships are nurtured.

Concurrent to the focus groups, semi-structured interviews were conducted with teachers. Two teachers were interviewed from each school, one teacher from 5th class and one other teacher from the school. 5th class teachers were selected as it was felt that due to the age of the students they are teaching (10-11 years old) they would have experience of having discussions regarding cultural and religious diversity. The second teacher was selected to triangulate the findings. Each interview explored questions, such as, how are students learning about the different cultures and religions in Ireland, how are teachers responding to diversity, and how are teachers creating environments in which children's agency is being empowered. Once all the data was collected, it was analysed under Braun and Clarke's Thematic Analysis (TA) framework (2006). Under this framework, the data went through a process of familiarisation, coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining, and naming themes and then finally writing up the findings. All interviews were

conducted according to ethical principles of voluntary informed consent, participants' rights to opt out of the process at any stage, and the complete anonymisation of all traceable information.

Findings and Discussion

Negotiating School Belonging in a Changing Educational Landscape

The purpose of this study is to explore how students negotiate belonging within the primary educational landscape in Ireland, and to investigate how students draw on their agency to counteract a sense of “otherness” within the school community. As anticipated, this study found strong evidence to suggest that primary school students in Ireland, particularly those whose personal beliefs may not align with the ethos of the school, are faced with the daily challenge of negotiating their place and sense of belonging. This comes as little surprise considering the highly denominational nature of the educational landscape. This, however, is not a critique of the place of denominational schools within the Irish educational landscape. Indeed, the findings suggest that culturally responsive practices are taking place in denominational schools. But rather, this study provides an investigation into how students are impacted by an educational system that, to some extent, preferences a particular religion, and how a culturally and religiously diverse student body interacts with such a system. Operating under a post-structuralist assumption that children are active agents in the construction of meaning, rather than passive recipients of structural forces, we found that students participating in this study were engaged in an active process of exercising their agency and negotiating their place within the ethos of the school. This can be clearly seen from an interview with a teacher from an urban Catholic school:

Yes, I sometimes find, like say if it was about...Religious Education in secondary schools they learn about other religions, whereas in primary schools it's just the Catholic ethos and Catholic teachings. Sometimes I find if something does come up about another religion and I would be very much like 'this is really very interesting'. But I do, I find that I shouldn't, you know it has to come from the Catholic perspective. So, I am always conscious that 'this is our curriculum'... Last year was my first-year teaching RSE. So, the relationship and sexual education. And I did find that I know that there are children in the class that don't identify as being heterosexual and it's very much coming from that point of view. So...I felt like this is like a script that I am reading here.

...And like questions that they like you know, a child was like, ‘what about IVF?’ And I was like ‘can I talk about IVF?’. Because you know? So, there was a kind of split-second moment, I don’t know if I can talk about this because you know because of the Catholic ethos in our school...And for the child in the class that knows I was conceived through IVF, so where do I fit into this.

The above example illustrates the clashes that may occur when a student's beliefs are situated outside of the institutional ethos of a school. Questions, such as, “What about IVF?” indicate that young people are navigating precisely how they fit into the ethos of the school. Of course, this example also highlights that teachers are also placed in a difficult position. Indeed, in Ireland, due to the prevalence of denominational, mainly Catholic primary schools, teachers, regardless of their religious beliefs, are often tasked with duties that align with the ethos of a Catholic school. Previous research, however, has found that a high percentage of teachers in Ireland would classify themselves as non-religious (Heinz, Davison and Keane, 2018). In the example above the teacher reverted to reading from a “script” when addressed with this particular question. Here, the agency of the teacher to respond to the questions of the class appeared to be bounded by the expectation of the school ethos and curriculum. Indeed, teachers in an effort to remain professional “mask their real attitudes and values” (Dineen and Lundie, 2017, p.109). Therefore, we can deduct from the above quotation that not only are students negotiating their sense of belonging within the ethos of the school, but teachers too are engaged in the complex process of negotiating how their attitudes and beliefs align with the ethos of the school.

With regards to how students exercise their agency in terms of belonging, the findings show that students are not only in a process of negotiating their own place within the ethos of the school but are concurrently in a process of negotiating the place of their peers. For one, students were acutely aware of the process of “othering” that often occurs as a result of practices in denominational schools and the implications that may occur as a consequence:

M.L: In some other schools they would be saying prayers, like every day, and the people that weren’t Christian might be left out because they wouldn’t of been able and Christian people in Christian schools get taken out for special subjects that people don’t do...Like in our school that doesn’t happen.

A.S: That's my old school before I moved here, the Catholic school. Three other people, including me, we had to do something else in the staff room. So, we have to do like a worksheet for like half an hour while they're learning songs and prayers and stuff.

Interviewer: And you don't do that here?

S.T: No, I'm Muslim.

T.W: So, I remember I was at a Catholic school, but my mom kept trying to tell them to not. But they kept taking me out and they kept trying to get me to be Christian with everyone else...my mom kept throwing away the homework and she refused to buy like the Bible and stuff, because it said that you should have like a small bible. And, my principal, she did not like that, but they kept trying to get me to pray and like, they're like Jesus watches over you. It's okay if you're a Christian, but I'm an atheist. And I don't believe. That isn't my belief. I just didn't think it was the nicest that they were trying to like get me to be.

Here, we can observe that students are negotiating their place, the place of their peers from diverse backgrounds and the process of “othering” that may result from not belonging to the dominant group. Indeed, students were not just aware of their own position, but they also were aware of the place of their peers within the classroom. When analysing this phenomenon, one may be inclined to arrive at a structuralist perspective, in which the child is placed at the bottom of the hierarchy of decision-making and must passively follow the structures outlined by adults. However, when analysing the findings, it appears more is at play. For one, children may articulate a desire to change schools as a response to the “othering” they experience and on the other hand, children may draw on their agentic capacities and make efforts to ensure that their peers do not feel excluded. To illustrate, one teacher in an urban Catholic school shared an example of how a student ensured that their peers could develop a sense of belonging within the school community:

...we have a very mixed culture within our school... I think that it's important for children to grow up with other children from other backgrounds and learn their ways, their religions, their values...Children are very accepting of each other...all nationalities have all been welcomed into the school. I've just spoke to you about a new pupil that has joined from Ukraine, they welcomed her with open arms, and they were eager to get a flag up the classroom for her and to translate. We had to make a big sign for her to welcome her into the classroom in Ukraine, one boy who was sitting at her group. He's learning how to speak Ukrainian... He hasn't a clue what he's chatting about. But they're really accepting of other nationalities. And then when it comes for other pupils to speak about, say their religion or, you know, their backgrounds in terms of say if a parent had to migrate from another country or is...possibly refugee. They're very honest about speaking about it, they never feel worried that they'll be judged by it...the children, I don't think we give them enough credit, but they are very empathetic towards each other...a lot of it stems from how teachers are with their pupils as well and how we treat each other. And they are watching me all the time so they can see how I interacted with pupils...

This example illustrates how students are adapting to the demographic changes in Ireland by drawing on their agency in order to interact with students from different backgrounds (learning the language to speak with new classmates). Studies have found that agency and place “intermingle through children acting on or towards spatial restrictions - they consciously and unconsciously create and produce (unexpected spaces)” (Nind, Köpfer and Lemmer, 2022, p7). Indeed, as a response to environments that adopt practices that may “other” children that do not align with the religious ethos of a school, students may engage in a process of creating counter spaces in which they can validate their identity (Nind, Köpfer and Lemmer, 2022). The need to create counter spaces in primary schools in Ireland may continue if the educational landscape fails to reflect the social demographics of the country.

This study also found that students draw on several internal and external sources to reconfigure meaning in order to understand the beliefs of their classmates. The below quotations highlight an interaction amongst a group of students in an urban CNS, in which they are exploring what they have learned about various religions:

Interviewer: What do you know about these different religions?

S.L: Like Christianity you believe in God and everything.

T.A: I’m half Christian and half Muslim because my family is Muslim, but my dad and his family is Christian so we usually, I’m not sure what month it is, but we go on a big fast where we don’t eat.

Interviewer: Do we know what this is called?

S.L: Isn’t it called lent?

R.B: Lent?

T.A: At the end of the day, we eat a lot... And you can’t drink water either. Or that’s going to break the fast. And we don’t eat pig or anything.

C.B: If you’re Muslim, then Jesus Christ is a prophet but in Christianity Jesus Christ is a saviour.

Interviewer: Where did you learn this? At school or at home?

T.A: We don’t learn much about religion in school.

S.L: Sometimes I talk with my friends, sometimes.

C.B: I have a question. when you’re fasting so you don’t eat or drink for a whole month. Like 40 days and 40 nights

T.A: No. For like, till day till night.

The above exchange demonstrates the agency of students in building meaning from their own ontological perspective. Indeed, critics have argued that children play an “active role in the construction and reconstruction of their social life as well as the social life of adults”

(Rajabi-Ardeshiri 2011, p.1). This is particularly evident from the above example. In essence, students are in an ongoing process of understanding different religions and belief systems by drawing on their own ontological paradigms. For example, the students here are attempting to understand Islamic beliefs through a more western, Christian lens. This can be clearly seen as the student draws on Christian paradigms, such as, lent and 40 days and 40 nights in order to understand Ramadan. This process of meaning-making from one's own ontological position, brings to mind Shillitoe and Strhan's (2020) suggestion that understanding children's perspective on the relationship between the religious, non-religious and spiritual "invites us to consider how the boundaries within which 'the religious' and 'the non-religious' or 'the secular' are often demarcated by those in positions of authority are not experienced in the same way by children, whose understandings challenged these reified differences". This example highlights the critical need to draw on students' perspectives of how to be inclusive of the different religions and cultures within the Irish context, as they may offer an alternative way of understanding integration to that of school leaders.

Developing Tools to Exercise Agency and Interact with Cultural and Religious Diversity

According to Riley (2019), agency is more than just one's ability to make a difference within the school environment, but also consists of possessing the tools and opportunities to act. Therefore, it is important to analyse the extent to which Irish primary schools are giving young people the opportunities to express their identity. In light of the recent demographic shifts in Ireland, schools have become increasingly important platforms for giving young people the tools to interact with cultural diversity. Indeed, enshrined in the Education Act (1998) is the mandate to develop educational environments that respect the diversity of beliefs and values. In multi-denominational schools, such as CNS, the students appear to be keenly aware of the ethos of the school and its commitment to treating every child equally regardless of "their race, gender, religion/belief, age, family status, civil status, membership of the Traveller community, sexual orientation, ability or socio-economic status".

G.L: the school is welcoming to...any person, like either religion or what you are, gender or anything, the school, what would you. That's why we have the LGBTQ+ flag.

R.G: ...especially when you have disabilities and stuff, they treat you fairly. Like anyone else over there. They don't like, they don't like treat you very differently. Like you have same lessons and stuff as well. So, you don't get treated extremely differently.

The above quotes demonstrate that the ethos of the school is clearly being transmitted to the student body, with students demonstrating the ability to clearly articulate what the aims and mission of the school are. Although studies have found there often is a discrepancy between ethos and practice (Faas, Smith and Darmody, 2018b), here, it is clear that the ethos of inclusivity found in CNS is being implemented and grasped, at least on the level of thought. Previous research has found that one factor that contributes to the implementation of ethos is having culturally responsive staff that can embody the ethos (Foley, Fass and Darmody, 2023). This again can be seen in schools in which the students were conscious of the ethos of the school. Indeed, the students in a rural CNS shared how a teacher regardless of their religion, was eager to learn about other religions and treat them equally:

K.C: They just treat everyone equally. It doesn't matter what religion.

S.G: ...Last year we had this teacher, and she was like, like she's Catholic, but she was really happy and excited to know about other religions.

J.A: I thought that was very interesting.

Multi-denominational primary schools in Ireland have adopted various approaches to assist their students to develop cultural literacy. One strategy is replacing the traditional RE with ethical education programmes, in which there are opportunities to learn about different religions and cultures. Although these programmes appear to enhance student awareness of different cultures and belief traditions, it can be argued that its implementation is not standardised across schools and even between classrooms. Indeed, when asked about the GMGY programme, one student from an urban CNS replied “we don't do that here”. The lack of standardisation with the implementation of the programme was further explored with a teacher from an urban CNS:

Interviewer: Do you pick and choose elements of the programme, or do you adapt it to what you think will fit your classroom?

Yeah, kind of. But you're also supposed to be making lessons that can be used by other classes or next year. So, like it's still being developed and they kind of want it to be developed by teachers. So, they want us to be making... the lessons, they kind of gave us examples and then they kind of want us to make the lessons and then kind of have a shared folder of lessons that we can only use.

Interviewer: How have you found doing that?

To be honest, not great because like you just don't have time to do a lot of. So, it's been a little bit messy in the whole approach to GMGY. It was really good, and they changed it and they decided to get rid of faith formation in the classroom and they changed again. So...as you probably heard from the children, we don't do a huge amount of it in our class. I think it's kind of more important just to let them have their time to talk and let them teach us about their religions and their faiths.

The above quotation highlights the challenges with implementing programmes that aim to enhance religious and cultural literacy in students. The national curriculum comes with many demands, and it is a challenge for teachers to cover all elements of the curriculum. Within a neoliberal educational landscape, in which subjects such as Maths and English are placed within the top of the hierarchy of subjects, subjects such as GMGY, Learn Together or, in the case of denominational schools, RE, are often given less time and not held in the same regards as the core subjects. Furthermore, the above quotation highlights the specific challenge with GMGY, in that the programme is currently under development and requires additional input from teachers. This again proves challenging as teachers are very busy and struggle to invest the necessary time to adequately prepare and deliver the subject. Therefore, although equality-based and multi-denominational schools have developed a curriculum that aims to develop tools in young people to interact with cultural and religious diversity, in practice, there may be a great deal of variability in its implementation. Not dedicating sufficient time to lessons that equip young people with the tools to engage with religious and cultural diversity may in turn prevent a young person from drawing on their agency to feel a sense of belonging.

Nevertheless, it was evident from the focus groups that students in ET and CNS are very conscious of the ethos of the school and their commitment to embracing all belief backgrounds. Even when this cannot be achieved through specific lessons, the ethos of the school may be communicated through the hidden curriculum and teachers integrating

messages that relate to the importance of cultural and religious diversity throughout the curriculum. However, in denominational schools, although students may receive less exposure to lessons that address different religions and cultures explicitly, there are examples of culturally responsive teachers and leaders ensuring that the school environment is inclusive of the diverse student body. However, from our findings, it is difficult to know exactly how the school has prepared them to interact with diversity, as children are exposed to many levels of socialisation in which they can learn about different cultures and religions. Indeed, as highlighted in a discussion with students in an urban Catholic school, information can be obtained from a variety of sources:

Interviewer: Where did you learn about all these different religions?

A.M: I learn some at school and some of them I heard off the internet.

K.E: I love learning about different cultures and religions.

N.O: We learn about it from the Irish rebellion.

P.H: I am orthodox and when I came here some of the people were Catholic, so I learned...

E.K: In school and at home.

N.G: My sister goes to secondary and sometimes I overhear her talking about it...

D.F: Internet and I am interested in it.

J.G: Internet and some people in the school.

Regardless of where such information has been obtained, the necessity to provide an education that prepares students to interact with cultural diversity is evident, as schools are key platforms for young people to develop the tools to interact with cultural and religious diversity. However, as there may not be a specific programme in denominational schools to learn about religious and cultural diversity, a lot of the responsibility appears to be placed on the shoulders of the teacher. Indeed, the absence of such a programme, places a great deal of responsibility on the teacher, and, consequently, the approach to teaching about cultural and religious diversity may not be standardised across classrooms. Nevertheless, it is important to reiterate that in the denominational schools sampled there were several examples of teachers making efforts to be inclusive of the different religions and cultures found in their classrooms.

Conclusions

Confronted with the rising population movement experienced across Europe, discourses concerning belonging and integration have accelerated. Nowhere is this more apparent than

in Ireland, where there has been major social change, partly driven by large-scale immigration in a relatively short space of time. An evident criticism that is made time and again against the Irish primary educational system, is its failure to match the demographic profile of the country. Indeed, with the rise of secularism and concurrent growth of minority faiths, many students attend schools that do not align with their religious beliefs. This has yielded a constellation of challenges, namely, a growing sense of “otherness” from not belonging to the hegemonic culture. Consequently, this study provides a timely exploration regarding how students can exercise their agency to counteract feelings of “otherness”.

From the findings, it is evident that students are engaged in a continuous process of negotiating how they belong within the school they attend. However, students are not only attempting to navigate their own sense of belonging but also that of their peers. The findings suggest that students demonstrate agency in responding to the diversity within the classroom and make efforts to create a more culturally responsive environment for their classmates. However, the responsiveness and example the teacher sets provide a platform for students to emulate. It was also found that teachers, too, are confronted with questions regarding their belonging, as it can be argued that the Irish educational landscape, although diversifying, has not quite kept pace with the changes occurring in Irish society. However, the extent to which teachers can exercise their agency to be responsive to the diverse needs within the classroom may be bounded by the ethos of the school.

Consequently, this study echoes previous research by suggesting context does matter. Considering Riley’s (2019) assertion that agency goes beyond the individual’s action, but rather is the extent to which they have been given the tools to act, we begin to see the importance of institutional context. Therefore, this study draws attention to how the different primary school types in Ireland are providing students with the tools to exercise their agency. Although CNS and ET primary schools, as part of their ethos, provide opportunities to develop these tools, the degree to which they are developed may be moderated by the extent to which teachers feel capable to implement the full curriculum. Indeed, despite having a highly qualified teaching body, structural factors, such as curriculum overload, insufficient training, and the culturally homogenous teaching body, may impede, to some extent, the opportunities for teachers to assist young people to develop the tools to exercise their agency and, therefore, develop a greater sense of belonging in the school. Nevertheless, it was evident that the ethos of the schools was being

translated and grasped by the student body. In the case of denominational schools, this study found that a great deal of responsibility rests upon the teacher to develop the tools in their students that will assist them in interacting with religious and cultural diversity. Here, the lack of standardisation may result in inconsistencies with regards to the extent an individual student will develop their cultural and religious literacy, as teachers in denominational schools encounter many of the same structural challenges teachers in multi-denominational schools encounter.

In light of these findings, this study proposes a number of policy recommendations. While the primary school educational landscape has become more diverse, in terms of opening new types of primary schools to respond to parental demand, the number of these schools remain small and are not available in all geographic areas. To ensure students can avoid feelings of “otherness”, particularly in relation to how religion is treated in denominational schools, more multi-denominational schools are required. Of course, the divestment of Catholic schools and the opening of more multidenominational schools is complex due to Ireland’s historical context. For one, surveys indicate that many parents still favour a Catholic education (this may be for religious but also cultural reasons). Therefore, although the Irish government have outlined plans to increase the number of multidenominational schools, this is by no means an overnight change. Therefore, the second policy recommendation relates to adjustments that can be made to influence the cultural responsiveness of denominational schools. For one, like previous studies, this study recommends mandatory modules concerning teaching in a culturally and religiously diverse classroom in ITE. Currently, there are optional modules trainee teachers can take, however more training is required as teachers are encountering increasingly diverse classrooms. Furthermore, it is important for young people to learn about the different cultural and religious backgrounds of people living in Ireland during their formative years. Indeed, unless students are culturally and religiously literate, they may encounter challenges interacting with a pluralistic society when they graduate from their schools. Therefore, in the case of denominational schools, this study recommends developing an explicit programme that informs students about different cultures and religions. This would remove the inconsistency across classrooms in cultural and religious learning as it is not dependent on the teachers.

While this study focuses on Ireland, the findings are of potential interest to many countries across Europe experiencing social transformation, as they highlight how primary schools can assist students from diverse cultural and religious backgrounds to exercise their agency and overcome feelings of “otherness”.

6: Conclusions

This dissertation set out to explore the responses of the Irish primary school sector to demographic changes that have taken place in Ireland in recent decades. It examines whether the various theoretical frameworks clarify processes that are taking place across the different types of primary schools. This section will highlight the key findings from the research.

The first finding relates to the challenges of maintaining the institutional ethos of a school in light of demographic changes in Ireland. Here, this study reinforces Donnelly's (2002) assertion that the ethos of a school is shaped by both the formal expression of the objectives of a school, but also the interactions that occur within the school setting. Indeed, this research found that there are key social processes and school wide factors that influence the implementation of ethos. In particular, the positionality of the teacher was found to be an important factor in ensuring the ethos is implemented with fidelity and in alignment with the school's stated objectives. However, clarity achieved through training (CPD and ITE), support and leadership also influence the preservation of ethos. Therefore, to ensure the ethos of the school is preserved and the classroom is responsive to cultural and religious diversity, teachers must actively support and subscribe to the ethos of the school and receive a sufficient level of training to have the skills and confidence to manage issues related to diversity.

The second major finding concerns the challenges associated with implementing practices related to creating culturally responsive classrooms in Irish primary schools. We found that schools participating in the study encountered several challenges when implementing elements of the Intercultural Education Strategy (2010-2015). In Catholic schools, it was challenging for teachers to be fully inclusive of the religious diversity within their classrooms, as teachers have a dual responsibility of implementing a curriculum that gives precedence to a particular religion, while at the same time, being responsive to culturally and religiously diverse classrooms. Therefore, clear structural limitations were found. While multi-denominational and equality-based primary schools did not have the same

limitations as Catholic schools, they also had challenges related to implementing programmes designed to enhance religious and cultural literacy in students. Teachers highlighted numerous barriers that prevented them from implementing programmes, such as, GMGY and Learn Together. These included time constraints, curriculum demands, and feeling as if they lack sufficient knowledge and training to teach the students about various world religions.

The third finding relates to factors that influence parental school choice. This research found evidence to suggest that the complex interplay between religious and secular thought that characterises many European countries, including Ireland, could be observed in the decision-making process of parents. Consequently, clarity regarding the diverse educational expectations of parents is required to understand the preferences of parents in Ireland. In one sense, the current provision to increase the number of CNS and ET primary schools by 2030 may meet certain needs within Irish society, however, it is not without its limitations. Indeed, the approach to religion adopted by CNS and ET primary schools may not meet the expectations and preferences of parents from diverse backgrounds, particularly families representing minority religions.

Fourth, students are in a continuous process of negotiating their belonging within the school environment. However, students are not only attempting to navigate their own sense of belonging but also that of their peers. The findings suggest that students demonstrate agency in responding to the diversity within the classroom. They make efforts to create a more culturally responsive environment for their classmates by highlighting how certain practices may “other” children from non-Catholic backgrounds, welcoming new students to the classroom and by taking an interest in a student’s cultural and religious background. However, the example the teacher sets provides a platform for students to emulate.

Fifth, the voices of parents and students are key to improving the cultural responsiveness of the Irish educational landscape. However, this research identified numerous barriers to drawing on the voices of such actors. The data collected highlighted that the culturally homogenous teaching body encounter challenges connecting with parents from different cultural and religious backgrounds. Therefore, assumptions may arise regarding the parent’s involvement in school life and educational expectation for their children. To bridge this gap, this study highlights the need to diversify the teaching body of Ireland and develop

key skills and attitudes in CPD courses that can assist teachers with interacting with diverse groups of parents.

Assessment of Findings

In light of these findings, it is important to explore how they fit within a wider context. As highlighted above, the findings offer a timely analysis of the factors that influence the inclusion of students from diverse backgrounds across the major denominational, equality-based and multi-denominational primary school types in Ireland. For one, the methodological approach adopted in this research offers a valuable and unique insight into the challenges of the educational system in Ireland. By adopting a comparative case study design, the research was able to provide rich, in-depth information into how ethos is implemented, how schools prepare students to interact with a pluralistic society, and what are the barriers to implementing an ethos that aims to be inclusive of cultural and religious diversity. Previous studies, analysing similar questions in CNS, highlighted the need for a comparative approach across different school types. With such an approach, one is positioned to consider wider social processes and how the ethos of different schools develops agency, cultural understanding and religious knowledge (Faas, Smith and Darmody, 2018d). Therefore, adopting this research method unlocked possibilities to address certain lacunae in the field.

The findings from this research highlight the changes that are required at macro and meso level. In short, macro level factors include, but are not limited to, movement towards a more culturally diverse teaching body, improving the CPD and ITE training with regards to multicultural education and accelerating efforts to develop more equality-based and multi-denominational schools. At the same time, meso level changes are required to ensure students from diverse backgrounds develop a sense of belonging. These include a stronger emphasis on delivering ethical education programmes, culturally responsive leadership, and a strong collaboration between the school and parents.

In terms of how schools are responding to change, this research explored this phenomenon through a CRP framework. Here, the findings were in line with wider research that suggests that despite the best efforts of teachers, there is a need for greater CPD and adjustments in

ITE to ensure teachers are prepared to deliver culturally responsive practices. The findings of this study also align itself with Ladson-Billings (2019) assertion that reductive interpretations of CRP, not grounded in theory, hampers the progress of its full evolution. Therefore, this research highlights the importance of moving away from a tick-box approach to culturally responsive practice and towards the improvement of ITE programmes to ensure teachers are well-prepared, culturally and religiously literate, and can demonstrate attitudes and qualities that ensure the integration of all students. Therefore, this research builds on previous studies that highlight the need for greater representation of cultures and religions within the Irish teaching body and the need for more emphasis on culturally responsive teaching in ITE and CPD.

Furthermore, this research is in line with the conclusion of contemporary sociologists that offer new insights regarding the relationship between modernity and religion. In particular, this study aligns itself with the move away from narratives of secularisation towards the development of two pluralisms as outlined by Berger (2014). Although critics, in recent years, have questioned the role of religion in education in liberal democracies, this research recognises the value of religion within the curriculum. For one, it responds to the wishes of parents that view religion as an invaluable feature in the education of their children as it enables them to develop spiritual and moral values, and two, it develops understanding, tolerance and empathy towards individuals and communities practicing different religions. This is essential as many students will interact with pluralistic societies when they leave school and enter the workforce. Therefore, it is essential that young people develop these necessary tools in their formative years.

With regard to the preservation of ethos, the research also aligns itself with the theoretical position adopted by Donnelly (2002). Donnelly (2002) states that ethos is both a formal expression of the objectives of a school, but also can emerge as a result of interactions between key actors within the school. This research suggests that wider societal forces and school level factors influence the day-to-day ethos of the school. This has important implications for the educational landscape in Ireland, and in particular, Catholic primary schools. In recent years public discourses have explored the place of denominational schooling in liberal democracies. However, this research found a certain level of fluidity in the ethos of denominational schools, where the ethos is influenced by key actors within the school. So, although Catholic primary schools, by definition, privilege students of a

Catholic background in the day-to-day practices, teachers within the school can be inclusive to the diversity of needs – dependent on their own positionality, the cultural and religious make-up of the class and the example set by the school principal. However, it should be acknowledged that the ethos is finite in its degree of inclusivity as it is bound by structural factors that will, of course, privilege Catholicism. Nevertheless, these findings highlight the nuance of discourses surrounding the place of religion in education and how Catholic schools in Ireland are responding to diversity.

This research diverges from the school of thought that the most effective response to religious diversity is adopting a learn-about approach to religion. Here, we do not question the efficacy of the learn-about religion approach, rather we question the extent to which the learn-about religion approach responds to the expectations of parents from various religious backgrounds. This approach is useful in terms of building students' understanding of the different religions that operate in a pluralistic society. However, for some parents from minority religion backgrounds, the learn-about approach to RE may be viewed as a somewhat limited way of teaching RE. Therefore, although the ethos of inclusivity that is found in multi-denominational schools is, without doubt, having a positive influence on the educational system in Ireland, particularly in terms of preparing students to interact with diversity, it is not without its limitations.

This study also raises questions regarding the extent to which the Irish educational system is responding effectively to cultural and religious diversity. Here it can be argued that, making minor adjustments to a curriculum to accommodate diversity, is in itself, a tokenistic approach to responding to the needs. As such, this research raises important questions regarding power and who is making decisions regarding changes. This thesis, therefore, echoes Khalifa's (2018) call for greater community epistemology in school change. Indeed, there is an urgent need for the voices of parents and students from minority religious and cultural backgrounds to inform policy and practice. Although policies and practices concerning capturing parent voices are present in the Irish educational system, challenges persist regarding how to engage parents from diverse backgrounds. In the absence of input from families from religiously and culturally diverse backgrounds, the solutions to managing diversity are based on the dominant group assumption of what is required. Therefore, this research challenges the assumptions underpinning the recent

changes to the educational system and calls for greater community input in order to manage diversity.

Contributions of Study

Empirically, this dissertation contributes to discourses concerning the integration and inclusion of students from diverse religious and cultural backgrounds. The importance of understanding how students can develop a sense of belonging within the Irish primary school system cannot be underestimated. Indeed, as Riley warns “if children don’t belong in schools, they don’t belong anywhere” (Riley, 2017, p.90). Therefore, as the religious and cultural make-up of Ireland has changed dramatically over the past three decades, questions regarding how students from culturally and religiously diverse backgrounds find their place within the Irish primary school sector have accelerated in recent years.

Despite the prevalence of such discourses, comparative research on the inclusion of students from diverse religious and cultural backgrounds, and what factors act as barriers or facilitators to integration across the different school types has remained sparse. This research offers valuable, in-depth insight into the experiences of parents, teachers, students and school principals from the major denominational, multi-denominational and equality-based primary schools in Ireland. The comparative case study design offered distinct and significant insights into the commonalities and differences across the different school types with regards to their approach to managing diversity and preparing students to interact with a pluralistic society. Furthermore, by comparing rural and urban primary schools, this study sheds further light on how geographical factors may influence practices pertaining to managing diversity.

One of the most important empirical contributions of this research is highlighting with clarity the barriers that impede the Irish primary school sector from fully embracing diversity. Here, the research outlined the factors that “other” students and the different challenges schools experienced with regards to integration. For one, this study highlights the importance of spending sufficient time throughout the school week on programmes that aim to develop cultural and religious literacy in students. In CNS and ET, although such programmes exist, in the forms of GMGY and Learn Together, their implementation is

influenced by a range of factors. Indeed, the gap between ethos and practice was observed, particularly when teachers felt they lacked time or training to implement the different elements of these programmes. Therefore, we conclude that the quality of implementation is contingent on time, training, and clarity regarding how to implement the programmes and familiarity with the various religions and cultures that such programmes engage with.

Another empirical contribution is the critique of how primary schools are developing cultural and religious literacy in students. On the one hand, this research found evidence that teachers are engaging with culturally responsive practices across denominational, multi-denominational and equality-based primary schools. This comes as little surprise as the teaching body in Ireland are highly qualified. However, this research also found evidence of barriers that prevent schools from enhancing students' cultural and religious literacy. In denominational primary schools, religions outside Catholicism may be covered to some extent in subjects outside of RE, however, there is no explicit programme within the curriculum that focuses on learning about different religions and cultures. Therefore, it is often the responsibility of the teacher to integrate these elements into the curriculum. Here, we found teachers often taught more about different religions and cultures when those cultures and religions were represented in the classroom. However, in classrooms that are less religious and culturally diverse, the teacher may be less inclined to do so. This is particularly problematic in rural denominational schools, in which the classrooms are generally less culturally and religiously diverse. Therefore, this research highlights the need for programmes in denominational schools that teach directly about different religions and cultures.

This dissertation also contributes to discourses concerning the make-up of the teaching body in Irish education. This study found that teachers from a Catholic background, often feel less comfortable teaching about various religions, as they may not possess sufficient knowledge of religions outside Catholicism. Consequently, this research highlights key challenges that emerge from having a largely culturally homogenous teaching body. For one, teachers may not have the sufficient knowledge to teach effectively about the various world religions. Furthermore, this study also found that teachers from an Irish background may encounter barriers in developing relationships with parents from diverse cultural and religious backgrounds. This, consequently, impacts the extent to which they feel like they can collaborate with such parents. Finally, this research highlights the tension that can

emerge between the values a child learns at home and the values they learn at school, as teachers are sometimes unaware of the nuances of different cultural and religious beliefs. Consequently, there may be some inadvertent “othering” that takes place. As such, this research echoes studies that call for policymakers to identify steps that enable individuals from culturally and religiously diverse backgrounds to find a clear pathway to enter the profession and for the ITC to remove the obstacles that prevent teachers from migrant backgrounds from entering the profession.

In terms of theory, this research advances discourses concerning the conceptualisation of agency and how it manifests itself in culturally and religiously diverse classrooms. This research aligns itself with a post-structuralist theoretical paradigm, in which students are active agents in the making of meaning and not just passive recipients of structural forces. However, time and again, studies have reported that efforts to provide a platform to raise the voices of students can be tokenistic in nature (Darmody, 2011). Therefore, this study highlights factors that allow students to demonstrate their agency, particularly in terms of negotiating belonging in schools. Here, the research makes a significant contribution to the field as it found that students are not only engaged in a process of negotiating their own belonging but also actively drawing on their agency to accommodate other students within the classroom. Therefore, this study highlights the importance of drawing meaningfully on the voices and capacities of students to manage diversity.

Another key theoretical contribution of this study is its engagement with debates concerning the role of religion in schools. From the data collected, it was clear that, although several parents were complimentary of the ethos of CNS, some parents felt the approach to religion was limited. In such situations, parents from minority religious backgrounds may find more commonalities with denominational primary schools. Therefore, when considering how to approach religion in schools, it is necessary to arrive at conceptual clarity regarding what is the value of religion and why it is an important element of school life. This research engages in these debates and calls for a reassessment of approaches that aim to be inclusive of religious diversity. These findings have implications for policymakers concerned with engaging students from diverse religious backgrounds.

Finally, in terms of how this study contributes to the field of education, it is important to note that Ireland stands at a key moment in its history. As a country once defined by emigration, Ireland has experienced large-scale inward migration in recent decades. As such, there are many opportunities and challenges that now face Ireland. A surge in anti-immigration sentiments, alongside rising levels of racism have challenged public and policy discourses in recent years. It is evident that schools provide an important platform for addressing these concerns. As such, schools must be aware of the key role they play in society and move beyond an education that values subjects that emphasise economic skills above all, towards an education that prepares students to interact with diversity and contribute to social cohesion. Therefore, schools must learn how to ensure their students are developing the tools to interact with an increasingly diverse society. Herein lies the merit of these findings. This research offers a valuable contribution to discourses concerning how Irish primary schools can effectively respond to diversity and prepare students to interact with a pluralistic society.

Policy Implications

In light of these contributions, this dissertation provides several policy recommendations. For one, it highlights the importance of moving towards the goal of having 400 multi-denominational and equality-based primary schools in Ireland by 2030. At present, there has been a somewhat laboured response to this goal, and therefore, multi-denominational schools are limited in numbers, over-subscribed and not available in all geographical areas. Thus, parents are still left with limited choice, despite the diverse range of primary schools in Ireland. Another recommendation pertains to the need for students to learn about diverse religions and cultures within Catholic primary schools. As a high percentage of primary schools remain Catholic in Ireland, it appears an adjustment is required so that these schools can be more inclusive of students from religious minority backgrounds. Therefore, we recommend that Catholic primary schools maintain their Catholic RE curriculum, however, concurrent to the delivery of the RE programme, an additional element to the curriculum is added, that teaches students about the various religions and cultures represented in Ireland. This, to some extent, would remove the onus on the teacher to integrate information about different cultures and religions and would ensure that all students develop a clear understanding of the various world religions and cultures.

In relation to the teaching body in Ireland, this study echoes previous studies that call for a more diverse teaching body. This research found evidence of teachers avoiding subjects when they lacked clarity regarding how to teach the subject. Therefore, greater attention must be given to programmes in ITE if teachers are to build cultural and religious literacy in their students. Indeed, this study highlights the need for clear pathways for individuals from diverse backgrounds to enter the teaching profession and echoes recent calls for a change in the accreditation from the ITC that unfairly disadvantages teachers from migrant backgrounds. This study also highlights the importance of having mandatory modules in ITE that will help to prepare teachers to teach in culturally and religiously diverse classrooms. Currently, there are optional modules trainee teachers can take, however, more training is required as teachers are encountering increasingly diverse classrooms.

Furthermore, the findings from this research have already influenced discourses regarding creating culturally responsive classrooms. Indeed, in a recent systematic review on the status of culturally relevant teacher education, Koukoulidis, Kotluk and Brown (2024) cited a paper from this study and reinforced some of the major findings of this research. In particular, the systematic review highlights the finding that despite the best efforts of teachers, there is a need for greater CPD and ITE training in order that teachers are prepared to teach in culturally diverse classrooms. These findings and recommendations are highly significant in relation to discourses concerning how culturally and religiously responsive Irish primary schools are.

Limitations of the Study

There were several key limitations with this project that are important to highlight. The first limitation pertains to the scope of the study. As data collection was undertaken during the Covid-19 pandemic, there were numerous challenges with regards to access to schools. This was a period when primary schools were under a great deal of pressure due to the restrictions and high levels of staff absences. As a result, many schools were unable to participate in the project and even when a school agreed, there were sometimes limitations with regards to who could participate. Although the involvement of 97 individuals was a success and provided sufficient data for answering the research questions, the original proposal was to sample 120 individuals.

Another challenge with the data collection was accessing schools with the pre-defined criteria. Each school type was sampled in both an urban and rural location. However, as the aim of the study was to understand how a school's ethos is influenced by demographic and community characteristics, efforts were made to sample all four school types in relative proximity to each other. However, due to challenges with access, it was difficult to meet this condition. So, again, compromises had to be made and schools that were as close as possible to one another were selected. However, it was felt that this did not interfere with the results and the schools sampled still provided rich data to answer the research questions.

Another shortcoming of this research is that the study did not engage with any stakeholders outside the school, other than parents. To develop a clearer understanding of the community factors that influence the ethos of a school, drawing on stakeholders outside the school would have contextualised the data collected within the school. It would have been interesting to collect data from external stakeholders, such as, faith representatives, boards of management, community leaders and so on, to see how they interact with and mediate the process within the school. However, this was beyond the scope of the research and the primary focus of this study was mainly on internal stakeholders.

Another key limitation was how the sample was selected. In many cases, students, parents and teachers were selected by the school principal. Here, there may have been selection bias, with the principal identifying individuals who would have a more favourable impression of the school. Of course, outlining the criteria for selection may have helped to mitigate against this, particularly with the student and teacher sample. Furthermore, parents who were not fluent in English may have been reluctant to participate in the study, despite having a particularly interesting perspective on the challenges schools encounter managing diversity. However, by sampling many actors within the school environment and developing a carefully designed interview schedule, this allowed the researchers to paint an accurate picture of the school.

The final limitation relates to the generalisability of the findings. As this research adopted a comparative case study approach, there are limits to the extent to which the findings can be generalised. Furthermore, due to the research design, it was difficult to arrive at conclusions as regards to why certain behaviours were exhibited. For example, although

we observed that students in a Catholic school demonstrated a high level of religious literacy, we were unable to make a conclusive statement that Catholic schools develop in students an eagerness to learn about different religions, as the research design did not allow for such conclusions. Rather, the comparative case study approach was able to capture rich, in-depth information and highlighted pertinent themes across the topics investigated. This would not be possible by means of large-scale survey.

Directions for Future Research

In terms of future directions of this research, there is scope to build on these findings. One direction for these findings would be to involve more parents from religiously diverse backgrounds to understand their expectations regarding approaches to religion in Irish primary schools. Although the findings that emerged from this study provides rich insight into the concerns of parents from religiously diverse backgrounds, there is further scope to analyse this. Particularly as the Irish Government's main response to the growing religious and cultural diversity at the primary school level is the development of more multidenominational and equality-based primary schools, such as CNS and ET, it would be helpful to analyse what elements of this approach are inconsistent with the frameworks for education held by diverse groups of parents. Indeed, in the absence of such data, approaches to religion will be based predominately on assumptions from a majority ethnic Irish perspective, rather than families from different religious backgrounds.

Although a strength of this study was hearing the voices of several key actors within the school environment, such as teachers, students, parents and principals, future research would benefit from hearing the perspectives of policymakers. Indeed, there is a great deal of scope to continue analysing why the discrepancy between policy and practice remains across the Irish educational landscape. Therefore, drawing on the insights and perspectives of key policymakers would shed light on this phenomenon. Furthermore, it would be helpful to draw on the voices of school principals too. For this research, school principals were drawn upon to find out baseline information about each school to contextualise the data. Although this was helpful, in future studies it may be beneficial to conduct semi-structured interviews with school principals too.

There is also further scope for research regarding the role of religion in Irish primary schools. This highly contested subject is at the heart of key educational debates in Ireland. Indeed, arriving at conceptual clarity regarding how religion is understood and practised in modern, liberal democracies is highly important. Ireland, with its complex religious history, would benefit greatly from research that will help shed light on key epistemic debates on the role of religion in education, religious freedom and how religion is practised within educational settings. Furthermore, a major theme that emerged from the data was the necessity to draw on the voices of parents, particularly in terms of understanding cultural expectations for raising children. As the curricula deployed in Irish schools are based on Irish values, tensions may emerge between the values a child learns at home and at school. Therefore, future research exploring this tension, often felt by parents from various cultural and religious backgrounds and their experience of how religion is taught in schools, would be of great social utility.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A School Principal Survey

Principals Survey: Multi-Ethnic Communities and Religion: How Responsive Are Irish Primary Schools to Cultural and Religious Diversity?

You are invited to take part in a study that will analyse how accommodating Irish primary schools are in light of the increased cultural diversity found in Ireland. Specifically, this project aims to explore the role of religion in schools and the impact different approaches towards religion have on the multi-ethnic friendship's pupils create and the religious and cultural knowledge they develop. This survey is part of a PhD project from the Department of Sociology at Trinity College Dublin. We would be grateful if you could fill out the questionnaire. Thank you for your participation.

Part 1: Principal Information

1. How long have you been employed in the school?

2. Is this your first principal position? Yes ☐ 1 No ☐ 2
3. Please indicate the number of years you have been working as a principal

4. Have you previously worked in a school with a different ethos?

5. If yes, please state the school type/ethos Yes ☐ 1 No ☐ 2 If yes, which one:
Catholic ☐ 1 Church of Ireland ☐; Educate Together ☐; Community National ☐;
Other _____
6. Are you also involved in teaching in the school?

Part 2: School Information

1. How many pupils attend this school: Boys _____
Girls _____
2. How many teachers work in this school?

3. Over the last 5 years, has the number of pupils:

Increased ☐ 1 Decreased ☐ 2 Remained stable ☐ 3

4. What is the religious ethos of the school?

Denominational: Catholic ☐1 Church of Ireland ☐2

Multi Denominational ☐3 Equality Based ☐4 Interdenominational ☐5 Other ☐6 If other please state _____

5. Are there pupils from migrant backgrounds attending your school?

20%+ ☐ 10-20% ☐ 6-10% ☐ <5% ☐ None ☐

6. Does the school have a written policy on interculturalism?

Yes ☐1 No ☐2

If yes, can you please describe:

7. Does the school have a written policy for anti-racism?

Yes ☐1 No ☐2

8. Is the anti-racism policy included in the anti-bullying policy?

Yes ☐1 No ☐2

9. How would you describe the socio-economic background of the student intake?

Mostly Middle Class ☐1 Mostly Working Class ☐2 Equal mix of different social backgrounds ☐3 Other, please describe ☐4

10. Are there pupils with minority religious beliefs in your school?

Several ☐1 Few ☐2 None ☐3 If so, which faith groups are represented:

11. What are the arrangements for pupils who do not wish to attend Religious Education?

- Students are withdrawn from the classroom ☐1
- Pupils sit in on the class but do not participate ☐2
- Pupils participate in the RE class ☐3
- RE is not taught in the school ☐4
- Other

12. Sacramental Preparation takes place during school hours

Yes ☐1 Takes place in afterschool hours ☐2 Does not apply to this school ☐3

13. If yes, please indicate how many hours are spent on sacramental preparation

5-10 ☐ 10-20 ☐ 20-30 ☐ 30+ ☐

Part 3: Response to Diversity

1. What steps have taken place in order to cater for the needs of pupils and parents from different religious backgrounds:

2. This school encourages the use of the home language of migrant pupils:

Yes ☐1 No ☐2 to some extent ☐3; if home language is encouraged, please describe:

3. The school has specific provision in place for pupils with English as an additional language:

Yes ☐1 No ☐2 If yes, please describe what these provisions are:

4. Please provide an approximate number of pupils who attend your school from these countries:

Country	Number	Country	Number
UK (excluding Northern Ireland)		Australia/New Zealand	
Northern Ireland		USA	
Poland		Canada	
Lithuania		China	
Romania		Brazil	
Other European		Other South American	
India		Ghana	
Pakistan		Nigeria	
Philippines		Somalia	
Other Asian		Other African	

5. Please indicate your level of agreement or disagreement with the below statements
[Tick one box on each line].

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Compared with native Irish pupils, pupils from migrant backgrounds experience difficulties with academic progress	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4	☐ 5
Compared with native Irish pupils, pupils from migrant backgrounds experience social difficulties	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4	☐ 5
Compared with native Irish pupils, pupils from migrant backgrounds are more likely to experience bullying	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4	☐ 5

6. Does your school adopt a particular approach to accommodate migrant pupils who just arrived in Ireland?

Yes ☐1 No ☐2 If yes, please state below:

7. Who is mainly responsible for providing support to pupils from migrant backgrounds? Tick all that apply.

- Principal ☐1
- Teacher ☐2
- Language Support Teacher ☐3
- Learning Support Teacher ☐4
- Other, please state: _____

8. Please indicate your level of agreement or disagreement with the below statements [Tick one box on each line].

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
This school has sufficient resources to accommodate religious diversity	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4	☐ 5
The principal plays a critical role in deciding how to accommodate different religions	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4	☐ 5
The principal does not collaborate regularly with teachers regarding how best to cater to students from different religions	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4	☐ 5
Teachers actively encourage interfaith dialogue amongst pupils in the classroom.	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4	☐ 5
Pupils from different religious backgrounds have not been able to integrate well and develop friendships with other pupils.	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4	☐ 5
Migrant pupils have experienced racism at school	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4	☐ 5

Pupils in this school have a good understanding of different religions as a result of what has been taught at school	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4	☐ 5
Pupils in this school have a good understanding of different cultures as a result of what has been taught at school	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4	☐ 5
Pupils of migrant origin prefer to make friends with other migrant children in the school	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4	☐ 5

9. Have you received any training in how to respond to the increased religious diversity?

Yes ☐1 No ☐2 If yes, please describe

10. Teachers in this school have received training to respond to the increased religious diversity

Yes ☐1 No ☐2 If yes, please describe

Part 4: Religion

1. Please indicate what religious beliefs are represented in your school:

- Catholic ☐1
- Church of Ireland ☐2
- Other Christianity ☐3
- Muslim ☐4
- Jewish ☐5
- Buddhist ☐6
- Hindu ☐7
- No Religion ☐8
- Other ☐9, please state which

2.The school celebrates and acknowledges holy days of different religious groups

Yes ☐1 No ☐2

3.Please indicate your level of agreement or disagreement with the below statements [Tick one box on each line].

Statements	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Religion is not an important feature of school life in this school	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4	☐ 5
Schools have a crucial role in developing religious identity	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4	☐ 5
Assemblies in this school address religious themes	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4	☐ 5
Assemblies in this school address religious themes from multiple religions	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4	☐ 5
Teacher's attitude towards teaching religion is generally positive	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4	☐ 5

Part 5: School Ethos

1.How would you describe the ethos of this school?

2.Has the ethos changed in any way due to the increased religious diversity in Ireland?

Yes ☐1 No ☐2 If yes, please state the adaptations made to the ethos

3. Please indicate your level of agreement or disagreement with the below statements with regards to your school [Tick one box on each line].

Statements	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
The ethos of the school is well known by all teachers	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4	☐ 5
The ethos of the school is influenced by religion	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4	☐ 5
The teachers follow the ethos of the school in the classroom	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4	☐ 5
Teachers must have a certain religious conviction in order to teach at this school	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4	☐ 5

Part 6: Collaboration with Parents

1. Please indicate your level of agreement or disagreement with the below statements.

Statements	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Most parents are engaged in school activities	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4	☐ 5
Parents are involved in the decision-making process of the school	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4	☐ 5
The school has a lot of parents from different religious backgrounds	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4	☐ 5
The school takes initiative to include parents from different religious backgrounds in school activities?	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4	☐ 5

[If Applicable] Many parents choose to opt their children out of Religious Education classes	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4	☐ 5
[If Applicable] Minority faith parents are consulted regarding the provision of Religious Education in the school	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4	☐ 5
Teachers collaborate closely with parents in order to accommodate pupils from different religious backgrounds	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4	☐ 5
The principal collaborates closely with parents in order to accommodate pupils from different religious backgrounds	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4	☐ 5
Parents should have the primary role in teaching their children about religion	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4	☐ 5

Part 7: Open Questions:

1.What have been the main challenges in catering for the needs of pupils and parents from different religious backgrounds:

2.Is there anything you would like to add?

APPENDIX B

Focus Group Interview Guide

General Questions

1. First, how old is everyone here?
2. Next, what do you think about this school? What are some of your favourite subjects? Why?
3. Has everyone here lived in Ireland for their whole life or was anyone born in a different country? Were anybody's parents born in a different country?
4. Are there many people in your class from different countries? Do you know which countries?
5. How easy would it be for someone new to settle into a new school/class? Why?
6. Can you name any world religions? What do you know about these religions? How did you learn about these religions? Did you learn about these at school, or at home, from tv or even from your friends (in or out of school?)
7. Do pupils in your class have different religions? What religions are they? Can you share what you know about these different religions?

Religious Education

8. Is this a religious school? What religious activities do you do in school?
9. What do you do in your religious education/GMGY classes? How often do you have these classes? Are these classes held during the school day or after school? What do you learn in those classes?
10. Do you consider yourself a religious person? Do you practice religion outside school (prompt: attending religious services; praying at home?)
11. Why do people follow religion?
12. What religion do you know most about? Why do you think that is?
13. What holidays do you celebrate? Do you think everyone in Ireland celebrates the same holidays? What are some of the different religious holy days?
14. What does religion mean to you?
15. How does a person show that they are religious?

Cultural and Religious Literacy

16. Do you have friends who practice different religions? How do you find it making friends with people with different religions? How come?
17. What have you learned about different religions at school that you did not know before?
18. In Ireland do you meet a lot of people from different religions? Where?
19. Do you think people who move to Ireland feel welcomed? Why do you say that?
20. What makes a person Irish?
21. Can you be Irish if you are born in a different country?
22. Can you become Irish?

23. Is there anything else you would like to add to what we have been discussing?

APPENDIX C

Interview Guide Teachers 5th Class

General Questions

1. Firstly, do you mind sharing how long you have been teaching at this school?
2. What are your main responsibilities in the school?

Social Composition of the Classroom

3. How would you describe the background of students in in your class? [prompt social class: migrant] Has it changed over the years? Are there many different religions represented in your classroom?
4. How have you found accommodating pupils from different backgrounds? Are there specific supports in place in the school to help integrate pupils? What have been the main challenges?
5. Have you received any training related to intercultural/interreligious education - do teachers receive support or training to deal with diversity in the classroom? Is there a need for such training among teachers here?
6. How do children from migrant backgrounds do academically in your class?
What have been the main challenges? How have they been addressed? What approach has worked best?
7. How do children from migrant backgrounds get on socially with Irish native children?
To what extent do pupils from different religious backgrounds mix at school? Have there been any challenges and if so, how have these been addressed? What approach has worked best?
8. To what extent do the native Irish pupils in the class know about the religions of pupils from migrant backgrounds? What has helped to facilitate this?
9. How can you, as a class teacher, support religious diversity?

Religious Education

10. [If applicable] Do all pupils attend RE classes? What do pupils who do not attend do during this time?

11. In your view, how adequate is RE/GMGY/Learn Together in introducing pupils to other religions? In what settings in the school do pupils have an opportunity to learn about different religions? How is this done? In which lessons is religious diversity discussed?
12. Is RE/GMGY/Learn Together important? Why?
13. What topics are covered in RE/GMGY/Learn Together; is there anything you would change, why?
14. Are there certain topics in RE/GMGY/Learn Together you find it difficult to teach? Why?
15. Would you describe yourself as religious?
16. How did your teacher training prepare you to teach RE/GMGY/Learn Together?
17. When you were applying to work in this school, was it important to have a certain belief/worldview? Would it be important for a teacher to have a certain worldview when teaching in this type of school?
18. Where do you think a child should receive most of their religious education? Is it primarily the responsibility of the parent, community, or the schools?
19. To what extent are religious and intercultural themes integrated into other areas of the curriculum?

Parent Involvement

20. How would you describe the involvement of the parents of students from migrant backgrounds with the school? How often do you communicate with the parents from different religious backgrounds? On what occasions? Have parents expressed concerns over what is taught with regards to RE/GMGY/Learn Together? What is the school's approach when this happens?
21. What involvement do migrant parents have in school? Does the school have a Parent Council? Are any migrant parents involved?

School Ethos

22. How would you describe the ethos of the school? Is the ethos influenced by religion?
23. How does the ethos play out in the school day to day?
24. Is it important that teachers follow the ethos? How is this monitored? What steps do you take in the classroom to follow the ethos?
25. Can you describe how the school celebrates religious festivals? Does the class engage with sacramental preparation? Would you say this is a key aspect of school? Why? How

many hours? Are all pupils involved in the preparation? What do the pupils who are not involved do? Should sacramental preparation take place in school or elsewhere [involvement of the Church]?

26. What kind of traits does the school encourage in its pupils as future citizens of Ireland? [prompt here re acceptance, tolerance, discrimination]

27. What steps do teachers take to prepare pupils to live in a multicultural/religiously diverse society? [outside of what is taught in the curriculum?]

28. Is there anything else you would like to add to what we have been discussing?

APPENDIX D

Interview Guide Parents

General Questions

1. [if from migrant background] How long have you lived in Ireland?
2. Were your children born in Ireland?
3. (If no) What are some of the differences between your birth country and Ireland in terms of education system?

Enrolment

4. What were the main criteria you had in mind when looking for a school for your child? What factors were important to you? Was the religious ethos of the school a factor?
5. Did you feel like you had a choice? Why or why not? Would you prefer it if there were more options available, in terms of types of schools, or availability of more schools in the area?
6. Please describe the enrolment process; were there any challenges?

Religion

7. Would you say your family is religious?
8. What religious services does your family attend? How often?
9. How informed are you about what your child learns about different religions in school? Do you get this information from your child or the teacher?
10. How important is it to have RE/GMGY/Learn Together as part of the school curriculum?
11. How would you describe the role of school and family in teaching children about different religions? Who has the main responsibility in this? Where has your child mostly learned about [his/her] religion/other religions?
12. Are there people from different religions in your circle (immediate network, circle of friends)?
13. What religious activities happen at home? In your community? In the school?
14. Does your family celebrate religious holy days? Did you child participate in sacramental preparation? Did all their friends? Is this important to you and your family? Why? Where do you think sacramental preparation should take place?

Religious Education

15. [If a denominational school] Does your child attend the RE classes?
16. Do you know what your child learns about in RE/GMGY/Learn Together? In your view, has RE (or any other programme) helped your child to understand other religions better? What have they learned? What about his or her religion? Has it complimented what you teach your child at home? How? Can parents and children have different religion/worldview?
17. Has your child ever become confused about religion because of what is taught in RE/GMGY/Learn Together and what is taught at home? How do you solve these differences [if any]?
18. Is there anything you'd like to change about how RE/GMGY/Learn Together is taught or what topics are covered?

School Ethos

19. How would you describe the ethos of the school your child attends?
20. Was school ethos (characteristic spirit) important when considering what school to send your child to?
21. How has your child found it making friends in school? Does your child have friends who are from different religions? If yes, do you meet their parents? Have there been any challenges?

Parent-Teacher Relationship

22. Are there opportunities for parents to get involved in school activities; please give examples (parents council, events)? What events have you attended? Is there anything you'd like to change about the school's approach to involving parents?
23. If not attending events – what are the main obstacles – time, types of activities, interest in getting involved?
24. How often do you speak with the teachers, principals? On what occasions?
25. To what extent do you feel welcome in the school?
26. Is there anything else you would like to add to what we have been discussing?

APPENDIX E

Interview Guide Teacher 2

General Questions

1. How long have you been teaching at this school?
2. What are your main responsibilities?

Demographic Changes and Response

3. Has the demographics of the school changed in recent years? Are there many pupils from migrant backgrounds? Are there many different religions represented in the school? How has this influenced the ethos?
4. How has the school found accommodating pupils from different religious backgrounds? Are there specific supports in place in the school to help integrate pupils with different religious backgrounds? What have been the main challenges?
5. Does the school have a support system for pupils who need extra support? For example, language support. Who mainly utilises this support?
6. How do pupils from migrant backgrounds get on with other pupils? Have there been any challenges? What provision enables pupils to integrate academically and socially?
7. To what extent have you received training related to interreligious education - do teachers in this school receive support or training to deal with diversity in the classroom?
8. Can you describe how teachers are trained to teach religion? Do you think the current training available to teachers supports them to manage diversity? How can this be improved?
9. What would you say teachers in this school have found most difficult about managing diversity?
10. What do you think are some of the main priorities for supporting pupils from different religious backgrounds?
11. Are there any resources or materials that have assisted teachers here with managing diversity?
12. How would you describe the involvement of the parents of students from migrant backgrounds with the school? Does the school have systems in place to communicate with parents from migrant backgrounds?

School Ethos

13. How would you describe the ethos of this school?
14. How does the ethos play out in the school day to day?
15. Is it important that teachers follow the ethos? How is this monitored? What steps do you take in the classroom to follow the ethos?
16. (If the ethos is influenced by religion) How do pupils who do not follow this religion fit in?

Religious Education

17. Can you describe how the school celebrates religious festivals? Does the class engage with sacramental preparation? Would you say this is a key aspect of school? Why? How many hours? Are all pupils involved in the preparation? What do the pupils who are not involved do?
18. In your view, how adequate is RE in introducing pupils to other religions? In what settings do pupils have an opportunity to learn about different religions? How is this done? In which lessons is religious diversity discussed?
19. {IF Applicable} Do all pupils in the school take RE? What happens if they choose not to take it? What steps are in place in this scenario?
20. Is religious education important? Why?
21. When you were applying to work here, was it important to have a certain belief?
22. Is there anything else you would like to add to what we have been discussing?

APPENDIX F

Participant Information Sheet

Multi-Ethnic Communities and Religion: How Responsive are Irish Primary Schools to Cultural and Religious Diversity?

Participant Information Sheet

You are invited to take part in a study about your experiences of how religion is experienced by pupils through the curriculum and ethos of the school.

Before you decide whether you would like to participate, it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what participation involves. Please take time to think about the information provided here about the study. You should feel free to contact us if you have any questions about the study

Who am I and what is this study about?

My name is Aron Foley and I am a PhD student in the Department of Sociology, Trinity College Dublin. I have designed a research study to explore how pupils experience religion through the ethos and curriculum of the school. I am eager to do this because the population of Ireland has changed considerably over the last three decades. As such, primary schools now experience great diversity, with pupils attending from different religions, cultures and races. I am eager to see how schools accommodate this diversity, particularly through how religion is approached. This research I hope will shed light on what practices within schools can help accommodate pupils in a multiculturally, diverse Ireland.

Who do we want to talk to?

- 5th class teacher
- One other teacher from the school
- Principal
- 10 pupils from 5th class
- Two parents of the pupils from 5th class

What does taking part involve?

If you agree to take part in this study, I will arrange to meet with you to interview you at a time that suits you. The interview will take around 30-45 minutes. If you decide not to take part, that is absolutely fine.

What kinds of things will you be asked about in the interview?

- Experience of Religious Education
- The role religion in school
- The ethos of the school
- Experience of pupils
- Strategies to accommodate pupils from different backgrounds.

It is important that you know that you do not have to answer questions on any topic that you would prefer not to talk about. Your privacy and your choices will be respected. If we ask you about something that you don't want to discuss, this is fine – you just need to say so and we will move on to another topic.

Can you change your mind about taking part?

Yes. You can change your mind at any time. You have the right to stop the interview at any time without having to give a reason. You also have the right to decide to withdraw from the study, even after you have been interviewed.

Is what you share private?

Yes. What you share in the interview will remain private and confidential. This means that whatever we talk about in the interview will not be said to other people unless you tell us that there is a risk of harm to you or another person. If this was the case, we would talk to you about it before telling anyone else.

With your permission, we will record the interview. This is to ensure that what is shared is recorded accurately. The researcher will turn off the recording device if at any point the interviewee does not want what is being shared to be recorded. After the interview, the researcher will listen to the recording before typing it up. After this the researcher will delete the recording.

All participants in this study will remain anonymous. This will be done by assigning all participants and those mentioned in the study pseudonyms. Therefore, the researcher will remove any names or places mentioned during the interview when writing it up.

What will happen to the results of the study?

The information will be written up into a report and may also be presented in a publication. We may also give presentations on the findings of the study at conferences. Real names and any information that might identify you or any other person known to you will not be used in any of these reports or presentations. A copy of the report and a summary of the research findings will be made available to you when the study is finished.

Contacting the researchers

Please feel free to contact us if you would like to discuss the study in more detail:

Aron Foley: arfoley@tcd.ie

Thank you taking the time to read this Information Sheet

APPENDIX G

Consent Forms

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Lead Researcher: Aron Foley

Background of Research: I have designed a research study to explore how pupils experience religion through the ethos and curriculum of the school. I am eager to do this because the population of Ireland has changed considerably over the last three decades. As such, primary schools now experience great diversity, with pupils attending from different religions and cultures. I am eager to see how schools accommodate this diversity, particularly in light of how religion is approached. This research I hope will shed light on what practices within schools can help accommodate pupils in a multiculturally, diverse Ireland.

Procedure: Please read through the consent form and feel free to ask any questions.

Publication: The information will be written up into a report and may also be presented in a publication. We may also give presentations on the findings of the study at conferences. Real names and any information that might identify you or any other person known to you will not be used in any of these reports or presentations. A copy of the report and a summary of the research findings will be made available to you when the study is finished.

DECLARATION:

- I am 18 years or older and am competent to provide consent.
- I have read, or had read to me, a document providing information about this research and this consent form. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and all my questions have been answered to my satisfaction and understand the description of the research that is being provided to me.
- I understand that if I make illegal activities known, these will be reported to appropriate authorities.
- I understand that, subject to the constraints above, no recordings will be replayed in any public forum or made available to any audience other than the current researchers/research team.

- I freely and voluntarily agree to be part of this research study.
- I understand that I may refuse to answer any question and that I may withdraw at any time.
- I understand that my participation is fully anonymous and that no personal details about me will be recorded.
- I have received a copy of this agreement.

PARTICIPANT'S NAME:

PARTICIPANT'S SIGNATURE:

Date:

Statement of investigator's responsibility: I have explained the nature and purpose of this research study, the procedures to be undertaken and any risks that may be involved. I have offered to answer any questions and fully answered such questions. I believe that the participant understands my explanation and has freely given informed consent.

RESEARCHERS CONTACT DETAILS: arfoley@tcd.ie