Inclusive Religious Education:

The Voices of Religious Education Teachers in Post Primary Schools in Ireland

Identity, bullying and inclusion

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An tIonad Náisiúnta Taighde agus
Acmhainne don Fhrithbhulaíocht
National Anti-Bullying Research
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Glossary of Terms

Denominational/confessional Religious Education: Teaching organised by religious communities that have exclusive responsibility for RE (denominational/confessional/catechetical) (Schreiner, 2013).

Faith Formation: Nurturing of a student in a particular faith.

Patron: The patron is the body that establishes the school. The patron appoints the Board of Management of the school. The patron also determines the ethos of the school. These responsibilities are set out in law under the 1998 Education Act (www.education.ie).

Pluralism refers to a society, system of government, or organization that has different groups that keep their identities while existing with other groups

Religious Education: (post-primary) in Ireland is understood as the critical encounter between religion and education (NCCA, 2017).

Preface

DCU National Anti-Bullying Research and Resource Centre (ABC) is a University designated research centre located in DCU's Institute of Education. The Centre is known globally for its research excellence in bullying and online safety. The Centre is home to a team of scholars with a global reputation as leaders in their field.

The aim of ABC is to contribute to solving the real-world problems of bullying and online safety through collaboration with an extensive international community of academic and industry partnerships. The extent of the Centre's resources and the collaboration between disciplines drive quality education, understanding and innovation in this field.

The Centre hosts the UNESCO Chair on Tackling Bullying in Schools and Cyberspace, and is the home of the International Journal of Bullying Prevention.

The objectives of the Centre are aligned to support the UN's overarching goal to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education" and "promote lifelong learning opportunities for all" by 2030 (SDG4) and support the implementation of the Government of Ireland's Action Plan on Bullying (2013), Action Plan for Online Safety (2018-2019), the Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice (2018-2023), and the Workplace Relations Commission/Health and Safety Authority's Code of Practice for Employers and Employees on the Prevention of and Resolution of Bullying at Work (2021).

Abstract

This study investigates contemporary views and experiences of Religious Education teachers in post-primary schools in Ireland around issues of inclusion. Significant societal changes in Ireland, including a decline in religious practice, have influenced Religious Education in post-primary schools. The once dominant tradition of denominational and confessional Religious Education has given way to an approach designed to be inclusive of students of all faiths and none. A mixed patronage system is gradually replacing what was once a largely denominational post-primary education arrangement, with Catholic voluntary secondary schools no longer a majority. A specific focus of this research was to give voice to Religious Education teachers in all sectors in order to understand how this flux is being experienced. Their experiences and voices were then used to extract implications for inclusive Religious Education in line with the Anti-Bullying Procedures (2013), which state that a "cornerstone in the prevention of bullying is a positive school culture and climate that is welcoming of difference and diversity and is based on inclusivity and respect". Research results indicate that teachers are concerned about all 'religious students'. This echoes the growing field of research which suggests that in a rapidly secularising society, those who continue to practice any faith, especially the once-majority faith, are vulnerable to bullying. Findings seem to support this, with Religious Education teachers most concerned about the bullying of Catholic students and least concerned about the bullying of atheists.

Introduction

This report arises out of a research project funded by the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission to investigate contemporary views and experiences of teachers of Religious Education (RE) in post-primary schools in Ireland. Significant societal changes in Ireland in recent decades and the increasing pluralism of secular and religious views among the population, raise questions for the teaching and learning of all subjects, including RE. Reflecting an international shift (Rymarz, 2012; Stuart-Buttle, 2017), the once dominant tradition of denominational and confessional RE in Irish post-primary schools has given way to an approach designed to be inclusive of students of all faith and none. A specific focus of this research was to give voice to RE teachers in order to understand how they experience this flux.

Religion in Ireland

The Irish religious landscape is changing. Census data indicate that the percentage of those who self-identify as Catholic fell by almost 3.5% between 2011 and 2016, continuing a steady decline over the last five decades.[1] At the same time, the number of those with no religion continues to rise. In 2016 persons indicating no religion comprised 9.8% of the population, up from 5.9% in 2011, elevating no religion to the second largest religious affiliation category (see Table 1).[2]

1   In 1961 the percentage of the population who identified as Catholic was 94.9, the highest recorded. 78.3% of the population identified as Catholic in 2016, the lowest recorded. Source https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cp8iter/p8iter/p8rrc/.

2   In 1961, approximately 0.04% of the population was of no religion. Source https://www.cso.ie/en/media/csoie/census/documents/vol12_entire.pdf. It is important to note that 'no religion' does not necessarily denote atheist or agnostic.

Table 1 Population by religion, 2011 and 2016

| Religion	2011	2016	Percentage change
	000s		
Roman Catholic	3,861.3	3,729.1	-3.4
Church of Ireland	129.0	126.4	-2.0
Muslim (Islamic)	49.2	63.4	28.9
Orthodox	45.2	62.2	37.5
Christian	41.2	37.4	-9.1
Presbyterian	24.6	24.2	-1.6
Hindu	10.7	14.3	34.1
Apostolic or Pentecostal	14.0	13.4	-4.9
Other	70.2	97.7	39.1
No religion	269.8	468.4	73.6
Not stated	72.9	125.3	71.8
Total	4,588.3	4,761.9	3.8

Source: Central Statistics Office (CSO), Ireland

A 2018 study on religious affiliation found that 16 to 29 year-olds in Ireland self-identified as follows:

— 58% Christians (54% Catholic, 2% Protestant, 2% other Christian),

— 1% Muslims,

— 3% of other religions,

— 39% not religious (Bullivant, 2018, 6).

This trend towards no-religion echoes international patterns in Western, once Christian-majority nations (PEW Research Center, 2019). The significant increase in the non-Catholic population over this period is accounted for not only by growing numbers with no religion but by increases in other religions. The fastest growing religion has been Orthodox followed by Apostolic and Pentecostal (CSO, 2017) (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 Annualised growth rates of religions in Ireland, 1991 - 2016
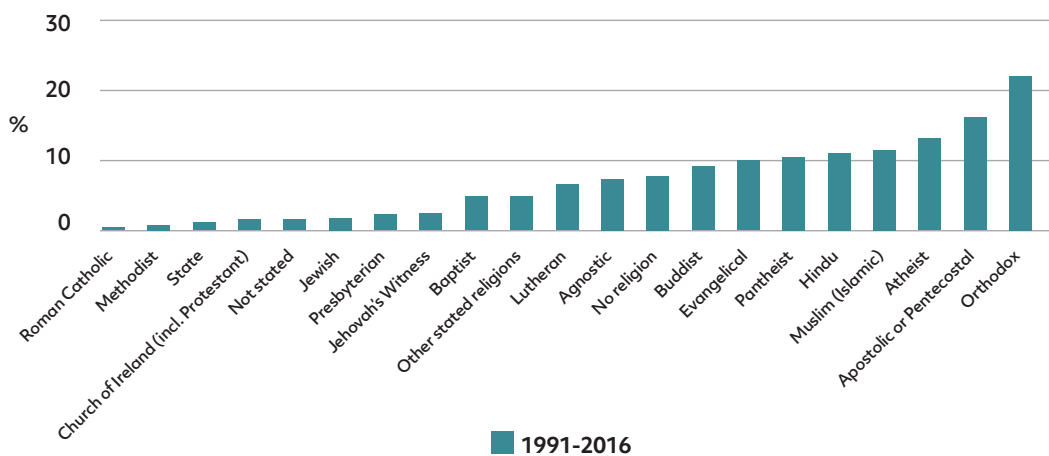
Source: Central Statistics Office, Ireland

Along with Catholic identity, Christian religious practice in Ireland is steadily decreasing, especially among young people. 26% of young people in the 16 to 29 age group say they never attend a religious service (Bullivant, 2018, 7). This trend is not particular to Ireland: since at least the beginning of this millennium, adolescents in England who regularly attend and participate in religious activities are a minority among their peers (Kay and Francis, 2001). Interestingly, whereas Christian practice is falling among young people in Ireland, it seems religious identity is still a feature: the most recent *My World Survey* found that 91% of the post- primary age group identifies with some religion (Dooley et al, 2019, 13).

This landscape raises questions for RE such as: Is there a role for/or relevance to RE today? To what extent are teachers prepared for this pluralistic environment, specifically teaching RE to students of minority faith and those of a non-religious worldview? How inclusive is post-primary RE? Most importantly for the National Anti-Bullying Research and Resource Centre (henceforth, National ABC), is the question of bullying: in this landscape, can a young person's religious identity/practice make them more or less vulnerable to bullying? The *Anti-Bullying Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools* assert that all subjects should 'foster an attitude of respect for all: to promote the value of diversity; to address prejudice and stereotyping and to highlight the unacceptability of bullying behavior' (DES 2013a, 27). Teachers of every subject have a role in this regard. In an effort to answer some of the questions listed above, DCU National Anti-Bullying Research and Resource Centre undertook a study to investigate the perspectives of RE teachers on inclusion of students of minority faith and non-religious worldviews in Irish post primary schools. Findings indicate that teachers are concerned about all 'religious students'. This echoes the growing field of research which suggests that in a rapidly secularising society (cf Norway, Sweden, UK) those who continue to practice any faith, especially the once-majority faith are vulnerable to bullying (cf Schihalejev et al, 2020; Kittelmann Flensner, 2018; Moulin, 2016; Ipgrave, 2012). Findings seem to support this, with RE teachers most concerned about the bullying of practising Catholic students and least concerned about the bullying of atheists.

Background/
Theoretical Framework

RE in state funded schools across Europe

Religious Education (RE) across Europe is the subject of much debate. Whereas the role and best approach to Religious Education are contested (cf McKinney & McCluskey, 2017), the vast majority of European countries accept the necessity of school based Religious Education (Schreiner, 2013).

Most European states provide Religious Education in publicly funded schools (NCCA, 2017, 25). In Scotland, England and Wales, for instance, a legal provision exists for RE as a core (compulsory) subject for all pupils (McKinney & McCluskey, 2017; Stuart-Buttle, 2017).

Although the approach varies across states, common objectives among most syllabi include:

— to encourage pupils to be sensitive to religion and the religious dimension of life

— to provide orientation among the variety of existing religious traditions and worldviews, including non-religious convictions

— to provide knowledge and understanding of religious beliefs and experiences

(Schreiner, 2013).

Over the last two decades, in light of increasing social, cultural and religious tensions in many European countries, the Council of Europe has increasingly looked to RE as a means of promoting intercultural understanding and respect for diverse beliefs. In 2005 the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe called on Governments to do more to guarantee freedom of conscience and religious expression, to encourage religious instruction, to promote dialogue with and between religions, and to further the cultural and social expression of religions (NCCA, 2017, 28)

More recently the Council's recommendations go beyond just teaching about religion; they promote the development of attitudes such as sensitivity and respect for religious and non-religious traditions, as well as competences such as religious literacy and understanding. Such competences, the Council holds, are necessary for intercultural living, and Religious Education has an important contribution to make in this regard.

Findings from a number of research projects across Europe agree that young people highly regard the place of RE in schools and want a safe space to learn and talk about their own and others' religions, beliefs and truth claims. Findings indicate that students and teachers value Religious Education as it

— facilitates respectful dialogue in the classroom

— creates 'safe spaces' for dialogue

— engages with competing truth claims

— helps young people analyse media representations of religions (NCCA, 2017, 31).

Post-primary Religious Education in Ireland today

The Education Act (1998) marked a new departure for Irish education and for post-primary RE. Up to that point, education was underpinned by the Intermediate Education (Ireland) Act (1878), an act of the British Parliament. Section 5 of the 1878 Act effectively prohibited state involvement in RE, leaving it to the almost exclusively denominational school patrons to fill the gap. Thus a system of denominational confessional RE took hold. The Department of Education and Skills (DES) refers to this approach as 'religious instruction' (DES, 2018). One significant effect of the Education Act (1998) was the removal of Section 5 of the 1878 Act. Change was swift, launching a very different approach to RE.

The Junior Certificate Religious Education Syllabus (2000)

The year 2000 saw the introduction of the Junior Certificate Religious Education Syllabus (JCRES), with students taking the first state-certified Junior Certificate RE examination in June 2003. Developed by the National Council of Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) on behalf of the state, the JCRES encouraged students to reflect on human experience and to understand and interpret that experience. A significant aim, among others, was to foster an appreciation of 'the richness of religious traditions and to acknowledge the non-religious interpretation of life' (Department of Education and Science, 2000, 5). It also offered opportunities to 'develop an informed and critical understanding of the Christian tradition' (4).[3] At the time the JCRES was introduced, the Irish Catholic Bishops offered guidelines for how the syllabus might be used in Catholic schools and for the faith formation of Catholic students (Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference, 1999).

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3   These aims also apply to the Leaving Certificate Religious Education Syllabus (2003).

The specification for Junior Cycle Religious Education (2019)

The specification for Junior Cycle Religious Education (NCCA, 2019) has been incrementally implemented in schools since September 2019. In line with the approach of the *Framework for Junior Cycle* (DES, 2015), RE continues as a state-certified subject. Like its predecessor the JCRES, this specification is intended for all students, whatever their religious faith or worldview. It is intended to ensure that students are exposed to a broad range of religious traditions and to the non-religious interpretation of life (NCCA, 2019, 4). It does not 'provide religious instruction in any particular religious or faith tradition' (DES, 2018, 2). The ensuing guidelines from the Irish Catholic Bishops on Junior Cycle Religious Education in the Catholic School are informed both by the Framework and its accompanying circular letters, and by the specification (Council for Catechetics of the Irish Episcopal Conference, 2019).

Religious Education in Junior Cycle is understood as the 'critical encounter' between religion and education. The use of the word critical 'indicates that this encounter is intentional and draws on both religious and educational principles . . . for the purpose of understanding both the content and expression of religious beliefs' (NCCA, 2017, 6). A 'critical encounter' also allows room for students to engage with the adverse influences of religions and how religion can be colonised and politicised as a force for harm as well as good (see Appendix A for the aims of RE at Junior Cycle and Senior Cycle).

School patronage and RE

The school patron has a legal right and responsibility to uphold the characteristic spirit of the school (Government of Ireland, 1998). Religious Education can be one (among many) expression of that characteristic spirit, giving patrons the right and responsibility to influence the approach to RE in their schools. Parents and children also have a right to expect RE in accordance with school ethos. In broad terms, patronage of post-primary schools falls into 3 sectors:

— Voluntary secondary schools, usually denominational but also including groups such as Educate Together.[4] Schools with a Christian ethos fall into this category – just short of 50% of post primary schools.

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4   There is one voluntary secondary school in Ireland with a Jewish patron. Stratford College was founded by the Dublin Jewish Community and provides a secondary education within a Jewish ethos. The largest non-Christian minority in Ireland is the Muslim population at 1.3%. The Islamic Foundation of Ireland is patron of two Muslim national schools and is seeking to become patron at second level. At present there is no Islamic post primary school in Ireland.

— Schools and community colleges which are managed on behalf of the state by local Educational and Training Boards (ETBs). ETBs, formerly Vocational Education Committees (VECs), are subcommittees of the Department of Education and Skills (DES). These schools are usually multi-denominational.

— Community and comprehensive schools, usually resulting from an amalgamation of schools. In these cases, the state (through the DES) and another body (usually a religious congregation or local bishop who was previously patron of an amalgamating school) act as co-patrons. These are also usually multi-denominational.

Table 2. Number of post primary schools by sector 2019/2020

School Type	Frequency	Percentage
Voluntary Secondary Christian	354	49%
Voluntary Secondary Secular	19	2.6%
Voluntary Secondary (An Fóras Patrúnachta)	6	0.8%
Vocational	246	34%
Community and Comprehensive	96	13%
Total	723	100%

Sources:
https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Statistics/Key-Statistics/key-statistics-2019-2020.pdf;
https://www.educatetogether.ie/schools/find-a-school; http://www.foras.ie/en/scoileanna;
https://www.schooldays.ie/secondary-schools-in-ireland/Church-of-Ireland

In recent years, the Department of Education has made clear the required approach to RE in community and ETB post-primary schools. The Department does not require any school to include Religious Education at Junior Cycle as a mandatory subject. Accordingly, schools 'have discretion to determine if they provide the subject at all or if it is to be mandatory or optional in any particular class group or year' (DES, 2018, 2). Further, the more formative/confessional approach to RE as a subject which may have existed in some state-managed schools is explicitly dealt with. Where 'religious instruction and worship in accordance with the rites and practices of a particular denomination' (DES, 2018b, 3) is offered in ETB schools or community schools and colleges:

— It must not be associated in any degree with the NCCA developed syllabus/ specification

— It must not be provided in timetabled class periods

— A newly required opt-in by parents for their children is necessary (DES, 2018).

RE in Catholic schools

The Irish Catholic Bishops are committed to RE in Catholic schools and to the developments in state sponsored RE since the JCRES of 2000. They recognise the need for a religious education that raises students awareness of different religious perspectives.

> The Catholic school offers its young people a community that is Catholic and therefore by definition should be reflective, critically disposed, service-of-other-orientated, and happy to support its students in ecumenical, interreligious, and intercultural dialogue. Everyone is asked to bring their beliefs and values, their very selves, into the religious education classroom and to open their mind and heart to the deepest meaning of life (Byrne, 2021, 8-9)

The Irish Catholic Bishops' response to the *Framework for Junior Cycle* (2015) upholds that religious education is a manifestation of school ethos, and recognises the importance of RE in an holistic education:

> Reimagining the role and contribution of RE depends . . . on a realistic understanding of the needs of contemporary young people, on an appreciation of the opportunities and challenges they face in the secular world that dominates their lives and the continuing willingness of the Catholic faith community to put its best resources at the disposal of the young (Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference, 2017, 5).

Methodology

The research was partly funded by the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission and completed in 2019. It involved an online survey of 214 Religious Education teachers. Ethical approval was obtained from the Dublin City University Research Ethics Committee. The online survey was issued to all post-primary schools in the Republic of Ireland and circulated to RE teachers through school principals. Principals were invited to share a link to the survey with the RE teachers in their schools. Participants came from a cross section of post-primary schools in Ireland, with schools from all three sectors represented.

The data from the online survey was transferred to an Excel spreadsheet and critically analysed. The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) in conjunction with Survey Monkey analytical software and Microsoft Office software data were used as an analytical tool. A thematic approach was used to analyse comment box responses.

Participant profile

214 RE teachers participated in the study. 80% identified as female, 20% as male, reflecting the overall gender gap in the teaching profession in Ireland (Department of Education, 2021). The religious identity of participants was broadly in line with the Census of 2016: the majority described themselves as Roman Catholic (85%) with 2% Church of Ireland, 5% multiple religious beliefs, and 4% no religion. Two thirds (66%) described their religious beliefs as being very important to them.

Findings: What RE Teachers had to say

Place and purpose of RE

When it came to the place and purpose of Religious Education on the curriculum, the majority of teachers (64%) who participated in this study said that RE should be a mandatory subject in both Junior and Senior Cycle. With subject matter extending to all world religions and the non-religious worldview, they felt it is inclusive of all students. Teachers agreed that all beliefs should be respected and accommodated in RE. Interestingly, while some of the teachers linked the purpose of RE in schools to faith formation, for a large majority, RE is primarily an academic subject: 67% felt that RE should be a state examined subject in post-primary schools.

There was quite a variation in how RE teachers described their main goal in teaching RE. Albeit approximately one third of respondents listed a single main goal such as 'exam results', 'acceptance and tolerance of other faiths and none', or 'teach the syllabus to all students', it is important to note that many of the goals identified were not stand-alone. Most teachers offered compound responses, i.e. responses containing more than one goal/an intersection of goals such as

— "To broaden student knowledge of world religions with the aim of promoting tolerance and respect. I always want students to reflect on their own spirituality, whatever that may be."

— "To help all students learn about, experience and enjoy learning about ALL world religions while keeping the ethos of Nano Nagle, the Presentation Order & Christianity visible in our school."

— "To inform students about different world views, equip them with skills to reflect on their own and promote respect for diversity."

— "To inform students about faith and to encourage them to question faith and develop their own view of what faith is and how best it will serve them."

— "To inform students about the role religion has played in the lives of people past and present (by following the JC syllabus). To also instil in my students a place to develop their spirituality if they so wish."

— "Education about religions and their elements and beliefs and rituals, not faith formation."

These views were not at odds with each other as they reflect the multifaceted aims of post primary RE.

Consistent across all three sectors, 70% of responses highlighted knowledge and understanding of religions/worldviews as the main goal of teaching RE. Formation of attitudes and values was the main goal in 47% of teacher responses with tolerance, respect and acceptance the most commonly cited. Typical responses such as "all students to have tolerance and respect for other people regardless of religious beliefs" and "respect for those who have faith and practice it and respect for those who express no faith perspective." To understand each other" echo the *Anti-Bullying Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools* (DES, 2013a) assertion that subjects should foster an attitude of respect for all.

13% of responses referred to faith formation; these were mostly drawn from the voluntary sector. It is interesting that this is well below the proportion of schools with a Christian ethos participating in this study (57%). The vast majority of these positioned faith formation as a goal amongst others. One teacher described how "[we] deliver the curriculum as we follow the junior cert religion course. We also provide opportunities for students to partake in services/reflection following the liturgical calendar." Another said the goal was "to educate students about world religions so they can have faith seeking understanding and practice tolerance and have an understanding of their own faith and others." Other main goals in teaching RE included spiritual development (15%), students exploring their own beliefs/worldviews (10%), the religious ethos of the school/the Christian faith/appreciation of Christian values (6%), and exploring the big questions/ questions of meaning and purpose (4.5%).

Religious practices outside the RE classroom

The survey also explored faith/religious practices which might traditionally reflect the school ethos but often occur outside the RE classroom. Responses depict various types and levels of practices. In some instances but not others, practices reflect the majority faith identity of the wider population. For instance, 83% of graduation celebrations involve a religious service; 43% of school assemblies include religious prayers. Other practices favour the non-religious view: 67% of prize-giving and award ceremonies are without a religious theme.

School ethos appears as a determinant for some customs. For instance, 53% of school uniforms bear a crest with a religious symbol, mirroring the 57% of participating schools with a religious (Christian) ethos. On the other hand, 23% of RE classes involve religious prayer. This is interesting given that approximately 49% of post-primary schools in Ireland have a religious patron. It is also noteworthy that this study was conducted before the DES prohibited worship in RE classes in schools under their sole or joint state patronage (DES, 2018). Although the absence of prayer reflects the narrative of increased secularisation of values and beliefs in society, it is somewhat at odds with the religious identity of the wider population (CSO, 2017). It supports the earlier finding of a significant move away from RE as faith formation, and suggests potential anticipation of state demands.
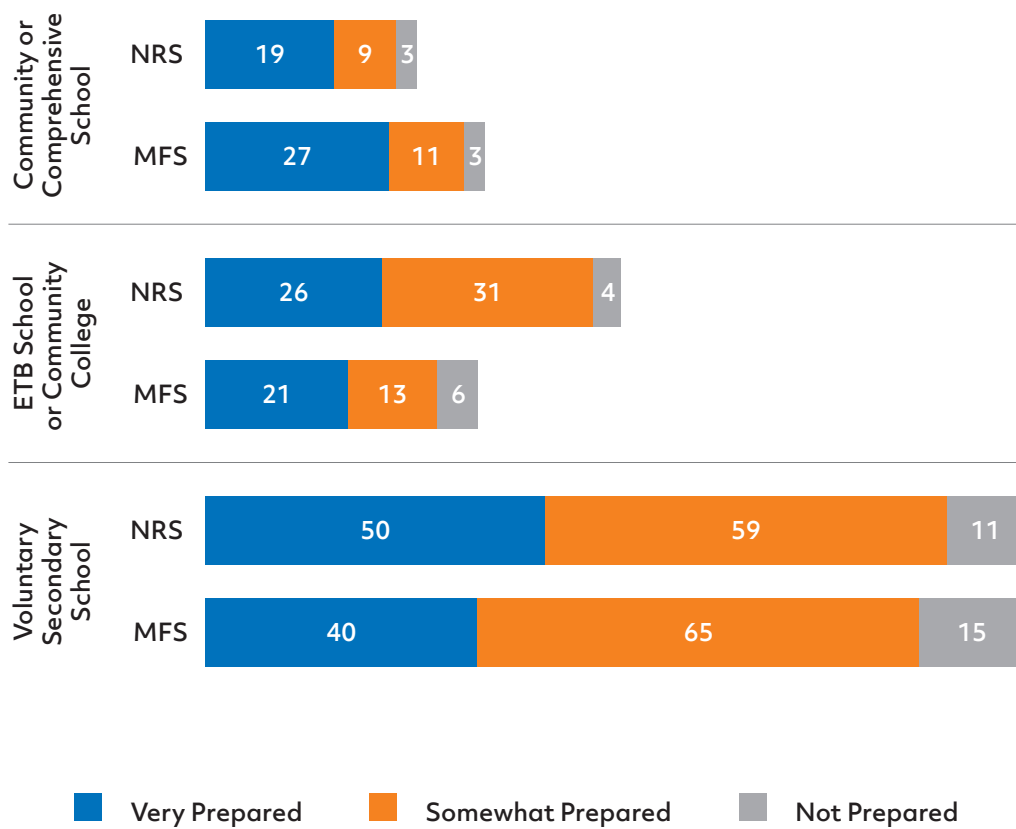
Data on other practices such as dining and prayer options for students of minority faiths was less conclusive. For instance, 33% of school canteens provide for dietary requirements based on beliefs/worldviews (vegetarian, vegan, kosher). However, with a Jewish population of 0.1% and a Muslim population of 1.3%, and many schools without a canteen or lunch provision, this statistic can only be loosely interpreted. The same applies to variables such as provision of a dedicated multi-faith prayer space (39% of schools provide such a space): many schools do not have students who require such a space, for instance Muslim students. In others, Muslim students have access to a specific prayer area. Without follow- up qualitative data, it is difficult to interpret the salience of these statistics.

Preparedness for Teaching Minority Faith and Non-Religious Pupils

Teachers seem aware of inclusion issues and conscious of adopting inclusive practices in class. The vast majority of participants (83%) said they emphasize the diversity of religious/ non-religious views in most classes/every class. However, in keeping with the increased secularisation of values and beliefs, some teachers said that it was getting harder to motivate their students to study Catholic RE. On the other hand, they were interested in learning about world religions, morality, and social issues. Teachers also reported that they were able to respond to the interests of their students as they had significant autonomy in deciding what topics to cover, particularly at Senior Cycle where RE tended to be a non-exam subject in most schools.

When assessing their preparedness for teaching minority faith pupils, an average of 11% of participants felt unprepared (see Table 3 & Figure 2). This figure fell to 8% when it came to teaching non-religious students (see Table 4 & Figure 2). With the exception of teachers in community and comprehensive colleges, the majority felt somewhat prepared to teach minority/non-religious students, suggesting a need for ongoing, quality CPD for RE teachers in this area.

Figure 3. Preparedness to teach Minority Faith Students (MFS) and Non-Religious Students (NRS) Across School Type

Community or Comprehensive School
- NRS: Very Prepared 19 | Somewhat Prepared 9 | Not Prepared 3
- MFS: Very Prepared 27 | Somewhat Prepared 11 | Not Prepared 3

ETB School or Community College
- NRS: Very Prepared 26 | Somewhat Prepared 31 | Not Prepared 4
- MFS: Very Prepared 21 | Somewhat Prepared 13 | Not Prepared 6

Voluntary Secondary School
- NRS: Very Prepared 50 | Somewhat Prepared 59 | Not Prepared 11
- MFS: Very Prepared 40 | Somewhat Prepared 65 | Not Prepared 15

Legend: ■ Very Prepared ■ Somewhat Prepared ■ Not Prepared

Provisions for students of minority/non-religious beliefs during RE

When asked about provisions made for students of minority/non-religious beliefs during RE, the majority responded that all students were encouraged to participate and to share their views regardless of their religious beliefs or faith background. Most teachers also referenced the choice to opt-out. Findings indicate that opting out of RE takes different forms in different schools: this appears to depend on resources (e.g. space/personnel), the RE programme, and history of requests/numbers making the request. Some teachers referred to specific policy/ethos led arrangements for accommodating these students such as:

— "We follow the NCCA curriculum we do it together. We meet with Parents/Guardians show them the textbooks and explain our thinking."

— "All students attend classes as we follow the NCCA syllabus."

— "They traditionally participate as we follow the SEC exam syllabus. There are arrangements made for withdrawal by the patrons."

— "My school does not make provisions as yet. It is a Catholic school with Catholic in the title. Parents know what they are to expect from the ethos. There has never been an issue with minority students in religion class. That may change in the future."

— "They are currently doing philosophy and ethics as a result of Minister Bruton's circular last February"

In some schools, students who are not participating in RE could go to a supervised study area such as the library or study hall. That was clearly not an option in other schools.[5] In a small number of cases, teachers were expected to come up with their own arrangements. Responses indicate an array of opt-out practices in schools for students of minority/non-religious beliefs such as:

— "They remain in class and can read only, cannot do study or homework to prevent educational advantage."

— "They sit in the class but do not have to participate"

5   It is mandatory for post primary students to be supervised.

- — "They sit at back of class and make a contribution if they wish"

- — "They are welcome to join if they choose; otherwise, they go to the study hall"

- — "Any students who chooses to opt out sits at the back of the room, studying their own faith"

Although the opt-out facility is intended to promote the student's agency where religious identity is concerned, teachers acknowledged that studying alone while the rest of the class continued with the RE lesson was not ideal. Teachers suggested that this might be addressed in the future through curricular changes and additional resources. Since the introduction of the Specification for Junior Cycle RE in 2019, the opt-out is no longer deemed necessary in ETB, Community or Comprehensive schools (DES, 2018).

Religious/belief based bullying

With mandatory anti-bullying policies adopted are regularly reviewed in all schools, and anti-bullying is a compulsory agenda item at all Board of Management meetings, schools are familiar with the serious nature and effects of bullying. 88% of respondents were not concerned about religious based bullying. Comments such as "I haven't heard of any bullying based on Religious belief in the school" indicate that either it was not an issue in their schools, or participants were not aware of it. However, a number of teachers said they were concerned about religious- based bullying, with comments such as "There can be hostility from non-religious students towards students who express faith at times" and "Strong beliefs by students can be ridiculed." Teachers singled out Christians as the most vulnerable group: "expressing religious based convictions can lead to low level bullying by staff members…e.g. expressing anti-abortion views." Another commented "I suspect Christians get the greatest flak today. There is a general intolerance of the Christian worldview which needs [to be] addressed."

Comments such as "many students profess no active faith. Few students express active participation in their faith" is interesting in the context of the *My World Survey* (Dooley et al, 2019), which found that 91% of this age group identify as religious. It seems that young people identify as religious at some level, but may find it difficult to express them. As one teacher suggested: 'holding a religious worldview can be a lonely experience in modern Ireland.'

Negative stereotyping

When it comes to negative stereotyping of students, teachers are most concerned about those who identify as Catholic (12%) and least concerned about negative stereotyping of those who identify as atheist (2%). Of the respondents who explained their answers, 50% voiced concern about anti-religious sentiment/behaviour such as 'the lazy way that Muslims can be categorised as terrorists, and Catholics as paedophiles or supportive of such behaviour'. Ableit new to Ireland, this concern echoes similar findings in other secularising nations where Christianity once dominated such as Australia, the United Kingdom, Sweden and Estonia (cf Schihalejev et al, 2020).

Students who identify as Catholic were most frequently the subject of concern. 33% of those who voiced concern singled out Catholicism/Catholics with comments such as:

— 'A Catholic student is more likely to be ridiculed or laughed at for their faith position so they tend to be silenced by the prevailing trend towards a secular humanist worldview.'

— 'It is now seen as archaic to hold Catholic values among the student body.'

— 'It is socially acceptable in Ireland to insult/belittle Catholics/Catholicism.'

Findings from the Open Forum

One aim of this study was to give RE teachers an opportunity to raise issues of relevance to them, i.e. to identify what they feel are the dominant opportunities and/or concerns for inclusive RE today. Therefore, the final survey question took the form of an open forum. Rather than asking a prescriptive question, teachers were asked: *The purpose of this survey is to assist in providing guidelines for inclusive RE... please add your voice here.* Of the 214 teachers who filled in the survey, 118 chose to participate in this open forum. Three main themes emerged from the data as follows

The most dominant theme was the importance of Religious Education/RE as a subject on the curriculum. The rationale for this was two-fold: it can prepare young people to live in a global society and it contributes to the spiritual/moral development of students. Both echo the rationale of the JCRES (2000) and the JCRES (2019). Two teachers dissented from this view.

Some RE teachers (15%) were concerned about the Catholic school ethos and/or about the effects of eroding the Catholic school ethos. They spoke of 'having to apologise for being Catholic' and 'having to justify a Catholic ethos.' Teachers talked about the negative view of faith schools – how they are portrayed in the Irish media and depicted in Irish society. They felt that this is inaccurate and does a disservice to society, that faith schools have an important role to play and should be allowed to fulfil that role, and that the secular/non-religious agenda can often be promoted instead of one that is fully inclusive. Some respondents expanded this view to faith in general and the importance of faith to individuals and to a truly pluralist community.

Students of faith are vulnerable to bullying. The negative view of faith and faith schools contributes to this effect, making students of faith a vulnerable group. The most vulnerable group of second level school students to emerge from the open forum are practising Catholics; the least vulnerable are those who profess a non-religious or atheist worldview. Teachers see evidence of pressure on students to be/identify as a non-believer.

Discussion

Overall, RE teachers view the provision of RE in post-primary schools positively. This resonates with European practice and the view of the Council of Europe outlined earlier. Most teachers see RE as primarily an academic subject, inclusive of all world religions and the non-religious worldview. Many others prioritise the attitude-forming potential of RE. A small minority mentioned the role of RE in faith formation. This may be of significance to patron bodies.

The main goal of teaching RE varied among participants, reflecting the broad aims of RE at post-primary level in Ireland and the expanding view of the role and relevance of RE across Europe. Although all aims of RE (DES, 2003; NCCA, 2019) emerged from the survey, some are clearly more dominant than others. Knowledge/understanding of religious traditions and the non-religious interpretation of life, and inculcating attitudes of tolerance and respect, constitute the main goals of teaching. It is interesting to compare this with a very small minority who identify as a main goal students exploring their own beliefs/worldviews and engaging with the big questions of life. With 'Exploring Questions' one of the three designated strands in the specification for Junior Cycle RE (2019), this may change.

The role and relevance of RE is interesting in the context of the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic. Research during this period indicates that many people see themselves as having become more reflective, more prayerful and closer to God during the more severe period of lockdown. One result of Covid-19 is that people seem to be asking: What is really important? What gives us meaning and purpose? Where should we root our values (Byrne & Sweetman, 2020)? If Ireland is a more plural society than it was in the past, but at the same time more reflective and perhaps prayerful as a result of the recent pandemic, how does this impact RE in schools, and particularly, inclusion of all students in RE?

Although young people value RE and want a safe space to learn and talk about their own and other religions, beliefs and truth claims in schools (NCCA, 2017), opportunities for them to talk about religion or faith outside the classroom are limited (Cullen, 2019, 280). RE has been significant in allowing young people to engage with the spiritual and religious questions they may not be addressing elsewhere. For instance, 85% of the 13- to 15-year olds in a recent survey said studying religion in school helped them understand people of other religions; 71% said it shaped their own views about religion (Byrne, Francis, & McKenna, 2019). Religious education at this level provides young people with an opportunity to understand the beliefs of others and to test their own beliefs and values. This theme found resonance among our participants, with some teachers identifying the main goal of RE in these terms.

In line with the Government's Action Plan on Bullying (2013b) which requires schools to include identity based bullying in their anti-bullying policies, half of the teachers in this study reported that their school's policy specifically mentioned religious identity-based bullying. However, this may not reflect student experience, as teachers reported that they were most concerned about the bullying of students who were practising Catholics and least concerned about bullying against students of minority or no religious belief. The teachers' concerns reflect the growing field of international research suggesting that in rapidly secularising societies, those who continue to practice any religion are vulnerable to bullying, especially the previous majority religions (cf Schihalejev et al, 2020; Kittelmann Flensner, 2018; Moulin, 2016; Ipgrave, 2012). Some of these researchers have identified that when an "atheist cool" sweeps the school, adolescents can consider religious participation as 'abnormal', with adverse consequences for young people who practice. In these settings, religious adolescents risk ridicule and social exclusion (Ipgrave, 2012). Similarly, the international research project REDCo (Religion in Education. A Contribution to Dialogue or a Factor of Conflict in Transforming Societies of European Countries) undertaken with 14-16 year olds found that some religiously-committed students feel vulnerable in the classroom (Weisse, 2011). Ipgrave (2012) concludes that when students feel forced to conceal or deny their religious identity, both personal and communal (school community) wellbeing are compromised. This has particular implications for Irish schools, where it seems that some young people are religious at some level, but may not want to appear so.

Implications for Inclusive Religious Education

Teachers agreed that RE should continue to be provided in post-primary schools. Although the main goal of RE might differ, there was much support for RE as a subject which provides significant opportunities to promote tolerance and understanding between faiths and with the non-religious view. The move away from Catholic-focused RE towards an approach that is inclusive of all religions and the non-religious perspective is now enshrined in the specification for Junior Cycle RE (2019). With many RE teachers fee somewhat (but not very) prepared to teach minority/non-religious students, ongoing quality CPD in this area is recommended. Once the specification has been embedded in schools, a follow up survey of RE teachers to assess its impact would be useful. A follow up might also analyse whether or /to what extent teachers' main goals in teaching RE has changed in light of the specification.

In relation to minority faith/non-religious students opting out of RE, there was strong evidence that opt-out arrangements differs among schools. It is important to remember that this data pertains to the period before the implementation of the JCRE Specification from 2019. With religious instruction and faith formation prohibited from RE in schools under sole or joint state patronage, the opt-out is no longer deemed necessary in these schools (DES, 2018). It would be interesting to investigate how this is experienced in schools by both teachers and students. In light of the importance of RE recognised across European education systems, by the Council of Europe, and by RE teachers, an exploratory study on the impact of the DES Circular of 2018 on RE provision might be warranted.

Findings suggest an increasing secularisation of schools despite the involvement of religious patrons in either a sole or joint capacity. In this context RE teachers had specific concerns about students who were practising Catholics being targeted for bullying. The experiences of those from a traditionally majority position which goes into rapid decline is a subject of some concern internationally; there was evidence from this study to support the existence of this concern in the Irish context. Given the personal and communal well-being implications, this needs to be taken seriously, investigated further and addressed.

It seems that all students who practice a religion can experience problems in school. The *Anti-Bullying Procedures* are designed to 'foster an attitude of respect for all: to promote the value of diversity; to address prejudice and stereotyping and to highlight the unacceptability of bullying behavior' (DES 2013a, 27). This applies to all groups, students of majority, minority and no faith and those who practice the once dominant faith tradition. Further attention needs to be given to creating inclusive classrooms in which the beliefs and sensibilities of every child is respected. It is essential that schools follow the guidance set out in the Action Plan on Bullying (2013b) and follow the Anti-Bullying Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools (2013a) where identity based bullying is concerned. However, some teachers consider this to be bigger than schools; if it is an issue of wider society, it cannot be left to schools to deal with alone.

Although the findings presented in this report could be informative for school patrons, policy makers, researchers, RE teachers, students and their parents, some limitations should be outlined. Firstly, it did not present any detailed data on the features of the organisations included in this report (e.g., private/ public; size/demographics). Secondly, the data pertains to the perspectives of RE teachers only. The experience of being religious in a school setting warrants further investigation. The voices of both students and teachers who practice a religious faith would add considerably to this field of research. These limitations should be addressed in future reports and research papers.

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Appendices

APPENDIX A

Aims of RE at Senior Cycle

1. To foster an awareness that the human search for meaning is common to all peoples of all ages and at all times.

2. To explore how this search for meaning has found, and continues to find, expression in religion.

3. To identify how understandings of God, religious traditions, and in particular the Christian tradition, have contributed to the culture in which we live, and how they continue to have an impact on personal lifestyle, interpersonal relationships, and relationships between individuals and their communities and contexts.

4. To appreciate the richness of religious traditions and to acknowledge the non-religious interpretation of life.

5. To contribute to the spiritual and moral development of the student (DES, 2006, p.4; 2000, p.4).[6]

The revised aim for Junior Cycle Religious Education is

to develop knowledge, understanding, skills, attitudes and values to enable young people to come to an understanding of religion and its relevance to life, relationships, society and the wider world. It aims to develop the students' ability to examine questions of meaning, purpose and relationships, to help students understand, respect and appreciate people's expression of beliefs, and to facilitate dialogue and reflection on the diversity of beliefs and values that inform responsible decision-making and ways of living (NCCA, 2019, p.5).

6   These aims were common to Junior Cycle up until the publication of the JCRE Specification in 2019.