

Belief Fluidity in Ireland's Changing Primary School Context

Challenges for religious education

Introduction

In 2018, Ireland was ranked the third most religiously observant country in Western Europe (Pew Research Centre, 2018). However, recent Census data indicates that the number of people self-identifying as Roman Catholic has decreased by 10 percentage points in just six years, falling from 79% in 2016 to 69% in 2022. The situation is complex, especially considering that the number of Catholics in Northern Ireland has risen slightly, from 45% in 2011 to 45.7% in 2021.

The Republic of Ireland has witnessed increasing religious and cultural diversity and a gradual rise in those not affiliated to any religion. This 'No Religion' category, which includes people identifying as humanist, free-thinkers, atheists, sceptics, and agnostics, has risen from 10% in 2016 to 14% in 2022. Sometimes described as the 'new nones', this diverse group resist religious labels, and though many may not believe in God, some are not hostile to religious engagement in education and faith schools (Woodhead, 2016).

These recent changes in people's religious and philosophical identity have impacted on the Irish educational system, where religion plays a key role. Indeed, in contrast to many other European countries, at primary level Ireland has no nationwide system of State schools but instead has a public-funded system of private faith schools. Currently 88.5% of Ireland's 3,095 mainstream primary schools have a Catholic ethos (DoE, 2023).

Despite their prominence, faith schools are encountering multiple changes and challenges. While most parents and faith leaders welcome educational choice, the



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This article profiles the complex, evolving role played by religion and belief in the context of sociocultural changes impacting on Ireland's denominational primary school system. Recent research indicates that the religious and belief self-identification of initial teacher educators and primary school teachers is complex and fluid. The article focuses on the challenges that teachers may face as they teach Religious Education.

government's commitment to increasing the number of multidenominational schools to 400 by 2030 – a target that seems increasingly unlikely to be met – has brought change to the primary school system. In the last five years, all of the 25 newly opened mainstream primary schools are multidenominational and none have a religious ethos. From 2012 to 2022, while 69 multidenominational schools have opened, 118 Catholic schools and 11 Church of Ireland schools have closed. Although the system is still heavily denominational, there is a perceptible feeling that change is inevitable.

Role of Religious Education in Ireland's denominational system

Ireland's denominational primary educational system is distinct in how it defines its school system in terms of religious affiliation. Further, the State does not prescribe content for the curricular area of Religious Education (RE), leaving responsibility for its content, delivery, and assessment in the hands of school patrons. In 2023, the Department of Education's inaugural curriculum framework designates Religious Education as one of the curricula areas, but there has been considerable change in its identity, role, and location in schools.

Initially, the most noticeable change is terminological. It is worth remembering that terminology has changed in the past. In the 1971 curriculum, Religious Instruction, conceptualised as forming students in faith, was integrated with other curricular areas and identified as the most important subject in the curriculum. By 1999 it was renamed Religious Education and emphasis was placed on educationally inclusive approaches that recognised the diversity of religions and beliefs.

In 2023, what was previously termed RE has emerged as an amalgamate and fluid term called 'Religious/Ethical/Multi-belief, and Values Education – The Patron's Programme' (NCCA, 2023). The awkwardness of this expansive term testifies to the NCCA's desire to avoid offending any one educational sector by diplomatically including a cover-all term that encompasses different approaches to patron's programmes in primary schools.

Interestingly, across Europe, RE is accepted as an inclusive umbrella term encompassing a range of ethical, values, and multi-belief dimensions, as well as faith formation approaches. But in Ireland the term *religion* or *religious* is sometimes linked to the contested notion that religious bodies, in particular the Catholic Church, should not be involved in State-funded education.

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Belief fluidity

Though the new curricular framework designates RE as a curricular area in primary schools with a new recommended teaching time of 2 hours per week, studies suggest that primary teachers may not be teaching it as intended in Catholic schools. Recent research with 400 postgraduate initial teacher education (ITE) students in two Catholic teacher education colleges in Ireland reveals a disconnect between students' personal beliefs and the curricular content they are required to teach children in Catholic primary schools (Kieran & Mullally, 2021).

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This mixed-methods study profiles the religious beliefs and non-religious worldviews of ITE students as part of a study on their understanding of and attitudes towards religious and non-religious beliefs. The data indicates that 97% of participants attended a Catholic primary school and 89% a Catholic post-primary school. Further, 99% received the Sacraments of First Eucharist and Confirmation at primary school. With Catholic education and sacramental initiation playing such a significant role in their education, it might be expected that participants' personal beliefs and lives would mirror conventional Catholic teaching and practice. But this is not always the case.

While 58% continued to identify as Roman Catholic, only 39% said they believed in one God and 37% in the Holy Spirit, two core non-negotiable aspects of Catholic belief. Further, 19% were unsure what they believed, and 11% did not believe in God. When it comes to their religious practice, 16% said they attended weekly Mass and 30% said they never attended. Participants revealed an interesting range and fluidity of beliefs, ticking boxes for energy (53%), spirits (44%), psychics (18%), and crystals (10%). Their belief in energy and spirits was greater than their belief in God. Moreover, 7% believed in gods, 9% in magic, and 14% in reincarnation.

The data shows ITE students' fascinating identification with a range of eclectic, fluid, and individual beliefs drawn from outside formal orthodox Christian beliefs. Findings suggest that they are hesitant to identify with any one tradition. Harmon's (2018) research on the voice of the child on religion in an Irish Catholic primary school also reveals belief fluidity among children. A significant number of children in his research identified with a sense of belonging to different religious traditions (one said, 'I am a Catholic Buddhist'), suggesting comfort with a variety of cultural and religious practices that they may be experiencing in more diverse, multicultural families.

With recent studies indicating a trend towards extra-institutional religious practice (Ganiel, 2019) and disaffiliation from institutional religion and practice among ITE students, it is important to ask questions about the appropriateness of expecting beginning teachers to be tasked with sacramental preparation and faith formation in Catholic primary schools. Nurturing children's faith is also a

very onerous role for teachers that is often not being complemented by the role of the family and the parish.

In a move towards reform, the Dublin Diocese set up a Sacraments Implementation Group in 2020 (Association of Catholics in Ireland, 2020). It began with a listening process with parishes and parents. Parents revealed a strong desire to communicate to their children a belief in God and for prayer, but their disposition towards Church was complex. A 'lingering fondness' for their childhood experiences of faith was clear, but Mass attendance is not where they are now experiencing a spiritual connection. Many felt an alienation from Church language and its teachings (ibid.).

Conclusion

In a country with an overwhelmingly denominational or faith-based system of schooling at primary level, and a sizeable majority of faith schools at post-primary level, it is important to explore what this rise of the religiously unaffiliated and belief fluidity might mean for children, parents, and educators. Research is revealing that many young teachers in Irish primary classrooms are now more comfortable aligning themselves with a broader spectrum of beliefs than with more traditional, orthodox belief systems.

This emerging fluidity of belief among ITE students and children situates Ireland's denominational primary-school system in a new landscape. It is crucial for denominational schools to consider the place of religiously unaffiliated students and teachers in the educational system and to recognise the changing contours of the traditionally hegemonic relationship between religion and education in Ireland. Far from this being a bleak analysis, the reality points to more diverse, inclusive, dialogical classrooms in Ireland, with opportunities to reimagine the role and place of religion in Irish primary schools.

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Powerstown Educate Together School wins Nature Hero Award 2023



Powerstown Educate Together National School in Tyrrelstown, Dublin, was the winner of the Glenveagh Nature Hero Award 2023. The prize was a certificate, a plaque, and a €10,000 school garden makeover.

The Glenveagh Nature Hero Award aims to support schools with their biodiversity goals and provides a mark of excellence to schools looking to create an educational space that nurtures love of nature, develops knowledge of Irish biodiversity and encourages real action to help it locally.

School Principal Helena Hench said:

“It’s incredible to see the pupils all work together over the past year and see how their hard work paid off. The children are beyond excited to have won a garden makeover for the school, and myself and the staff at Powerstown ETNS could not be more proud.”