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The voices of RE teachers

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INTRODUCTION

Many readers might remember Frank O'Conner's hapless Jackie and the fear and trembling with which he approaches his first confession. It's hard to fathom how much things have changed in Catholic identity and practice since O'Connor's short story was published in 1951. Census data indicates that the Catholic population has fallen by approximately 17% over the last five decades. At the same time, the proportion of those with no religion continues to rise. In 2016, 9.8% of the population identified as non-religious, up from 0.04% in 1961. A recent study on religious affiliation among 16 to 29 year-olds in Ireland indicated that 58% of this age group identify as Christian, 1% Muslim, 3% other religions, and 39% as non-religious. Furthermore, 26% of young people in this age group say they never attend a religious service.[1] International patterns in Western, once Christian-majority nations, echo this trend towards no-religion.[2] On the other hand, it seems that religious identity among second-level students is still a feature:

1 Bullivant, S. (2018). *Europe's Young Adults and Religion: Findings from the European Social Survey (2014-16) to inform the 2018 Synod of Bishops.* London: Benedict XVI Centre for Religion and Society, St Mary's University, and Institut Catholique de Paris.

2 Pew Research Center. (2019). *Religion's Relationship to Happiness, Civic Engagement and Health Around the World.* http://www.pewforum.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/7/2019/01/Wellbeing-report-1-25-19-FULL-REPORT-FOR-WEB.pdf

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the most recent *My World Survey* in 2019 found that 91% of this age group identifies with some religion.[3]

This article arose out of a research project funded by the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission, which investigated views and experiences of teachers and minority belief students of Religious Education (RE) in second level schools in Ireland. Conducted by the National Anti-Bullying Centre (ABC) at Dublin City University, it explored questions such as: to what extent are teachers prepared for a religiously pluralistic environment; how inclusive is RE; and most importantly for the ABC, in this landscape can a young person's religious identity or practice make them more or less vulnerable to bullying?

The research specifically focused on giving voice to RE teachers in order to understand their views and experiences. Findings indicate that some teachers are concerned about the experiences of 'religious students', especially practising Catholics. 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.[4]

SECOND LEVEL RELIGIOUS EDUCATION: THE CONTEXT

Over the last two decades, the Council of Europe has looked increasingly to RE as a means of promoting intercultural understanding and respect for diverse beliefs. 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 competencies such as religious literacy and understanding. According to the Council, such attitudes and competencies are necessary for intercultural living, and RE has an important contribution to make in this regard. Findings from a number of research projects across Europe agree that young people regard highly the place of RE and want a safe space to learn and talk about their own and others' religions, beliefs and truth claims in schools.[5]

3   Dooley, B., O'Connor, C., Fitzgerald, A. and O'Reilly, A. (2019). *My World Survey 2: The National Study of Youth Mental Health in Ireland.* Retrieved from http://www.myworldsurvey.ie/content/docs/My_World_Survey_2.pdf

4   Schihalejev, O., Kuusisto, A., Vikdahl, L. & Kallioniemi, A. (2020). "Religion and children's perceptions of bullying in multicultural schools in Estonia, Finland and Sweden", *Journal of Beliefs & Values,* 41:3, 371-384; Moulin, D. (2016). "Reported Experiences of Anti-Christian Prejudice among Christian Adolescents in England", *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 31 (2): 223-238. https://doi.org/10.1080/13537903.2016.1152679

5   National Council for Curriculum and Assessment. (2017) *Background Paper and Brief for the Review of Junior Cycle Religious Education*. Dublin: NCCA.

Up until the Education Act of 1998, the Irish state was effectively prohibited from involvement in second level RE. As a result, denominational school patrons filled the gap, leading to a system of denominational confessional RE (religious instruction). The Education Act (1998) removed this prohibition. State certified and examined syllabi for Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate RE quickly followed. Thus, the once dominant denominational and confessional tradition has given way to an approach led by the state, designed to be inclusive of students of all faith and none.

The reform of Junior Cycle in 2015, as outlined in the *Framework for Junior Cycle*, ushered in a specification for Junior Cycle RE. This specification has been implemented incrementally in schools since 2019. Under the provisions of the *Framework* and the specification, RE continues as a state-certified subject. Like its predecessor, the Junior Certificate Religious Education Syllabus (JCRES) of 2000, this specification is intended for all students, whatever their religious faith or worldview. It exposes students to a broad range of religious traditions and to the non-religious interpretation of life. It does not 'provide religious instruction in any particular religious or faith tradition'.[6]

SCHOOL PATRONAGE AND RE

The school patron has a legal right and responsibility to uphold the characteristic spirit of the school,[7] where RE can be one among many expressions of that characteristic spirit. This gives school patrons the right and responsibility to influence the approach to RE in their schools, in accordance with school ethos. In *broad* terms, patronage of second level schools falls into three sectors:

- ‣ *Voluntary secondary schools*, usually denominational but also including recent, non-religious patrons such as Educate Together. Schools with a Christian ethos fall into this category – just short of 50% of second level schools (see Table 1).
- ‣ *Schools and Community Colleges* 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

6 Department of Education and Skills. (2018) Circular Letter 0062/2018. Dublin: Department of Education and Skills, p.2. https://www.education.ie/en/Circulars-and-Forms/Active-Circulars/cl0062_2018.pdf

7 Government of Ireland. (1998). Education Act, 1998. Dublin, Ireland: Irish Statute Book.

congregation or local bishop who had been patron of an amalgamating school) act as co-patrons. These are also usually multi-denominational.

Table 1. Number of post primary schools by sector 2019/2020[8]

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

In recent years, the Department of Education and Skills has made clear that in Community and ETB second-level schools, RE at Junior Cycle is *not* a mandatory subject. 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.'[9] Further, the more formative/confessional approach to RE as a subject is explicitly dealt with. Where 'religious instruction and worship in accordance with the rites and practices of a particular denomination' 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.[10]

RE IN CATHOLIC SCHOOLS

The Irish Catholic Bishops are committed to RE in their schools and, since the JCRES of 2000, to developments in state-sponsored RE. They recognise the need for RE that opens students to different religious perspectives. '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'.[11]

8   See 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
9   DES (2018) p.2.
10 DES (2018) p.3.
11 Byrne, Gareth. (2021). Investigating the Spiritual and Religious Dimension of Life with Young People in Catholic Second-Level Schools in Ireland. *Review of Religious Education and Theology,* 1: 2-17. See p. 8-9.

The Irish Catholic Bishops' response to the *Framework for Junior Cycle* (2015) upholds RE as a manifestation of school ethos. It explains the importance of RE in a holistic education, the need for a realistic understanding of the needs of young people and 'the continuing willingness of the Catholic faith community to put its best resources at the disposal of the young'.[12]

The *Framework* and specification inform the broad guidelines from the Irish Catholic Bishops on Junior Cycle Religious Education in the Catholic School.[13]

METHODOLOGY

The research was completed in 2019 and involved an online survey of 214 RE teachers. This online survey was issued to all second-level schools in the Republic of Ireland and circulated to RE teachers through school principals. Participants came from a cross-section of second-level schools in Ireland, with schools from all three patronage sectors represented. Findings revealed that 80% of participants identified as female and 20% as male, reflecting the overall gender gap in the teaching profession in Ireland. The majority identified as: Roman Catholic (85%); Church of Ireland 2%; multiple religious beliefs 5% and 4% no religion. Religious beliefs were described by 66% of participants as being very important to them.

WHAT THE RE TEACHERS SAID

When it came to the place and purpose of RE on the curriculum, 67% of participants felt that it should be a state-examined subject in second-level schools. With its subject matter extending to all world religions and the non-religious worldviews, teachers felt that RE *is* inclusive of all students and agreed that all beliefs should be respected and accommodated in the subject area. There was considerable variation in how teachers described their main goal in teaching RE. Approximately one third of respondents listed a *single* main goal such as 'exam results', or 'acceptance and tolerance of other faiths and none'. The remainder offered compound responses, containing *more* than one goal, such as those outlined in *Figure I* below. These intersecting goals are not at odds with each other; rather they reflect teachers' perceptions of the multidimensional aims of second level RE.
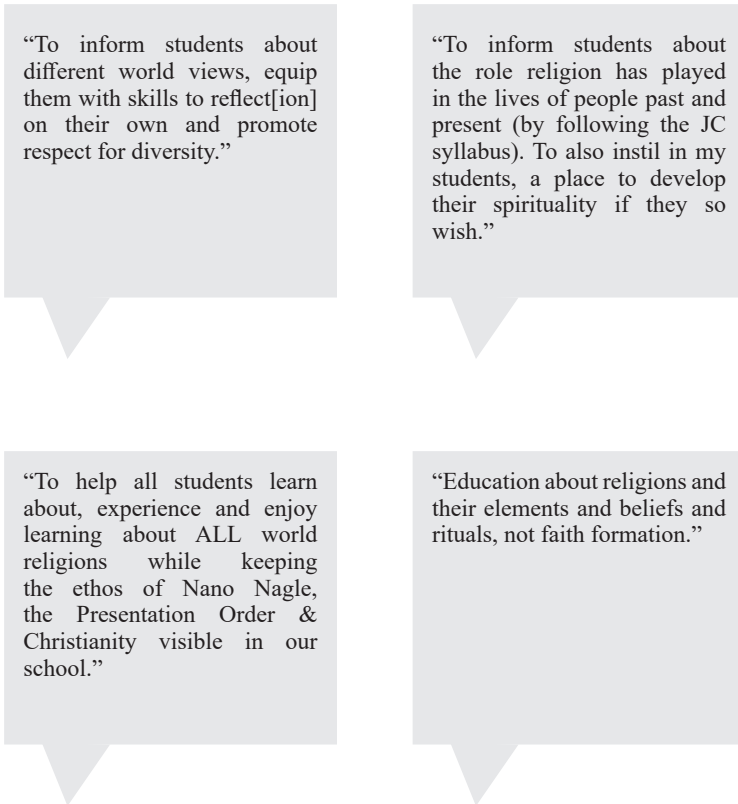
12 Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference. (2017). *Religious Education and the Framework for Junior Cycle*. Dublin, Ireland: Veritas, p.5.
13 Council for Catechetics of the Irish Episcopal Conference. (2019) Junior Cycle Religious Education in the Catholic School. Dublin: Veritas. https://www.religiouseducation.ie/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/JC-Religious-Ed-Cat-School_WEB.pdf .

Figure 1

Compound teacher descriptions of their main goal in teaching RE

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

"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."

"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."

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

Consistent across all three sectors, 70% of responses highlighted knowledge and understanding of religions and worldviews as a main goal of teaching RE. Formation of attitudes and values was a main goal of approximately half of teachers, with tolerance, respect and acceptance the most commonly cited. Interestingly, only 13% of responses referred to faith formation; this was well below the proportion of schools with a Christian ethos participating in this study (57%). Less frequently cited goals included: spiritual development; students exploring their own beliefs and worldviews; the religious ethos of the school; the Christian faith; appreciation of Christian values and exploring the big questions of meaning and purpose (see *Figure 2*).

Figure 2.
Percentage of the reported main goals of teaching RE among teachers.
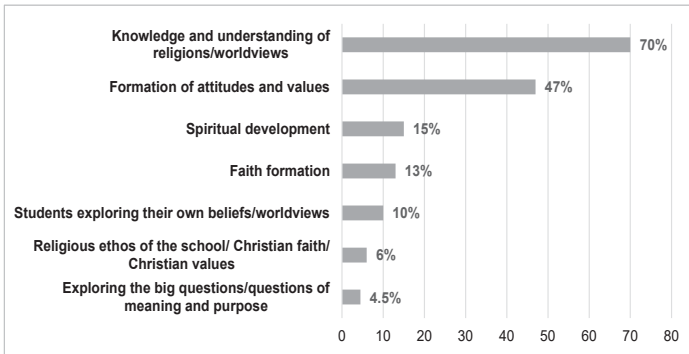
The vast majority of participants (83%) said that they emphasise the diversity of religious and non-religious views in most classes or in every class. Interestingly, whereas students were interested in learning about world religions, morality, and social issues, some teachers said that it was getting harder to motivate their students to study *Catholic* RE.

When assessing their *preparedness* for teaching minority faith pupils, an average of 11% felt they were not prepared (see *Table 3*). This figure fell to 9% when it came to teaching non-religious students (see *Table 4*). Across sectors, the majority felt 'somewhat' prepared to teach minority and non-religious students, suggesting a need for ongoing, quality Continuing Professional Development for teachers in this area.

Table 3.
Preparedness for teaching minority faith students by school type

	Very prepared	Somewhat prepared	Not prepared
Voluntary Secondary School	40 (33%)	65 (54%)	15 (13%)
ETB School or Community College	21 (35%)	33 (55%)	6 (10%)
Community or Comprehensive School	17 (55%)	11 (35%)	3 (10%)

Table 4.

Preparedness for teaching non-religious students by school type

	Very prepared	Somewhat prepared	Not prepared
Voluntary Secondary School	50 (42%)	59 (49%)	11 (9%)
ETB School or Community College	26 (43%)	31 (51%)	4 (7%)
Community or Comprehensive School	19 (61%)	9 (29%)	3 (10%)

RELIGIOUS/BELIEF -BASED BULLYING

For 88% of respondents, religious-based bullying either was not an issue in their schools, or they were not aware of it. However, a number of teachers expressed concern. One stated "There can be hostility from non-religious students towards students who express faith at times." Another said that "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". Whereas this phenomenon may be new to Ireland, this concern echoes similar findings from other secularised nations such as Australia, the United Kingdom, Sweden and Estonia, where Christianity once held a dominant role in society and education.

Comments such as "many students profess no active faith. Few students express active participation in their faith" are interesting in the context of the *My World Survey*, 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 appear so. 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".

33% of those who voiced concern singled out Catholicism and 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 and belittle Catholics and Catholicism".

FROM THE OPEN FORUM

One aim of this study was to give RE teachers an opportunity to raise what they feel are the dominant opportunities and/or concerns for inclusive RE today. Therefore, the survey ended with an open-forum style question: '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.

1) The most dominant theme was the *importance* of RE as a subject on the curriculum. The rationale for this was twofold: it can prepare young people to live in a global society and it contributes to the spiritual and moral development of students.

2) Some respondents (15%) were concerned about *Catholic* school ethos and the effects of eroding Catholic 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 and how they are portrayed in the Irish media and depicted in Irish society. They felt that this does them a disservice and that faith schools have an important role to play in a truly plural society. Also, teachers reported that the secular and non-religious agenda can often be promoted instead of one that is fully inclusive.

3) A third theme (14% of respondents) was that students of faith are vulnerable to *bullying.* Some suggested that the negative view of faith and faith schools contributes to this effect. Practicing Catholics are the most vulnerable group of second level school students to emerge from the open forum. Teachers see evidence of pressure to be or to identify as a non-believer. Further, they perceived those who profess a non-religious or atheist worldview as the least vulnerable group of students.

CONCLUSION

Overall, teachers are positive about the provision of RE in second-level schools and agree that it should continue to be provided.

The variety of goals they articulate when they speak of their main goal in teaching RE, reflect the broad aims of second level RE and the enlarging view of its role and relevance across Europe. Some goals are more dominant than others. For instance, a minority of 13% of responses refers to the role of RE in *faith formation*, and this is well below the proportion of schools with a Christian ethos participating in the study (57%). This may be of significance to patron bodies. Further, teachers' views on the place and purpose of RE are interesting in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. Research during this period indicates that many people seem to be asking questions like: What is really important? What gives us meaning and purpose? Where should we root our values?[14] Although young people value RE and want a safe space to learn and talk about their own and others' religions, beliefs and truth claims in schools, opportunities for them to talk about religion or faith outside the classroom are limited. RE should be significant in allowing young people to engage with the spiritual and religious questions they may not be addressing elsewhere. The teachers' concerns around the vulnerability of religious students reflect the growing field of international research in this area. For instance, Ipgrave identified that when an atheist cool sweeps the school, adolescents can consider religious participation as 'abnormal', with adverse consequences for young people who practice.[15] In these settings, religious adolescents risk ridicule and social exclusion. Similarly, an international research project undertaken with 14-16 year olds found that some religiously-committed students feel vulnerable in the classroom.[16] Ipgrave concludes that when students feel forced to conceal or deny their religious identity, both personal and communal (school community) wellbeing are compromised. It seems that students who practice a religion can experience problems in school. In this context, some teachers had specific concerns about students who were practising Catholics. However, if this is an issue of wider society, it is evident that it cannot be left to schools to deal with alone.

14 Byrne, G., & Sweetman, B. (2020, June 23). Rite and reason: Local church building crucial to identity. Irish Times, p. 14. Online version: Coronavirus in church: 2020 vision on the meaning of faith in our lives. Retrieved from https://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/coronavirus-in-church-2020-vision-on-the-meaning-of-faith-in-our-lives-1.4285471

15 Ipgrave, J. (2012). "Relationships between local patterns of religious practice and young people's attitudes to the religiosity of their peers", Journal of Beliefs & Values, 33 (3): 261-274, DOI: 10.1080/13617672.2012.732805

16 Weisse, W. (2011). "Reflections on the REDCo Project." *British Journal of Religious Education*, 33 (2): 111-125.