

**The Experience of Primary School Teachers Working in Denominational Schools  
with Children from Diverse Religious and Philosophical Backgrounds Who Opt Out of  
Religious Education.**

**Philip McCarthy**

**Master of Education Studies**

**(Intercultural Learning and Leadership)**

**Marino Institute of Education and Trinity College Dublin**

**Supervisor: Dr. Barbara O'Toole**

**June 2021**

**Declaration**

I hereby declare that this dissertation is a presentation of my original research work. Wherever contributions of others are involved, every effort is made to indicate this clearly. This work has not been submitted previously at this or any other educational institution. This work was done under the guidance of Dr. Barbara O'Toole at the Marino Institute of Education, Dublin. I agree that the library may lend or copy this dissertation upon request

Signed: Philip McCarthy

Date: 01/06/2021

### **Abstract**

The purpose of the current research study was to gain a greater understanding of the experiences of teachers working in denominational schools which have students from a variety of belief backgrounds, and who opt out of participating in religious education. Over the last 20 years, Irish society has become increasingly diverse, with a resulting increase in students in Irish primary schools from diverse belief backgrounds. However, the majority of Irish primary schools are still denominational, run by the Catholic Church. It is therefore of importance to critically examine and provide insights into teachers' experiences in these religious ethos schools where multiple religious and philosophical beliefs are represented. For this study, nine teachers were interviewed to understand their experiences of teaching in denominational schools. The findings suggest that teachers experience some negative feelings towards the teaching of religion in primary schools. This was highlighted through teacher responses indicating that the opt-out procedures in schools are insufficient, with the procedures being ambiguous and inconsistent. The research also shows that there was a clear contrast between contemporary Irish society and the traditional values of religious ethos schools. In summary, the findings from this research suggest that there may be a need for a greater diversity in the types of primary schools which exist in Ireland, and that significant disparities exist in the opt-out procedures in denominational schools. The research suggests that formal guidelines on opting-out strategies would be welcomed in denominational Irish schools, and that increased supports should be provided for teachers working in these schools.

*Keywords:* denominational schools, religious education, sacramental preparation, belief backgrounds, opt-out procedure

### **Acknowledgements**

Thank you to my supervisor, Dr. Barbara O'Toole who has guided me through this research project with great support, crucial guidance, and dedication. I feel very fortunate to have had you as my supervisor this year and am greatly appreciative of all of the feedback and direction provided to me throughout this work. Thank you to Dr. Rory McDaid, who along with Dr. Barbara O'Toole, put together a really engaging course. I thoroughly enjoyed all of the discussions and debates every Friday and Saturday.

Thank you to all of the participants in this study who gave up their own time to take part. Your contributions offered invaluable insight.

Thank you to all of the staff in Marino Institute of Education, who have created a great environment in which to learn. I have enjoyed all of the positive interactions that I have had with staff members over the last two years.

To my parents, for always encouraging me to further my education and instilling in me the importance of lifelong learning. I have enjoyed discussing my research topic with both of you this year and have appreciated your support. And in the tradition of saving the best to last, to my wife Eileen, who through her own academic achievements inspired me to apply for this course. Your willingness to discuss the research project with me in the evenings and at the weekends was really appreciated. You were a listening ear when I needed it and a vital support for me throughout the process.

**Abbreviations**

CPD	Continuous Professional Development
CPSMA	Catholic Primary Schools Management Association
CSO	Central Statistics Office
CSP	Catholic Schools Partnership
DES	Department of Education and Skills
HRC	Human Rights Committee
IHRC	Irish Human Rights Commission
ITE	Initial Teacher Education
INTO	Irish National Teacher Organisation
MIC	Mary Immaculate College
MIE	Marino Institute of Education
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
OSCE	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
RE	Religious Education
RSE	Relationship and Sexual Education
SPHE	Social Personal and Health Education

## Table of Contents

<b>Declaration</b> .....	<b>2</b>
<b>Abstract</b> .....	<b>3</b>
<b>Acknowledgements</b> .....	<b>4</b>
<b>Abbreviations</b> .....	<b>5</b>
<b>Chapter 1: Introduction</b> .....	<b>9</b>
Provision of schools in Ireland .....	9
Purpose of the current study and research aims .....	10
<b>Chapter 2: Literature Review</b> .....	<b>13</b>
Introduction.....	13
Ireland .....	13
Denominational schools and faith formation .....	15
<i>Faith formation</i> .....	17
<i>Rule 68</i> .....	19
Religious education lessons .....	19
Human rights, and the ethics of opting out.....	21
<i>The ethics of ‘opting out’</i> .....	22
The effectiveness of opting out.....	24
Comparative study .....	25
Teachers’ views .....	27

Teacher education .....	29
Conclusion .....	30
<b>Chapter 3: Research Methodology .....</b>	<b>31</b>
Introduction.....	31
Research paradigm.....	31
Research methodology .....	33
Semi-structured interviews .....	34
Research positionality .....	35
Research participants .....	35
Ethical considerations .....	37
Research procedures .....	38
<i>Pilot interview</i> .....	38
Research interviews .....	39
Data analysis .....	39
Reliability and validity.....	41
Limitations .....	41
<b>Chapter 4: Discussion and Analysis .....</b>	<b>43</b>
Introduction.....	43
Tension in schools between secularism and religious values .....	43
<i>Religious prayer, masses, and symbolism</i> .....	45
<i>Doctrinal preparation in diverse classrooms</i> .....	46

<i>Conflicting religious values</i> .....	47
Personal beliefs .....	48
Exclusion.....	53
Challenges of teaching children from minority belief/faith backgrounds in denominational schools.....	57
<i>Curriculum tensions</i> .....	57
<i>Guidance for teachers</i> .....	60
Conclusion .....	62
<b>Chapter 5: Conclusions and Recommendations</b> .....	<b>64</b>
Study conclusions .....	64
<i>(i) Negative feeling of teachers towards RE</i> .....	64
<i>(ii)The ambiguity and inconsistencies that exist around the opt-out procedure in schools</i> .....	65
<i>(iii)The difficulties caused by the contrast between contemporary Irish society and religious-ethos schools</i> .....	67
Recommendations.....	69
<b>References</b> .....	<b>73</b>
<b>Appendices</b> .....	<b>81</b>
Appendix A.....	82
Appendix B .....	83
Appendix C .....	84



## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

The Irish educational system is distinctive in that the majority of primary schools are denominational, under the patronage of religious organisations. The state is the provider for education, but most primary schools are owned by different patron bodies who manage them. Denominational schools are those that are run by religious organisations and follow the practices of that religion. This study looks to understand the experiences of teachers who work in these religious ethos schools where they are required to teach religious education (RE) and at the same time provide alternative work for children who opt out of RE and sacramental preparation. The aim of this research is to explore the perspectives of teachers when it comes to supporting children from different belief backgrounds; and assess how the need for children to opt out of RE impacts on their practice. To gain a greater insight into the reality of the opt-out procedure, nine interviews were carried out with teachers who had/have children in their classroom who were/are opting out of RE and sacramental preparation. The interview data collected informs this study.

### **Provision of schools in Ireland**

The Irish primary school system is largely made up of denominational schools with 89 percent of schools coming under the patronage of the Catholic church (DES, 2018). This results in the majority of Irish teachers working in religious ethos schools where they are required to teach RE and prepare students for the sacraments regardless of their own religious or philosophical beliefs. However, it is apparent from the 2016 Irish census that the makeup of Irish society has changed. This is illustrated by the fact that the total number of citizens claiming to have no religion was 481,388 in the 2016 census, an increase of 73.6 percent on the 2011 total of 277,237 (Central Statistics Office, 2017). Furthermore, many children in Ireland now attend schools that do not represent their own faith background (Faas, Foster, &

Smith, 2020). The Catholic Schools Partnership (2015) describes Catholic schools as being “caring and inclusive communities precisely because they are Catholic” (Catholic Schools Partnership, 2015, p.7). They also refer to the fact that they have “adapted to serve such a broad spectrum of pupils” (Catholic Schools Partnership, 2015, p.9). In Ireland, the options for parents who wish to send their children to multidenominational schools, or for teachers who would prefer to work in those schools, are Educate Together Schools and Community National Schools. Educate Together Schools originate from the Dalkey School Project, founded in Dublin in 1978. The Educate Together charter affirms that children of all social, cultural and religious backgrounds have a right to an education that respects their individual identity (Educate Together Charter, 2019). Essentially, Educate Together schools seek to provide for all those who are represented in society. Community National Schools were established in 2008 and are managed by the Education and Training Boards (ETBs). They state that their ethos seeks to promote a holistic approach to education, developing all aspects of the child, intellectually, physically, culturally, morally and spiritually (CNS, 2020). While these schools provide alternative options for those from different belief backgrounds, they only make up a small percentage of the primary schools in Ireland. As of 2019 there were 150 multidenominational schools in Ireland making up only 4.8 percent of the total number of primary schools (Lawlor & Burke, 2020).

### **Purpose of the current study and research aims**

Recently, Irish primary schools’ admissions policies have been amended and from September 2021 onwards schools will no longer be allowed to use religion as a selection criterion. Furthermore, schools must now provide details of the school’s arrangements for students who do not wish to attend religious instruction (Education Act, Admission to Schools, 2018). The current study sought to investigate the provisions which are currently in place and how these provisions impact teachers in denominational schools. Due to the fact

that many students attend denominational schools who are from different belief or cultural backgrounds, some of these students do not participate in RE, which is generally referred to as “opting out”. There is often a necessity for these children to attend denominational mainly Catholic run schools due to the lack of potential alternative options. During the school day when RE is taught, the options for these students are rather ambiguous and inconsistent. There are currently no definitive guidelines from the Department of Education and Skills (DES) on how denominational schools should approach the “opting out” of children from diverse religious and philosophical backgrounds. In addition, the Intercultural Guidelines (NCCA, 2006, p. 5) which looks to “contribute to the development of Ireland as an intercultural society” provides little direction on what schools should do when it comes to supporting those students who come from different belief backgrounds. This lack of direction has led to various different approaches being adopted by denominational schools and the individual teachers in these schools. These approaches are a main focus of this study.

Previous research has discussed the difficulties that are faced in denominational schools when it comes to religious diversity (Faas, Darmody, & Sokolowska, 2015; Hyland & Bocking, 2016; Lodge, A & Lynch, 2004; Mawhinney, 2015; O’Toole, 2015). Chapter 2 discusses the current literature and examines issues relating to the Irish education system and provisions which are currently in place. Denominational schools and faith formation are analysed in terms of their place in contemporary Irish society and whether alternative forms of provision would create an equitable situation. The rescinding of Rule 68 of the Rule for National Schools and the impact this has in primary schools and for the teachers who work in them is discussed. RE and the practical implications of teaching it in schools where there are students who are opting out is outlined. The human rights and ethical considerations are highlighted with respect to the opting out procedure. The chapter also discusses the effectiveness of the opt-out procedure and compares the Irish situation to that of other

European countries including Denmark, Sweden, Finland, and others. Finally, teachers' views and the role that teacher education programmes play in preparing teachers to work in denominational schools is evaluated in terms of their connection to the research topic.

The research methodologies chapter outlines the research design and the methodology that was followed to gather data for this study. This research followed a qualitative research method; semi-structured interviews were used to gather data which was examined using thematic analysis. The context of the study along with the positionality of the researcher are outlined in this chapter along with the ethical considerations, reliability, validity and the research limitations.

The discussion and data analysis chapter presents the main themes that emerged from the data collected. Four themes became apparent following the thematic analysis. These themes are presented in depth in this chapter.

The final chapter looks at the conclusions and recommendations that arise from this study. This chapter outlines the various areas where changes could be made that would benefit those children who come from different belief backgrounds and improve the experience of teachers in denominational schools.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

### **Introduction**

This chapter examines relevant literature in relation to different elements of primary school education in Ireland. It will begin with a focus on Ireland and its relationship with RE in the context of provisions that are currently in place. The chapter also looks at the impact of denominational schooling and the practice of faith formation in schools and how this shapes the experiences of those in the school community. The many contrasting opinions in relation to the effects of the current system on children's human rights will be discussed. The chapter also delves into issues around the procedure of 'opting out' and compares the system in Ireland to that of other countries in Europe. Finally, accounts in the literature on teachers' view will be examined in the context of working in denominational schools with children who opt out of RE.

### **Ireland**

Ireland has a unique educational system in that the majority of primary schools are denominational, under the patronage of a religious organisation. The state is the provider for education, but the schools are owned by different patron bodies who manage them. In Ireland's case, 89 percent of primary schools are under the patronage of the Catholic church (DES, 2018). However, there has been a significant increase in the number of people living in Ireland who come from different religious and belief backgrounds; between 2011-2016 this number increased from 16 percent to 22 percent of the population (Faas, Foster, & Smith, 2020). The UN Human Rights Committee (2011) recommended that Ireland should increase its efforts to ensure that non-denominational primary education is made widely available in all regions of the State, in view of the increasingly diverse and multi-ethnic population. The changes in the make-up of Irish society have not gone unnoticed by policy makers. In 2011

the DES established a forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector and in 2012 a report on their findings was published (Coolahan, Hussey, & Kilfeather, 2012). One of the findings was the need for greater diversity of school type to meet the needs and rights of citizens in a more pluralist society. However the report also pointed to the fact that denominational schools will continue to be the preference of many parents (Coolahan et al., 2012). Recent changes in the admissions policies for Irish primary schools mean that from September 2021 religious ethos schools will no longer be allowed to use religion as a selection criterion (Education Act, Admission to Schools, 2018). This is seen as making it easier for those of minority belief backgrounds to enrol in primary school regardless of the religious ethos of that school. Furthermore, schools must now provide details of arrangements for students who do not wish to attend religious instruction (Education Act, Admission to Schools, 2018).

While the changes in the enrolment policy of denominational schools may be seen as a positive step in creating a more inclusive model, the diversity of school choice is still something which is happening at a very slow rate. Since the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism published its report nine years ago there has been only a 2.5 percent increase in the number of multi-denominational primary schools (Lawlor & Burke, 2020). This can be attributed to the fact that the churches continue to own the property of many schools in Ireland which has caused difficulty for any attempts at setting up alternative schools (Fischer, 2016).

As was mentioned earlier in this section, from September 2021 schools must outline their arrangements for children who opt out of RE. Indeed, children in Ireland already have the right to ‘opt out’ of RE in denominational settings, but regardless of this, it has been argued that the beliefs of those who opt out are being undermined in Irish schools (Faas, Foster, & Smith, 2020). In practice, it has been reported by many authors (Mawhinney 2012,

2015; Shanneik 2015; Hyland 2015) that opted out pupils are simply placed at the back of the class and given no educational work to do.

### **Denominational schools and faith formation**

There are many challenges facing teachers in terms of religious diversity in schools internationally, but particularly in the Irish context where, as was previously mentioned, the majority of primary schools are denominational. In Ireland, a national opinion poll carried out in 2017 by Behaviour and Attitudes on behalf of Equate, a family and children's rights organisation, found that 84% of respondents thought the Irish education system should be reformed so that no child is excluded because of their religion or non-religion (Equate, 2017). McNamara and Norman (2010) see the conceding of control of the ethos of schools to private bodies as potentially being at odds with the standards of fairness appropriate to a modern democracy. The denominational model underpins the idea that formal equality between groups overwhelmingly favours, in practical terms, the most dominant denominations which draw upon the 'critical mass' necessary to ensure suitable education for adherents of their religion (Daly, 2009; O'Toole, 2015). The ceding of control of Irish primary schools to private bodies began prior to the formation of the Irish state and was compounded over the decades of the new state (Bocking & Hyland, 2015). The school system in Ireland was initially intended to be multi-denominational to avoid any potential social disharmony deriving from the conflation of religious and cultural identity (Fischer, 2016). However, this was resisted by the churches, and, due to the perceived need of the newly formed Irish state to promote cultural nationalism, there was a continuation of the strengthening through education of the connection between religion and national identity (Williams, 1999). As such, due to the control/ownership that the Catholic Church has over the majority of primary schools in Ireland, they are essentially not public schools at all, but private schools owned by the Church and not the state (Irwin, 2009). This is something which Daly (2009, p. 236) sees

as the state “facilitating the devolution of the public education to denominational institutions”. Current debates focus on the compatibility of publicly funded denominational schools with growing secularism, as well as on the use of state funding for denominational schools (Faas, Darmody, & Sokolowska, 2015). However, Article 44.2.4 of the Irish Constitution openly anticipates the provision of public education through denominational institutions:

legislation providing state aid for schools shall not discriminate between schools under the management of different religious denominations, nor be such as to affect prejudicially the right of any child to attend a school receiving public money without attending religious instruction at that school (Education Act, 1998).

The State is guaranteeing the rights of all children to attend denominational schools but is also guaranteeing that it will fund these schools regardless of their ethos. Daly (2009) sees this as a guarantee from the State against religious discrimination in the funding of denominational schools. However, the pluralism offered by the constitutional framework is seen as giving “very little scope,” and it merely benefits the religious majority (Daly, 2009, p.237). In Ireland, the traditional majority has been characterised as “Catholic, White and Gaelic” (Torvey & Share, 2003, p. 343) This has changed somewhat in recent years and there is an increase in religious diversity and secularism (Faas et al., 2015). As a result, there have been many who have argued the need for a different provision to move away from the current predominantly Christian denominational schooling model that we see in Ireland (Dunne, 1991; Faas et al., 2015; Mawhinney, 2012, 2015; O’Toole, 2015). However, Drumm (2012) warns of the dangers of pluralism and sees the use of the term as potentially inhibiting the right to freedom of religion in the public square; this is a point that will feature later in the chapter when examining the ethics of the current denominational system. O’Toole (2015) discusses how the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism was an opportunity to adopt ‘common



schools' that would cater for all, with religious beliefs and practices being left to the private realm. Dunne (1991) believes that true diversity and the enrichment it can bring to society is best achieved by enabling diverse groups to fully express and realise what is distinctive to each of them, and this can only be done by granting to each group its own schools. It is argued by O'Toole (2015) that this would further fragment an already fragmented system if each group was entitled to open its own school. Kitching (2020) sees the unavailability of non-denominational schools as a serious issue. In fact, a large proportion of Catholic schools now have a significant amount of students who come from different religious and belief backgrounds (Bocking & Hyland, 2015; Faas et al., 2020; Irwin, 2009). The Catholic Church however warns of the dangers of any reconfiguration of primary schools to accommodate an increasingly diverse student base. They suggest that it could result in "streamlined social stratification" and parents opting for schools who draw their students from the more "upwardly mobile social classes" (Catholic Schools Partnership, 2011, p.6). The Catholic Schools Partnership suggests that giving parents a choice will result in them choosing "socially exclusive schools" (Catholic Schools Partnership, 2011, p.6). Although we see that there are many different views on who should be responsible for the provision of primary education in Ireland, what is clear is that there has been a dramatic decline in the membership of religious congregations in Ireland (Fischer, 2016). Yet 96 percent of primary schools are denominational (Faas et al., 2020). These contrasting viewpoints highlight the issues that currently exist around the provision of denominational schools education in Ireland

### ***Faith formation***

Vermeer (2009) points out that the traditional function of denominational schools is to accustom children to church life and instil in them the basic norms, doctrines, and rituals of a specific denomination. Mawhinney (2015) makes the case for a change in the present denominational system and sees RE classes in denominational schools as doctrinal in nature,

that is, they have a specific denominational focus and are aimed at faith formation, rather than teaching about religions and beliefs. The Catholic Schools Partnership (2011) believe that RE has nothing in common with indoctrination, which they acknowledge as harmful. Their view is of “a religious education which includes faith formation, prayer and sacramental experiences, and a growing awareness of being stewards of God’s creation” (Catholic Schools Partnership, 2015, p.12). This does raise the issue of whether teachers in denominational schools can or should be involved in the transmission of faith where a large proportion of the children, and indeed some of the teachers, in the school may have diverse religious/philosophical beliefs. However, there is a belief among some authors that Christian virtues, which denominational schools seek to foster amongst their pupils, do not conflict with democratic virtues but actually enhance them (Drumm, 2012; Dunne, 1991). Indeed, the Catholic church also provide their perspective that RE taking place in the school setting is respectful of difference (Catholic Schools Partnership, 2011). This can be seen through the celebrations of different cultures during multicultural events in denominational schools. However, these celebrations have been perceived by Bryan and Bracken (2011) as tokenistic and tending to reinforce minority ethnic students’ sense of otherness. Irwin (2009) points to the difficulties for children to follow their constitutional right to opt out of RE without opting out of school. These difficulties have been suggested to be due to the positioning and timing of RE in the school day. Faas et al (2020) sees RE as negatively drawing a clear line of difference between Catholic and others. It is therefore apparent that there are multiple perspectives on the issue of faith formation within Irish schools and many divergent opinions on how denominational schools should approach faith formation given the increasingly diverse population in Irish society today.

***Rule 68***

Recently, some changes have been made in the Irish education system, with the rescission of Rule 68 of the Rules for National Schools in 2016. This rule allowed religious instruction to inform and vivify the whole work of the school (Department of Education, 1965). What this means in practical terms is that, rather than solely having an allocated time each day to teach RE, religion would instead percolate through all other subjects, and would be the most important aspect of the curriculum. From the position of someone from a religious background, the pervasiveness of RE throughout the school day, as was required by Rule 68, could simply be a positive sign of a ‘robust’ approach to the “religion-education connection” (Irwin, 2009, p.5). It could be argued that the abolition of Rule 68 effectively refutes the point made by Irwin (2009) around the difficulties that are presented to the children who opt out of RE. On the other hand, Faas et al (2020) describe how schools integrate their ethos into other areas of the curriculum, and this would seem to negate the abolition of Rule 68. No studies have yet been carried out however on the impact of the rescinding of Rule 68 over the last five years, and whether or not this has led to a change in how schools reflect their ethos during daily activities and during school events.

**Religious education lessons**

Despite the abolition of Rule 68, the fact that RE accounts for two hours and thirty minutes of each school week or thirty minutes a day (NCCA, 2016) suggests that there may still be significant challenges for children who opt out of RE. The instruction time given to the religious ethos of the school is mentioned in section 30 (2)(d) of the Education Act 1998 which notes that the Minister:

shall ensure that the amount of instruction time to be allotted to subjects on the curriculum as determined by the Minister in each school day shall be such as to allow for

such reasonable instruction time, as the board with the consent of the patron determines, for subjects relating to or arising from the characteristic spirit of the school (Education Act, 1998)

It has been suggested that RE and faith formation be conducted outside of school hours, and outside of the school setting. This has been seen as a possible solution to the ‘othering’ that may be caused by the amount of time devoted to RE. this ‘othering’ could potentially be avoided if all the children in the state were to be educated alongside each other in “common schools, where all can enjoy full and equal status, and where faith formation takes place outside of school hours” (O’Toole, 2015, p. 99). However, authors like Watson (2011) disagree with this and sees non-denominational schools as discriminating against those who hold religious beliefs or use religious language. Watson argues that atheism would be privileged in this scenario in that it is the default position making religion effectively an outsider. Watson (2011) reasons that the removal of religion from schools would require religious people to speak secular language. While Watson (2011) agrees that you cannot ask atheists to participate in school assemblies that are religious, you cannot equally ask religious people to speak a language which omits any reference to God (Watson, 2011). The arguments against non-denominational schooling are seen by Daly (2009) as trying to put the identity of non-religious on these types of schools and as such making them denominational. Unlike Watson, Daly (2009) sees non-denominational schools as being religiously neutral and accommodating those of all beliefs. The Catholic church on the other hand sees their schools as places that “instil an attitude of respects for the good of the other” (Catholic Schools Partnership, 2011, p.3), although some authors (Daly, 2009;Faas et al., 2020; O’Toole, 2015) might find it hard to see how the “good of the other” can be maintained given the current procedures in relation to the management of those who do not participate in RE. One such procedure outlined by the Catholic Schools Partnership (2015) suggests allowing

the child to do supervised research in another room. This could lead to a sense of exclusion and alienation; bullying and teasing can be based on the perception of a child being seen as religiously different (Lodge & Lynch, 2004). Mawhinney (2011), in her submission to the Irish Human Rights Commission Report on religion and education, believes that the “time given to sacramental preparation may affect the right of minority belief student to an effective education” (Irish Human Rights Commission, 2011, p.52).

### **Human rights, and the ethics of opting out**

The human rights and ethical considerations of opting out of RE in Irish denominational schools are complex and multifaceted. Guyette (2009) sees ‘forced assimilation’ as being potentially harmful to members of a minority group. This is stated in Article 18 of the Human rights Committee which notes the “right of everyone to hold opinions without interference” (Ibáñez, 1993). In an Irish context is it possible that assimilationism is occurring in denominational schools? The Catholic Schools Partnership (2015, p. 27), suggest that pupils who opt out of RE and sacramental preparation may still like to take part in “choirs, art, drama and other aspects of school support for the sacramental programme”. Similarly, in the Report on the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism, one school is included as stating that children of other faiths are present during RE and sometimes actively participate in the lesson (Coolahan et al., 2012). However, the report authors comment on the human rights implications of such a stance which is seen as being unsatisfactory and lacking in understanding, a point also echoed by O’Toole (2015) who argues that this is an infringement on liberty and leaves the responsibility for the provision of children who come from minority religious and belief backgrounds in the hands of the denominational authorities.

*The ethics of 'opting out'*

The Primary School Curriculum (NCCA, 1999) recognises the right of parents to choose a school with a religious ethos which reflects the parents' religious beliefs. Yet parents seldom have a choice about where to send their child for primary school (Hyland & Bocking, 2016) due to the previously mentioned predominance of Catholic schools in Ireland. Currently in Ireland, the only option given to parents is to opt their children out of participating in religious instruction in schools as is stipulated in the Education Act (1998). Therefore, the responsibility for maintaining the rights of children from different belief backgrounds in the classroom falls on the teacher and the individual school. As previously mentioned, government guidelines suggest that thirty minutes a day or two and a half hours per week be spent on RE (NCCA, 2016). When this is juxtaposed with the shift that has occurred in the diversity of religion and philosophical beliefs in Ireland, as was explained in Chapter 1. Therefore the question must be asked as to how teachers are supporting the ethical right of the growing number of children who opt out during that time each week. The challenges facing teachers and schools in relation to this are evident from the findings of a study carried out by Queens University Belfast in 2009 in Northern Ireland, a more religiously conservative place than elsewhere in the UK (Richardson, Niens, Mawhinney, & Chiba, 2013). This study examined the experiences of opting out for young people and their families who were from minority backgrounds. The parents who participated in this study expressed dissatisfaction with the system as a whole, believing it to be ineffective in protecting minority rights because it marginalises children and appears not to value their beliefs (Richardson et al., 2013). Similarly, Evans (2008) sees the removal of students from RE as causing separation along religious and/or ethnic lines, which may result in 'othering' and discrimination. Daly (2009) sees students' freedom of conscience and religious belief being undermined by the current provisions that are in place. Mawhinney (2012) states that:

through providing exemptions from equality legislation to religious organisations, in a situation where these bodies are in a near-monopolistic position, the Irish State is disregarding its responsibility to protect the right to non-discrimination, the right to education and the right to freedom of religion of those who do not adhere to the ethos of these religious service providers (Mawhinney, 2012, p.622).

Considering the points made by Mawhinney (2012) and Daly (2009), could it not be argued that the opt-out procedure is ethically flawed due to the denominational nature of schools in Ireland? The current provision of allowing children to opt out of RE and, as a result removing them from the classroom, can stigmatise children from different religious and belief backgrounds (McGuire & Faller, 2015). Indeed, difficulties may arise for the parent in that they are able to opt their child out of formal RE classes but may not be able to avoid their child being influenced by the religious ethos of the school (IHRC, 2011). This point is still relevant as even after the rescinding of Rule 68 it is unclear how schools have changed their approach and whether the school ethos still influences other areas of school life. This influence could arise due to the child following the school's opt-out procedure, "staying within the classroom following an interesting, educationally appropriate and child-friendly activity" (Catholic Schools Partnership, 2015, p26). However, the Catholic Schools Partnership (2015) have a different perspective on this and see Catholic schools as "creating an inclusive community in service of the common good; where knowledge is sought and respected while faith is nurtured and challenged" (Catholic Schools Partnership, 2015, p11). While this may be the case, Ireland is still under pressure both domestically and internationally to provide for those from different religious and belief backgrounds. In the concluding comments on Ireland, the United Nations Human Right Committee said that the state should "increase its efforts to ensure that non-denominational primary education is widely available" (HRC 2008, p.7). Therefore, it is apparent that there is also international

recognition, from international bodies such as the UN, on the need to facilitate non-denominational education in Ireland.

### **The effectiveness of opting out**

Schools currently implement different approaches to the opt-out scenario, one of which was mentioned in the previous section. Some schools may refer to the Intercultural Guidelines (NCCA, 2006) for assistance on the matter. However, Irwin (2009) finds the lack of direction in terms of religious diversity in the Guidelines disappointing, given that, according to this author, religion is precisely the most interculturally relevant area in the curriculum. The Catholic Schools Partnership do not see it in this way, saying that “religious affiliation is not the only measure of diversity in Ireland” and “arguably, it is the least important such measure” (Catholic Schools Partnership, 2011, p.6). The Toledo Guiding Principles were set up to provide recommendations for how OSCE (Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe) countries, of which Ireland is a member, should provide RE. They state that the opt-out measures put in place by countries must be realisable in practice and not merely theoretical (Durham, Ferrari, & Santoro, 2008). Mawhinney (2015) points to the practical problems of opting out and argues that it is not suitable to have children of diverse religious or philosophical beliefs in a classroom where denominational RE is taking place. The Catholic Schools Partnership (2015) offered solutions to the issues that surround the management of the opt-out procedure in their schools. These included split timetabling between class streams, providing children with supervised project work in other rooms, and the child staying in the classroom doing different educational work (Catholic Schools Partnership, 2015). Contrastingly, Shanneik (2015) sees the opting out process as ineffective in practice with alternative provisions rarely made for those from different belief backgrounds. Similarly, Mawhinney (2015) questions the practicalities of such solutions and points out that, in general, opted out pupils are placed at the back of the class and given no



educational work to do, with no offer of alternative ethical or moral education (Mawhinney, 2015). This is seen by Faas et al., (2015) as concerning, given the contrasting nature of values which the opted out child is therefore exposed to. In submissions to the Irish Human Rights Commission on Religion and Education, this is viewed as being an unacceptable outcome (Irish Human Rights Commission, 2011). The report also highlighted the lack of clarity in relation to the awareness of the right to opt out and also the lack of policies from schools in relation to their opt-out procedures (Irish Human Rights Commission, 2011).

### **Comparative studies**

The difficulties that arise in the Irish system and that have been previously discussed in this chapter, are seen in other jurisdictions too, according to Sakaranaho (2018), who sees European states as being faced with a “balancing act between growing religious diversity, on the one hand, and upholding historically national traditions, on the other” (Sakaranaho, 2018, p.112). There are many countries in Europe which have a comparable societal make up to Ireland. Modood (2017) points to countries like Belgium, Denmark, Norway, and the UK who each have established churches yet are amongst the leading secular states in the world. Finland is a prime example of a country that has some comparisons to Ireland. Both countries are on the fringes of Europe and up until the 1990s were places of emigration (Sakaranaho, 2018). Finland like Ireland has a majority church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church. There, the Act of Religious Freedom grants students the right to be educated according to their own religious tradition. (Hella & Wright, 2009). This is similar to the situation in Ireland, where the Education Act (1998) does not discriminate against religious groups who set up their own schools, which are then funded by the state. Other countries like Norway promote inclusion in schools through an ethos rooted in Christian ideology, but also draw upon Humanism, to foster respect for all beliefs (Faas, Smith, & Darmody, 2019). However, there are signs of a “confessional tendency” (Franck, 2020, p.6) in the Norwegian

religious syllabus which seeks to teach the significance of Christianity as cultural heritage (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2020). In Finland there is also a consideration of minority groups, therefore RE is also provided for adherents of other religious traditions, provided there is sufficient demand in individual schools (Hella & Wright, 2009). However, it must be noted that the Finnish Education Act (2003) obliges schools to firstly provide RE to the majority (Sakaranaho, 2018). With 70 percent of Finnish people being members of the Lutheran church (Sakaranaho, 2018), RE is predominantly provided for children in the Lutheran church, just like in Ireland where the majority of schools are Catholic and therefore provide RE to Catholic children. Nonetheless, religious minorities are not forgotten in Finland and religious or ethical education is provided when there are three children in a municipality that are registered as being part of a different religious community (Sakaranaho, 2018). The idea of RE being provided where there is sufficient demand is one which Daly (2009) is critical of, seeing it as favouring those religious and belief groups who hold sufficient social capital. However, the idea of giving parental preference when divesting schools in Ireland to new patron bodies and therefore providing for other religious and belief backgrounds is one which is recommended in the forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector. In it they note that when there is a “significant demand” the divestment of a school to a new patron body should be prioritised (Coolahan et al., 2012). While the Irish system does not exactly replicate the Norwegian and Finnish models, each country gives preference to the dominant religious group in their provision of RE and these countries, while now being described as non-confessional, do have a confessional history (Franck, 2020).

When examining the provisions made in other countries across Europe, it is evident that provisions are made for those from diverse religious and belief backgrounds. In Estonia, Hungary, Luxembourg and many other European countries, options beyond ‘opting out’ are given to students around religious and ethical education (Pépin, 2009). However, Malta is a

country in Europe which, like Ireland, has strong connections to the Catholic church in its provision of education. According to Darmody et al (2014) state schools in Malta are *de facto* Catholic schools in terms of their ethos and the RE curriculum they follow. Similar to Irish schools, they are run autonomously by religious orders but funded by the state (Darmody, Lyons, & Smyth, 2014). Religion in Maltese schools permeates the school day through assemblies and in classroom practice. In 2009 2.4 percent of the 36,000 students in state primary and secondary schools opted out of RE in Malta. The increasing religious diversity in Ireland could perhaps indicate higher numbers of children in Ireland who may be wishing to opt out of RE now and into the future. (Faas et al., 2020, p. 601) In Germany the provision of RE is split between the two main religious denominations, the Catholic and Protestant church and also a secular option which is given to those in secondary schools (Darmody et al., 2014). As in Ireland, the current provision of RE in Germany is seen as unsatisfactory (Darmody et al., 2014).

### **Teachers' views**

Thirty years ago, Dunne (1991) found that teachers in Ireland who want a job or promotion in a denominational school must resort to some form of “suppression or dissembling” if they practise no religion, in that they must conceal their own personal beliefs to protect their career progression. More recently, Fischer (2016) refers to the on-going expectations on teachers to uphold the predetermined school ethos. Teachers employed in denominational primary schools in Ireland are expected to teach denominationally orientated faith-formation based RE programmes, unlike their counterparts in the UK where there is a conscience clause (Fischer, 2016). No such conscience clause exists in Ireland.

In fact, Irish teachers' religious affiliations have rarely been explored (Heinz, Davison, & Keane, 2018). Heinz et al (2018) believe that a lack of research into Irish primary school

teachers' religious beliefs' is based on the assumptions that they come from predominantly Irish Catholic backgrounds. A teacher's own religious or philosophical background is likely to impact their practice in the classroom. How teachers interact with diversity could be dependent on their own identity. This is something which Parker-Jenkins and Masterson (2013) believe needs to be addressed in a modern Ireland that is now a much more diverse place, where addressing cultural diversity, which includes religion, is being predominantly left to the discretion of the individual teacher (Parker-Jenkins & Masterson, 2013). This means that teachers in denominational schools in Ireland can choose to include the diversity in their classroom if they wish but they are under no obligation to do so and the practice of recognising and valuing diversity in the classroom may vary greatly from teacher to teacher. Parker-Jenkins and Masterson (2013) sought to explore how schools in Ireland recognise and acknowledge diversity; they found that some teachers felt that world religions were often overshadowed by the Catholic ethos and patronage of schools. This is a problem when you consider that teachers are an integral part of ensuring a culturally responsive school community (Faas et al., 2020). However, it may be argued by the Catholic church that the religious ethos of the school should overshadow the teaching of other religions and cultures. Indeed, it is seen as a "responsibility" (Catholic Schools Partnership, 2011, p. 11) of Catholic schools to develop their ethos in the school community.

In denominational schools in Ireland, teachers face significant pressure when providing RE in an environment where children are opting out, something which is further heightened during sacramental preparation which takes place during the school day. Indeed, a survey of Irish teachers carried out by the Irish National Teacher Organisation (INTO) found that only 8.8 percent of primary school teachers in Ireland felt that sacramental preparation should take place during school time (INTO, 2013). More recently, Faas et al (2020), in their research into the role of ethos and leadership in accommodating diversity in Irish primary schools,

found that teachers felt that sacramental preparation was problematic for the full inclusion of children from other religious and belief backgrounds. Furthermore, Mc Ardle (2016) carried out research into provisions made for children of different belief backgrounds in one denominational school, and found that sacramental preparation was unknowingly taking time away from other curricular areas to the detriment of minority belief students (Mc Ardle, 2016).

### **Teacher education**

It is argued that initial teacher education puts pressure on teachers to conform to the denominational structure of primary schooling in Ireland, with initial teacher education (ITE) being provided by publicly funded colleges that are owned and controlled by the churches (Bocking & Hyland, 2015). However, in 2021 Marino Institute of Education (MIE) and Mary Immaculate College (MIC) are now the only colleges who continue to have a Catholic ethos. Regardless of this change, a Certificate in Religious Education is still a requirement to work in Catholic schools (Bocking & Hyland, 2015). Student teachers have little option but to enrol in this course given that 89 percent of primary schools are under the control of the Catholic church (Faas et al., 2020). In research carried out by Heinz et al. (2018) into the religiosity of ITE applicants, they found a low level of religious practice amongst ITE applicants, many of whom would prefer a non-confessional approach to teaching religion. They found that only 35 percent of respondents felt that teaching religion should be part of the role of a primary school teacher (Heinz et al., 2018). In their conclusions, Heinz et al. (2018) argue that the predominantly Catholic denominational school system may cause conflict between applicants' personal beliefs and professional requirements, while also deterring others from considering a career in teaching.

## Conclusion

The current literature describes the current provision of schooling made for primary school students in Ireland and how this affects the students, their parents, and teachers. Given the increased level of diversity in Irish society with over half a million people from different countries residing in Ireland as of 2016 (CSO, 2017), schools now have a much more diversified population along cultural and religious lines. This raises questions about the suitability of a schooling system which is predominantly denominational with 96 percent of schools being run by religious denominations (DES, 2018), an issue which has been discussed in this chapter from the views of the prominent voices in the debate (Faas et al., 2015; Hyland & Bocking, 2016; Mawhinney, 2012; O'Toole, 2015). Currently, Irish primary schools may still refuse entry to a student if they can prove that the refusal is essential to maintain the ethos of the school (The Education Act, 2018). It is important to note that Ireland has been criticised by the UN Committee on Human Rights (2011) for its lack of non-denominational schools and is an outlier in Europe in terms of the provision of schooling. Ireland has the highest level of denominational schools in Europe with 96 percent of schools being funded by the state while being controlled by religious denominations (Darmody et al., 2014). It is apparent from the current literature that many arguments exist against this current model of school provision in Ireland (Faas et al., 2020; Faas, Smith, & Darmody, 2018; Hyland & Bocking, 2016; Mawhinney, 2015; O'Toole, 2015; Richardson et al., 2013). However, there are also contrasting opinions from others who believe that denominational schools provide for the education of all students regardless of their religious or belief backgrounds (Catholic Schools Partnership, 2011; Drumm, 2012). The literature also points to the many issues facing teachers in Ireland from their ITE through to their practice in the classroom (Bocking & Hyland, 2015; Heinz et al., 2018).

### **Chapter 3: Research Methodology**

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this chapter is to outline the research design and to explain the methodology that was used in this study in order to answer the following research question: What is the experience of teachers working in denominational schools with children from diverse religious and philosophical backgrounds who opt out of RE? The qualitative research method that was followed; namely semi-structured interviews is outlined. The positionality of the researcher is discussed. How research participants were selected, the research procedures that were followed along with the reasons for using semi-structured interviews is explained. Finally, data analysis procedures, ethical considerations, reliability and validity, and research limitations are examined.

#### **Research paradigm**

The research design followed an interpretivist paradigm focusing on a small scale and in-depth analysis (Basit, 2010) of teachers' experiences of the opt-out procedures from RE in denominational schools. An interpretivist approach was chosen as it sees not only one reality but multiple realities and interpretations of a single event (Tisdell & Merriam, 2016). This paradigm interprets reality based on the experiences of research participants (Basit, 2010). It focuses on the idea that people create or construct their own interpretation of the world (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). A qualitative research methodology was followed for this study; qualitative research is descriptive in nature and allows for a better understanding of the data gathered. A qualitative research design seeks to understand phenomena from multiple perspectives (Anderson & Arsenault, 2005), and this study sought to understand the perspectives of teachers in rural, urban and suburban areas, who had varying degrees of experience and were both male and female. A qualitative design was chosen rather than a

quantitative one for a number of reasons. A quantitative research methodology requires a large number of respondents as it is concerned with gathering numerical data (Basit, 2010). The focus for quantitative research is often about how much or how many and the results are represented in a numerical manner (Tisdell & Merriam, 2016). This is useful when seeking to identify patterns and trends across large numbers. However, for the current research, it would not have been possible to obtain a sufficient number of respondents needed to gather numerical data. This was because of the nature of the topic under investigation, which touched on sensitive issues around different religious and belief backgrounds. Furthermore, the type of questions that were of interest would not have been suited to surveys or questionnaires. The questions asked in this research sought to achieve “depth rather than breadth” (Basit, 2010,p.16). This study was concerned with understanding how teachers interpret their experiences of working with children from different religious and belief backgrounds; as such a qualitative design was seen as being the most appropriate. Fraenkel, Wallen & Hyun (2012) argue that the ideal role of the researcher in quantitative research could be seen more as a detached observer while in a qualitative research study the researcher is immersed in the circumstances in which their research takes place. Through the use of semi-structured interviews, it was possible to become more deeply immersed in the circumstances of the research and therefore a qualitative approach was more applicable to this study. It has also been discussed that a qualitative research methodology can be useful to place a greater emphasis on a holistic description, describing in detail what happens in certain situations (Fraenkel, 2012). This was of value for the current research, as it was important that the holistic experiences of teachers were examined. A methodology which intends to understand why, how and what is happening in specific circumstances (Rubin & Rubin, 1995) and which is more responsive to the participants (Basit, 2010) was appropriate to the current research being conducted



### **Research methodology**

As previously outlined, a qualitative research design was used in this study. In qualitative research some, and occasionally all, of the data will come from conducting interviews (Tisdell & Merriam, 2016). In this research interviews were used to gather all of the data. Qualitative interviews were chosen because rich and detailed responses were needed from participants; the open-ended nature of the questions allowed for the interviewee to choose how they would respond, agreeing or disagreeing and also raising new issues (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Qualitative interviews allow for flexibility (Tisdell & Merriam, 2016) and for the researcher to form new questions throughout the interview to gain new insights (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). There are different types of interview structures that can be used for qualitative research studies. A highly structured interview is one where the questions and the order in which they are asked remain the same for each interview. Tisdell & Merriam (2016) point to the problems with this form of interview design, suggesting that the rigid nature of the questioning does not allow the researcher to gather the perspectives of their participants in greater depth. As outlined previously, this research sought to get in-depth responses from participants about their experiences in the classroom, so therefore a rigid interview style would not have worked. Indeed, it is argued by Kvale (1994) that research interviewing is not formulaic. Furthermore, Tisdell & Merriam (2016) state that predetermined questions assume that all of the participants will interpret the questions in the same manner. Given the sensitive nature of the topic and the questions being asked, the assumption that participants would share a common understanding would not have been appropriate. For these reasons, a semi-structured interview design was used. In semi-structured interviews there is greater flexibility and no predetermined order. A limited number of questions were prepared in advance (Rubin & Rubin, 2012) as certain information was needed from each participant. A mix of structured and less structured questions were used to allow for follow up questions and probing

questions to be asked. Please refer to Appendix A for a full overview of the Interview questions

### **Semi-structured interviews**

One-to-one video interviews were chosen as they were necessary during the Coronavirus pandemic which restricted face to face interactions; furthermore, they allowed the speaker to talk freely about the research topic without worrying about what other people might think, which may have been an issue had focus group interviews been selected instead (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). This was an important consideration given that the research was concerned with sensitive issues. Having one-to-one interviews also makes it more accurate for transcribing; this type of interview is also more manageable for the interviewer as they only have one person to guide through the interview agenda (Denscombe, 2010). A semi-structured interview approach was taken to allow for supplementary questions that would elicit a more elaborate, in depth response (Basit, 2010). This approach was suitable to this study because in a semi-structured interview the interviewees sometimes give a detailed response which may answer subsequent questions. The semi-structured interview structure does not require the same questions to be asked of each interviewee or for those questions to be asked in a certain order (Basit, 2010). It allows the interviewee to speak widely on the issues raised and gives the interviewer more flexibility and freedom (Denscombe, 2010) by allowing the interviewer to ask follow up questions (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The pre-formulated and supplementary questions asked in the semi-structured interviews sought to further uncover the perspectives of the participants. Guidance on the format and methodology used for asking supplementary questions were taken from those outlined by Tisdell & Merriam, 2016); (Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Basit 2010; Agee, 2009). Caution was exercised during the interviews to ensure that the researcher was non-judgemental, sensitive, and respectful this was particularly important given the type of the questions that were being

asked and answered. the importance of being receptive and remaining neutral during the interviews was also taken into account, so as to “encourage the right climate for an interviewee to feel comfortable and provide honest answers” (Denscombe, 2010, p.179) An interview schedule was organised prior to the pilot interview. The questions in the interview schedule were revised after the pilot interview to ensure that they focused more effectively on the research topic.

### **Research positionality**

As a teacher working in a denominational school who has taught in classrooms where children have opted out of RE, I have witnessed the challenges that this presents when no practical guidelines or policies exist. Providing for children who opt out of RE is not straightforward and is an area in which I believe more guidance would benefit teachers. There is considerable stress on professionals who are in this complex situation where they are trying to provide for all of the children in the class. This is something I have experienced in every classroom in which I have worked. Due to the continued increase in the different belief systems that are now represented in the classroom across the country, these issues will continue to create stressful scenarios for teachers. In this research study I was interested in understanding teachers’ opinions on their experiences of opting-out and how they approach the issue of children opting out of RE and sacramental preparation. I hoped to identify the key issues for teachers in this situation and to highlight the need for an effective solution to cater for children of all religious and belief backgrounds in denominational schools.

### **Research participants**

To gather the perspectives of teachers, nine teachers who are currently, or had previously, taught in a classroom where children had opted out of RE were interviewed. A cumulative approach for sampling was taken; this is also known as snowball sampling, which

is seen by Denscombe (2010) as working well for small scale qualitative studies. This started with a small number of participants. Their contact information was given through friends and colleagues and also through the professional teaching associations, namely the English Language Teachers' Association (ELSTA). Following these interviews, the participants then referred others who were willing to participate. This was done until a point was reached where sufficient data were gathered.

This method of identifying a sample is useful when the topic being examined relates to a sensitive issue, such as aspects of teaching in a denominational school, and also when a sample cannot be easily traced (Basit, 2010). It was challenging to get a sample for this study due to the previously outlined sensitive nature of the research area and due to the need to interview teachers who had been or were currently working in a specific setting. All participants in this study had to have a common characteristic, in that they all had to have experience of being a mainstream class teacher working in a denominational school setting where some of the children in their classes came from diverse backgrounds and followed a different religious or philosophical set of beliefs to that which informed the ethos of the school. The teachers interviewed were from both urban and rural settings, teachers who had different levels of experience and teachers of different genders. Difficulties arose in knowing whether a particular class teacher worked with children in their classroom from different religious and belief backgrounds who were opting out of RE. To resolve this issue, teachers were targeted in schools where I knew there was a diverse student cohort. The sampling approach also helped identify the type of participants I was looking for, as previous respondents were aware of other teachers who were working in a similar setting and could then pass on their contact information to me. All participants were informed that the interview would last for no more than forty minutes.

### **Ethical considerations**

Throughout the course of this study, ethical considerations were kept in mind at all times. Agee (2009) notes that when developing research questions it is important to understand that inquiries into other people's lives are "an exercise in ethics" (Agee, 2009, p.440). The validity and reliability of a research study can be seen to rely on the ethics of the researcher (Tisdell & Merriam, 2016). An important consideration before each interview took place was to gain informed voluntary consent (Denscombe, 2010). The potential interviewees were contacted by email, sending a letter outlining the nature of the research and the data retention policy of Marino Institute of Education (Appendix B). The contact information of the researcher and supervisor was given to all of the participants involved so that they had the opportunity to ask questions about the research prior to their participation in the study. Considerations were given to the current Coronavirus pandemic restrictions and the interviews took place through video conferencing. A link for the video interview was sent to participants on the morning of their interview. The participants were informed that only the audio recording of the interviews would be retained and that the video recording would be deleted after the interview had concluded. The interviews were recorded on a laptop and also on a separate recording device. A duplicate file was made of each audio recording which was encrypted and saved on a password enabled database. Participants were made aware of this in the letter and consent form (Appendix B&C respectively) which they signed before participating in the interview. This was also verbally reiterated to them prior to the start of the interview.

The consideration of confidentiality was ensured by giving the research participants and their workplaces pseudonyms; by doing this the interviewees' identities are protected (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Confidentiality was extremely important, and the research was not discussed outside of the research setting to other colleagues informed voluntary consent was obtained

from all participants through a signed letter of consent. All participants in the research were made aware of the process in which they were engaged, why their participation was necessary, how the information was to be used, to whom it would be made available to and that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any point for any reason. They were informed that their identity and that of their schools would be anonymised.

## **Research procedures**

### ***Pilot interview***

A pilot interview was carried out initially to see if the questions that had been prepared would allow for an interview that gathered in-depth responses. The pilot interview was carried out with a participant who was working in a similar setting to those who would be taking part in the main study (Basit, 2010). Piloting is seen as being important in allowing the researcher to reformulate the questions asked to make them more suitable for analysis (Basit, 2010). Furthermore, piloting is seen as ensuring the questions are robust, answerable probing and are not compromising the participants in any way.

The pilot interview, which took place via online conferencing, lasted for about twenty minutes, and there did not appear to be a sufficient number of open-ended questions. The pilot interview allowed the opportunity to learn which questions were confusing, needed rewording or yielded useless responses (Tisdell & Merriam, 2016). According to the responses and feedback of the pilot interviewee, some of the questions were too similar and did not necessarily allow for good follow-up, or for more probing questions. The order of the questions were changed for the following interviews, and new questions were added which allowed for more detailed responses.

### **Research interviews**

When research participants agreed to take part in the study and had signed the voluntary consent form, they were contacted by phone or email to arrange a time that was convenient for them to be interviewed. On the morning of the arranged interview day, participants were emailed a link to a video conference call which would take place at the agreed upon time. A semi-structured interview format was followed as has been previously outlined. The research was carried out between February and March 2021 and involved nine participants in total. The interviews lasted for forty minutes.

### **Data analysis**

A thematic analysis approach was taken for this research study as outlined by Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2017 and Braun & Clarke, 2006). This approach was applied as it is effective when identifying, analysing and reporting patterns within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis uses a six phased approach, this approach is seen as providing a flexible and useful research tool, which can potentially provide a rich and detailed account of data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The six phase approach that was followed for this research study involved familiarising myself with the data, generating codes, reviewing themes, defining, and naming the themes and producing the report (Nowell et al., 2017). The initial phase of data analysis involved becoming familiar with the data. As data were collected through interviews, they were transcribed into written form which is seen as the best way of familiarising yourself with the data (Riesman, 1993). Transcribing each interview meant that a good knowledge was gained of the data before generating codes. I was conscious of the importance of transcribing the interviews verbatim to ensure that punctuation was not added that could change the meaning of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Close attention was needed when transcribing the data, re-reading and interpretive skills are needed to analyse

data effectively (Lapadat & Lindsay, 1999). Phase two of the data analysis involved generating the codes for the interviews that had been transcribed. This is an important part of the data analysis as the data is being organised into meaningful groups (Tuckett, 2005). When the second phase of analysis was completed, and the data coded, these codes were then used to create themes. In the third phase of analysis similarities between codes were sought. Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest using mind maps and different visual aids to identify themes and sub-themes within the codes. After following this process, several themes were identified, and the relevant codes were attached to them. Any of the codes that were not added to themes were not discarded; they were put into a separate group of unattached codes that could be reviewed again. The fourth phase of analysis involved reviewing and refining the themes. In this phase it became apparent that some one of the themes did not have enough data connected to it and that a couple of the other themes were very similar. A clear and identifiable difference between themes is seen as being important (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In this phase the entire data set was re-read for the purpose of seeing whether the themes worked and to make sure that other potential new coding of the data could be applied to these themes. Once a satisfactory thematic map of data had been completed, the fifth phase of analysis was initiated, which involved defining and naming themes. Phase five requires the identification of each theme, and indeed the overall themes, and also a determination about what part of the data is captured by each theme (Braun & Clarke, 2006). At this stage, each theme was analysed individually. During this phase of analysis if there were any sections of the research data that were relevant to the research question but were not included, the themes could not be finalised (King, 2004). Phase six was the final phase of analysis which began after the themes had been fully figured out.

In this research study four themes were identified: tension in schools between secularism and religious values, personal beliefs, exclusion, and the challenges of teaching



children from minority belief/faith backgrounds in denominational schools. During the write up of my findings, it was of importance to disseminate my data in a concise, and coherent manner. extracts from my data were used including evidence of my themes when putting forward the arguments in relation to my research question.

### **Reliability and validity**

All participants in this study had a professional link to the topic. Each participant was asked introductory questions to ascertain their connection to the research area. The accuracy of the data was ensured through a rigorous process of reading and re-reading the data. The method of thematic analysis as outlined by Braun & Clarke (2006) required the researcher to review the data multiple times. This guaranteed that the process followed was clear and transparent. This process of analysis as detailed earlier in this chapter sought to find emerging themes throughout the data collected which confirmed the validity of the findings (Denscombe, 2010).

### **Limitations**

The sensitive nature of the area of research created some challenges. Religion is a sensitive topic to discuss generally; this is further heightened when you consider that the majority of primary school teachers in Ireland work in schools that follow a religious ethos. Participants may have been guarded in what they said during the interviews due to this. However, as previously outlined, the anonymity of all participants was guaranteed, and this may have alleviated some of their hesitancy.

The Coronavirus pandemic also presented challenges to this research study. At the time of data collection in February and March 2021, government restrictions did not allow for face-to-face interviews, and interviews had to take place through video conferencing. This

may have made the research participants nervous or less likely to feel relaxed and comfortable when answering questions. Research has shown that people respond differently based on how they perceive the person asking the questions (Denscombe, 2010), this may alter what they are willing to divulge in an interview. In the case of this research study, it may have been challenging for the participant to develop a connection with the interviewer. Indeed, performing interviews through video conferencing was challenging as it created a barrier between the interviewee and the interviewer. However, before the interview started a short conversation took place about the common experiences of our professional lives, it was hoped that this would create trust and put the interviewee at ease. Another potential limitation may have been the current employment status of the teachers who were interviewed. I was not aware of whether the teachers I interviewed were on permanent or temporary contracts; this may have affected the responses they gave to my questions during the interviews. While anonymity was maintained throughout the research process, some teachers may have been conscious of what they said due to their aspirations of career progression in the future. The participants' own religious or philosophical beliefs system may also have impacted upon their engagement with the questions posed during the interviews. Research participants may have been concerned that their answers to my questions may have reflected negatively on them or the school in which they are or were working. In two of the interviews the internet connection was weak at times, and this effected the flow of those interviews and also made them harder to transcribe due to the reduced sound quality. The size and scale of the research is also a limitation. Nine teachers were interviewed as part of this research study. Therefore, the results cannot be generalised.

## Chapter 4: Discussion and Analysis

### Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to outline and analyse the findings from interviews conducted with the nine participants involved in this research. This study looks at the experience of primary school teachers working in denominational schools with children from diverse religious and philosophical backgrounds who wish to opt out of RE. As stated in Chapter 3, all nine participants teach in denominational schools, and all currently have, or previously had, students in their class who opted out of RE. Participants will be referred to as P1, P2 and so on.

From conducting the thematic analysis, four themes emerged:

- (i) Tension in schools between secularism and religious values
- (ii) Personal beliefs
- (iii) Exclusion
- (iv) Challenges of teaching children from minority belief/faith backgrounds in denominational schools

### **Tension in schools between secularism and religious values**

The tension in schools between secularism and religious values is a theme that is evident throughout the data. The teachers who participated in this study and the families that attend their schools no longer come from the same denominational religious background. Primary schools in Ireland are now far more diverse than they have ever been before. A participant in this research noted that when teaching second class, “out of 48 students we only had 21 who actually made their Communion” (P 8). Of those not participating there was a

mixture of different belief/faith backgrounds. In this particular case the teacher had to prioritise the preparation of the sacraments in their class as they were working in a denominational school; this is despite the fact that the majority of students were not taking part and not taking the sacraments. This was something that the teacher and their colleague had to arrange between them: “I’d teach religion for one month and then she’d teach religion for the other month” (P 8). The informal arrangement the teacher made with their colleague was described as an attempt to “keep our sanity” (P 8). The basic logistical challenges caused due to the more diverse classroom the teacher was working in was outlined in their interview, “there were so many of them if it was four or five, we could have given SRA (silent reading activity) but with 20 out of them it was too difficult” (P 8). This highlights the difficulties that now exist in “more complex” (Mawhinney, 2015, p.293) Irish classrooms that were not previously an issue when there was a more homogenous student body. The secularising of society in Ireland is something that is set to continue based on, figures released by the CSO which show a 73 percent increase in those identifying themselves as having no religion (CSO, 2017), and from the data gathered it is apparent that this will create challenges in the classroom.

The change in the level of religiosity in Irish society and the potentially growing secularisation amongst teachers in Ireland was reflected in the professional practice of many of those who were interviewed. In some instances, this has resulted in children who have opted out of the RE programme rarely needing to do so due to the fact that RE is being taught less frequently by some teachers. “I wouldn’t teach religion five days a week” (P 2); “I had one colleague in particular who never taught religion” (P 4); with another teacher saying how they “didn’t teach religion nearly enough as they should be” (P 9). Participants also commented on the low level of religiosity amongst families in their schools. One participant was quite critical calling some families “lipstick Catholics” (P 8) when referring to their

selective engagement with religion in school; another mentioned how a parent when discussing their child's involvement with RE and sacramental preparation said, "ah sure we're not Catholics but go ahead" (P 4), i.e., referring to the fact that although they are not religious, they were not opposed to their child's involvement in sacramental preparation. Similarly a different teacher found that most parents, regardless of their personal beliefs, were often just happy to let their children "go with the flow" (P 7) when it came to the religious element of school.

### *Religious prayer, masses, and symbolism*

In some schools there is still a sense of traditional approaches being followed in terms of the role of religion throughout the school day. One of those interviewed discussed how prayers were said in the "morning, breaktimes and when going home" (P 9). This teacher also talked about the requirement placed on teachers in one school that they had worked in whereby the song choices for the school concerts at Christmas time were all "very faith based" (P 9) and this was seen as being "mandatory" (P 9) in that particular school. It was also remarked by a participant how "there will be prayers and all of that certain weeks and all the religious celebrations will be marked, you know, and feast days would be noted" (P 3). Another teacher talked about only becoming aware of the religious symbolism in the school when it was pointed out to them by a visiting teacher from another country. This participant remarked how the visiting teacher from another European country "couldn't believe the crucifixes, they thought it was horrendous" (P 4). This made that particular participant who said that it had "stopped affecting them" (P 4) when referring to the religious symbolism in the school stand back and realise that it was, "actually quite in your face" (P 4) how there were so many symbols of what they referred to as a "semi-naked male, crucified and tortured in torment" (P 4) throughout their school. In contrast to the traditional religious nature of the Christmas concert and the religious symbolism outlined by some of the participants, other

teachers felt like the “religious aspect of school was very much just ticking the box” (P 1) and another commented that they could only think of one person on their “staff who would be a committed Catholic (P 5).

### *Doctrinal preparation in diverse classrooms*

A separate point raised by some of those interviewed was around the doctrine of Catholicism and its impact on them as teachers. There is a requirement in Catholic schools to prepare children for the sacraments and this can be seen as religious instruction in a denominational manner. It was mentioned by one participant that when it came to the “sacrament it becomes more doctrinal” (P 7) and in some schools it was said that they “definitely would have the diocesan advisors coming” (P 3) who would check that the RE programmes and sacramental preparation were being conducted in class. However, it is now clear that denominational primary schools are no longer made up of solely Catholic children (Parker-Jenkins & Masterson, 2013). The comments of some of the participants would suggest that there is a focus on doctrine in schools which have a diverse student population. However, this is not surprising given the fact that they are religious ethos schools. The introduction of a child to the faith of their parents is seen by Drumm (2012) not as indoctrination but as education. However, this is an area where some researchers and commentators would disagree. For example, (Daly, 2009; Faas, Darmody, & Sokolowska, 2015; Richardson, Niens, Mawhinney, & Chiba, 2013) would worry about denominational schools and their potential for indoctrination of minority belief students during RE. One teacher noted that their school was “very obviously a Catholic school” (P 3) and “if you really object, you know, I suppose you could think of an alternative” (P 3) school to go to. Children opting out of RE were seen to be “absorbing it anyway” (P 5); a different participant noted how it “was hard to opt out actually there in the room” (P 3); another said that “those kids usually know it (the prayers) better than everyone else because they're listening to it all

of the time (P,6). This supports the idea that opting out while remaining in the classroom is “somewhat unachievable” (Faas et al., 2020, p 603), which indicates a real infringement on the rights of the children in these classrooms where the current provision of opting out appears to be difficult to implement in reality.

However, other data collected for this research describes how teachers, “avoided the doctrine” (P 4) and another stated how their school was not “pushing doctrine” (P 7), while some participants felt as though there was a very low level of attachment from “parents to the doctrine of the Holy Communion” (P 4).

### *Conflicting religious values*

Challenges were faced by the teachers in this study when working with children and families who had a strong faith. It was mentioned by a participant who was doing cross-curricular Halloween activities in class that a parent had complained to them about this being studied in class “calling it an abomination against their faith” (P 8). These comments are reflective of the tension between the values and beliefs that different groups have, which was evident throughout the data collected and further outlines the difficulties encountered by participants in this research. This conflict, and the conflicting feelings that it creates, was really encapsulated by one interviewee in particular who referred to “not teaching religion diligently” (P 4) but who also mentioned that there is a “cultural element of religion that I don’t think should be removed” (P 4). Indeed, it is referred to by Faas et al. (2020) that the preparation for the sacraments may be more to do with cultural tradition than anything else.

On the point of culture and its connection to the religious values of denominational schools, it is worth noting the tensions that arise when the area of sexual orientation comes up. A teacher described how she was challenged by a student who had called another child in the class ‘gay’ in a derogatory manner. When the teacher disciplined the child for this, the

child responded and said, “well my church said that doesn't exist, so it wasn't a bad word so I shouldn't be in trouble” (P 8). The teacher found this challenging to deal with given that the teachings of the church who run the school in which they are working does not support same sex marriage. However, under Article 41 of the Irish Constitution same sex marriage is legal in Ireland. The example from the teacher here represents the challenges that arise between a secularised society and religious values. This not only challenges teachers in terms of supporting children who opt out during RE, it also creates cross curricular difficulties in subjects like Relationship and Sexual Education (RSE) where teachers discuss topics that conflict with religious values but are representative of a contemporary secularised society.

### **Personal beliefs**

Personal beliefs was the second theme that emerged from this research. Participants' own belief and faith systems in addition to their personal background greatly impacted their opinion of how RE is taught in schools as well as the current opt-out process in denominational schools. It became apparent that teachers have conflicted feelings between their own beliefs and that of teaching in a denominational school. The difficulties that they experience in their day-to-day practice was evident. For instance, when participants discussed how they felt about teaching RE there was a consistent response throughout the interviews: “It goes against my beliefs” (P 3), “I am a confirmed atheist” (P 4), “it is like asking me to teach that two and two is five” (P 4,). One of those interviewed talked about how; “it can be hard to bite my tongue”, “I tend to believe in what science can prove” (P 8); another interviewee questioned why they should teach Religion when “they weren't practising it themselves” (P 1). The disconnect between the feelings of teachers interviewed for this study and the religious patronage of their schools was evident and it left some of them feeling “perplexed and conflicted” (P 4). As was noted in Chapter 2 there is a requirement in denominational schools for class teachers to complete thirty minutes of RE each day, which



comes to two and a half hours each week (NCCA, 2016). What became apparent in this study was the challenge that this presented to teachers in terms of their own conscience. It was described as being “difficult” and “tough” (P 8), “quite unfair” (P 9) and that “education and religion should be separate” (P 5), while it was implied that there was “no tolerance” (P 4) towards other beliefs in schools.

This was not the view of another teacher, who implied that denominational schools are very “tolerant” (P 7) and if a teacher were to go through “a crisis of faith” (P 7) they would be supported by the school. It was suggested that if a crisis of faith were to happen the school would “facilitate maybe another teacher taking” (P 7) the class for RE until it was worked “out for the teacher and they return” (P 7). Interestingly, there was no mention of what would happen if the teacher did not return to teaching RE; the implied expectation in this was just that they would. This participant also suggested how the fact that teachers have their own challenges in terms of their beliefs enables them to become more “tolerant to other people’s beliefs” (P 7). While the positive aspects of the denominational school in this context were seen as benefitting those from minority belief backgrounds, this participant also acknowledged that “a change was coming” (P 7) when they discussed the patronage of primary schools, referring to the further divestment of Catholic schools and the increase in the number of multi-denominational schools that they believe will happen.

There was a genuine sense of worry from some participants regarding their own faith (or lack thereof) and whether this could become known to management in denominational schools. For example, one participant noted that it was “definitely a worry” (P 8) for them to have their personal beliefs known in the school. It made some of those interviewed conceal their true beliefs in school as they felt it might “preclude them from applying for principalships” (P 4) and that they were “conscious of their career” (P4). There was a sense from some interviewees that letting their beliefs be known could “get them in trouble” (P 8)

and although a lot of teachers might not have “a particularly strong faith” (P 5) they were unlikely to let this be known. This was seen by one of those interviewed as having a greater impact on younger teachers:

I want to get married; I want to buy a house; I need a job. If I say now that I am not going to teach religion, then there goes 89 percent of the jobs that I can't apply for. I think younger teachers at the moment can't risk asking any questions about religion (P 4)

This participant's response relates to their concern that they feel as though they may be limited in their career progression based on the fact that ~89 percent of schools are Catholic in Ireland (DES, 2018). Ireland's unique position of having 96 percent of schools under the patronage of denominational bodies (Faas, Foster, & Smith, 2020) is something that cannot be overstated, particularly by those seeking to begin and progress in their careers. Similarly, this is something that Heinz et al. (2018) found in their research with ITE applicants where a significant number felt uncomfortable about disclosing their personal beliefs around RE taking place in primary schools. Although Article 18 of the *UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights* states that everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion (UN, 1948), it appears in practice that teachers in Ireland are concerned about how denominational patron bodies will view their beliefs.

Teachers also described the challenges of having to accommodate parents' personal beliefs in terms of their child's participation in RE. One teacher described many of their parents as being “atheist or just non-religious” (P 6). This has resulted in parents in some instances being “adamant” (P 4) that their child is not to participate in RE and referring to the practice in the school as “not being acceptable” (P 3) to them. Many of the teachers who took part in these interviews appeared to be caught between their own personal beliefs, the

personal beliefs and wishes of the children's parents, and the requirement placed on them by the patrons of the school.

Another issue that emerged under the theme of Personal Beliefs related to the incorporation of social traditions around the Christian faith; namely the celebration of Christmas in schools, and the conflicts that arise with parents of other faiths. For example, one teacher talked about being conscious of "not treading on toes" (P 8) and of the difficulties they faced around Christmas time when some children came from "belief backgrounds where Santa did not exist" (P 8). This teacher said that they contacted parents to say that "your child might not believe in Santa Claus but in this class, we do believe in Santa Claus" (P 8), a parent then contacted the school to say how "this infringed on their child's right to tell the truth" (P 8). This left the teacher in a challenging position trying to please those of all belief backgrounds in one class during what is typically a busy time in primary schools.

Sacramental preparation was mentioned by the participants in each of the interviews. The personal beliefs of the teachers who took part in this study appeared to be further conflicted when they discussed the role that their schools play in preparation for the sacraments (Confirmation, Communion and First Confession). Many participants were critical of preparation taking place during school hours. It was seen by many of them as "not being a meaningful thing anymore" (P 5), "it shouldn't be done in schools" (P 3), it needs to be done "outside of school" (P 6) and "if it is not coming from home, I have no idea why I am doing it" (P 4). Another teacher talked about the difficulties a colleague who was a talented musician had faced when looking for a break from teaching a class each year that had to prepare for the sacraments, "they had to make quite a demand for several years to get a change" (P 3). In this case there was an imposition placed on the teacher's professionalism brought on by the denominational nature of the school. However, it must be noted that not all of those involved in the study held the view that sacramental preparation should be removed

from the school day. Some participants referred to a newer initiative to include more parental involvement in the preparation of the sacraments, the '*Do This in Memory*' programme which is a resource used by Catholic schools designed to get greater parental and parish engagement in the sacramental preparation. One participant said that "it is not the burden it previously was" (P 7), referring to the greater level of community involvement. On the other hand, the push to have greater community involvement was seen by some teachers in other schools to be ineffective; "two years ago, they tried to bring it outside of school as much as possible and get the parents and the kids into the church, but they didn't go" (P 2). Another teacher recounted a conversation with a parent:

she was saying all of the parents are going mad because we all have to go to mass, on this first Monday of every month or first Sunday of every month. So, like, even the buy in from the parents to try and make it a little bit more meaningful for a lot of them, it just wasn't working (P 4).

What was apparent from the findings was that the personal beliefs of the teachers created challenges for them in terms of their approach to the teaching of RE and in their engagements with those children who were opting out. This was seen by one of those interviewed for this research as being potentially something which "limits the pool of teachers" (P 9). The potential reasons for this could be seen when other participants referred to themselves as "liberal" (P 8, P 9). One of these participants mentioned finding it very challenging when discussing things like "sexuality and homosexuality" (P 8) in class and when asked by a student if it was ok to be gay, responded by saying "of course it's ok to be gay" (P 8) but knowing themselves that their response goes against the beliefs of the patron body of the school in which they work.

## **Exclusion**

Another key theme from this research was that of exclusion, and the experiences of teachers who feel that certain students are being excluded from the class during RE. Teachers who participated in this research found that they had to overlook children in their class due to the need to teach religion and to prepare for the sacraments. The theme of exclusion was evident throughout the data collected and mentioned by the participants. One teacher noting how children who opt out, “are completely excluded” (P 2) when referring to their school’s procedure around sacramental preparation. It was evident when reviewing the interview data that the need to remove certain students from whole class activities was something that the teachers who participated in this research were acutely aware of in their day-to-day practice. The participants discussed how the need to exclude some children who were in the classroom from RE weighed heavily on them; one participant noted that they could feel the “sense of detachment” (P 9) on the part of the children who had been opted out from the rest of the class. Similarly, another participant mentioned how they did not “like to see a child distressed or uncomfortable” (P 8), when referring to the need to exclude them from what the rest of the class was doing during RE lessons. One teacher mentioned being “conscious of those who are put to the side” (P 5). In contrast however, another participant did not feel this way, and instead stated that they saw “no negative reaction” (P 1) from the children who were opting out of RE. This participant referenced the fact that there are “many children receiving some sort of support be it in class or out of class, these kinds of differences aren't as remarkable” (P 1). In general, though the participants discussed the difficulties that excluding children created for them. Some referred to it as being “awkward” (P 2) and said how they hoped those opting out “wouldn’t feel excluded” (P 2) but also acknowledged that their school “celebrated every Catholic holiday with an in service or a mass where they (those opting out) aren’t included” (P 2). As mentioned in Chapter 2, the permittance of religion to vivify and

inform the whole work of the school day has been rescinded (Department of Education, 1965), yet from what this teacher stated it is clear that religion pervades many aspects of the school in which they work, resulting in children opting out of additional school time outside of the thirty minutes of which is already assigned to RE each day. In this scenario the teacher said that “there is nothing I can really do other than give them a book to read” (P 2), which the participant feels is “awful but there’s nothing in place” (P 2) for children who opt out of RE during whole school Catholic celebrations. It also means that teachers must engage in a greater level of religious activity themselves during the school day and that the child cannot be opted out of “unscheduled and potentially continuous religious teaching” (Mawhinney, 2015, p.294).

This sense of exclusion appears to be heightened when it comes to the sacraments. One participant described how their school often invited children who do not participate in RE to come to the Communion or Confirmation as they thought that it would “be good for them” (P 4). This teacher felt that this was “patronising” (P 4) and from the child’s perspective it could have resulted in them feeling like an outsider. “They’re all dressed up because they’re Catholic, but my mammy doesn’t want me to be a Catholic, it was crushing” (P 4, 2021). In this case the participant was talking about a child’s mother in their class who did not want their daughter taking part in the sacraments due to their own personal beliefs. This point was something which was noticeable in some of the other interviews too. Some of the children who were opting out of RE were seen as “wanting to have inclusion with the class” (P 7) by participating in the sacraments. In one case a participant described a situation where a “child went to the communion ceremony and got the dress and everything but just didn’t take part in the actual sacrament end of it” (P 7). The participants pointed to the sense of longing that may exist amongst children who do not participate in RE to take part in celebrations with the rest of their class. It was also mentioned how in some cases the priest would invite the

children who were not making their confirmation to come to the altar and “he would just bless them” (P 7). The sense of wanting to be part of the occasion in some cases was so strong that one participant outlined how a child in the class “wanted to make his confirmation because all his friends were making their confirmation” (P 4). In this case the child who came from a different belief background was “baptised” (P 4) and was taken by a local nun for “doctrinal stuff” (P 4) so that they could be part of the confirmation ceremony. This could be seen as a form of assimilation, as was mentioned in Chapter 2 “everyone has the right to hold opinions without interference” (Ibáñez, 1993). It begs the question of whether sacramental preparation is interfering with the beliefs of children from minority faith/belief backgrounds.

It was not only the challenges presented to the teachers in terms of excluding children during RE that caused concern; in addition, one participant also said that the pressure from school management to exclude children was significant, saying that the principal told them that they were “not to provide formal instruction” (P 8) to children who were opting out during RE. This teacher described their principal as being “so adamant on that”, “he keeps saying it” (P 8). As a result of this the participant felt like they had to give opt out work to the children that would mean they “could do work quietly” (P 8). The instruction given by this principal would seem to go against the Toledo Guiding Principles (Durham et al., 2008) which refer to the need for the preparation of teachers to teach religion to be “framed in democratic and human rights principles” (Durham et al., 2008). However, this is clearly not the case in the example mentioned above. A participant also highlighted their experience of witnessing other children being aware of the fact that one child in the class opted out of RE. “He has to put on his headphones”, “all the kids would turn around and say get your headphones” (P 4). This is another area in which the Toledo Guiding Principles (Durham et al., 2008) believe care should be taken to avoid exclusionary or discriminatory behaviour by other students (Durham et al., 2008) during RE. In this case it appears the opt-out solution

has created a sense of exclusion within the classroom. In fact, this participant also mentioned how by giving the children who were not taking part in RE different work those children sometimes felt “punished” (P 4). These types of issues led to many of the participants trying to include the children who were opting out in RE. They mentioned that they would “include them as much as possible” and “ask them what their celebrations were” (P 2). This participant also discussed making it “less about the kind of specific Catholic Christian elements” and taking “out what is for everybody” (P 2). Others mentioned how they would teach elements of it “in a more SPHE way” (P 1) and sometimes they might “take the approach of generalising a religion lesson” (P 1) In terms of preparation for the sacraments, some teachers, instead of excluding the children got them involved in different elements of it, saying that “they’d like to be involved in that side of it” (P 7) when making reference to the artwork and music preparation that takes place during school time for Confirmation. Similarly, this was noted by another interviewee who said that they “would often do the artwork” (P 6). It was also suggested that they give them the “option to join the school choir for the day” (P 7) rather than exclude them. Contrary to these views, one participant saw it as never being “a negative to learn about a new religion” (P 5). However, this does not take into consideration the child’s ability to assent to this new learning and overlooks the power dimension at play here. This teacher also acknowledged how they “celebrate all of the other religious festivals” (P 5).

Overall, there is a sense that the exclusion of certain pupils during parts of the school day caused difficulties for the teachers who took part in this study. As a result, many sought to take other approaches that would avoid them having to exclude the children who do not participate in RE. However, by doing this it could be argued that they are going against the children’s and their families right to freedom of expression (Irish Human Rights Commission, 2011). Indeed an inclusive education system is seen as one which encourages



and supports children's agency (Faas, Smith, & Darmody, 2018), whereas the practices outlined by some of the participants here seems to suggest a more assimilationist approach in the informal practice of teachers.

### **Challenges of teaching children from minority belief/faith backgrounds in denominational schools.**

#### *Curriculum tensions*

The final theme that emerged from this research was the challenges of teaching children from minority belief/faith backgrounds in denominational schools. Different belief/faith backgrounds follow various rules, values, and traditions; these can conflict with the work of the teacher in the classroom, particularly in denominational schools. One participant in this study admitted to being "completely unaware of what they can and can't do" (P 2) when referring to the Muslim children in their class and their engagement with singing and dancing activities. As was referred to in a previous section, another participant got into difficulty with a parent in the class when they "sent home a book about Halloween" (P 8). What is clear from reviewing the data is that the challenges facing teachers when they have children in their class who opt out of RE extend beyond the RE lessons themselves and into other areas of the curriculum. When one participant assigned tasks in Visual Art that were related to Easter, some students who did not participate in RE "were a bit nervous, they thought that they'd get in trouble" (P 8) for taking part as the children themselves felt the activity related to RE. This put the teacher in a challenging position which they had not envisaged and further highlights the tensions that exist between the curriculum and the religious nature of denominational schools. Participants suggested that they did not have knowledge of the different belief backgrounds that were represented in their class and had "never had any professional development" (P 8) in that area. In some cases, the teachers in this study were

not even aware of what religious denomination the children in their class belonged to, “I was just told by the previous teacher that they don’t take part” (P 2). This participant only became aware of the children’s belief backgrounds after checking “their file on Aladdin (student database) and found out they were Muslim” (P 2). The participant said that they were not told “by school management” (P 2) about the children who were opting out. Similarly, another participant mentioned the fact that there is “little to no interaction” (P 9) about who was opting out in their school. This participant noted the risks associated with the lack of organisation and communication in the school around the opt-out procedure. They noted that some “children might easily put up their hand up and say, “I am not of the religion, whereas others might be quiet and would just sit there idly by” (P 9). It is interesting to note that none of the teachers who participated in this research exercised their own agency and asked the children in their classrooms about their belief backgrounds at the start of the school year. This raises the question of whether there may be a reluctance on the part of teachers in denominational settings to ask questions about children’s beliefs and if so, why might that be? Is it acceptable in a denominational setting to ask those questions? Is it related to teacher discomfort? Does it indicate a general lack of openness to minority belief backgrounds in denominational schools?

Other participants talked about the frustration when some of the children who come from different belief background “contradict what you’re saying” (P 8). This participant discussed the challenges of having children of different faiths in the class when trying to teach certain topics particularly some of those that are related to RSE like, “sexuality, marriage and equality” (P 8). Another issue that was seen as being a “pain in the neck for teachers” (P 4) was when parents were given the option to remove their children from the classroom. This meant that teachers had to stick rigidly to a timetable which was a source of frustration for some, “I had this great maths lesson going on and I would have run it until one

o'clock” (P 4). In this case the teacher could not adapt or change their timetabling of subjects due to the logistics around the opt-out procedure in their school as the parent was arriving to remove their child. Regardless of how well a lesson was going and the level of learning that was happening the teacher had to stop. A participant also discussed how parents removing their children from school during Mass caused them difficulties with the children who were taking part in RE, “he went off for his hot chocolate and his cookies and all of the other kids were like, ah we don't want to go to Mass” (P 6). This participant also talked about the requirement on the class teacher in this case to make sure that they called the parents of opted out children “48 hours before a Mass” (P 6) to give them time to make arrangements to remove their child from the school at the time of the Mass if they wished. This was seen as creating additional logistical issues and placed an obligation on the teacher to call the parents of the opted out children in their class every time there was a mass or payer service in school which there would be many times throughout the school year in a denominational school. It must be noted that this was the most organised opt-out strategy that was implemented by any of the participants in this study. However, it must be said that the children who were opting out in that school were not receiving any educational instruction during these periods when they were not in the class, and it created a demand that could not be facilitated by some parents. According to a teacher involved in this research this resulted in “most of the parents who are working or whatever are just happy enough for the kids to go and they just tell the kids don't pray and don't go to communion” (P 6).

Furthermore, the time given to teaching RE and preparing for the sacraments in primary schools was a source of significant annoyance for many of the participants who talked about it “taking a lot of time” (P 3).to the detriment of other subjects. Referring to the teaching of other areas of the curriculum they discussed how the teaching of RE and the preparation for the sacraments “encroaches on everything else” (P 6). It was also seen that the time devoted

to sacramental preparation in particular meant that some participants “didn’t get a massive amount of stuff covered” (P 2) and preparation for the Confirmation and Communion was seen as being to the “detriment of education” (P 5). Others noted how “confirmation and religion in general does bleed into other subjects” (P 8) and how it is “hard enough to get three subjects done in a day because there’s so much happening” (P 9). The time constraints on teachers were outlined further by one participant who stated their frustration at having “to give more time to sacramental preparation but not only that I have to give more time to the priest” (P 2), this was outside of the time allotted to RE during the school day, describing what the priest did as not “fully sacramental prep he came in and looked at passages from the bible and morality” (P 2). This put a greater pressure on the teacher when it came to engaging with the curriculum due to the time that was lost through sacramental preparation and visits from the priest. The experiences of the participants in this study contradict what is outlined by the Catholic Schools Partnership (2015) who state that, “the time allocated to religious education is sufficient to cover sacramental preparation (Catholic Schools Partnership, 2015).

### *Guidance for teachers*

The level of support given to those who opted out of RE by the different teachers who participated in this research varied from participant to participant; there were many reasons for this. One main cause for a lack of support appeared to be the structures of the schools in which the participants were working. One participant noted how in their school there was “no framework in place” (P 9) for the teachers to follow when they had a student who was opting out of RE. Another said how “it would be down to the teacher” (P 5) to decide what those not taking part in RE would do during that time. It appeared that there was little to no communication in the participants’ schools around the opt-out procedure, “the school haven’t said anything to me” (P 2), “I wasn’t aware of any policy for children who didn’t take part in religion” (P 1), “generally I go by, kind of what they tell me, what the kids tell me, not

management, or staff tell me” (P 2), “we don’t have a programme in place for those who are opting out” (P 6). The Catholic Schools Partnership (2015) say that “all staff should be familiar with the policy and procedures” (Catholic Schools Partnership, 2015, p. 27) related to the children who are opting out of RE. Yet from their own admission the teachers who participated in this study appear to receive no “formal” (P 7) details of what they should do when facilitating those who are opting out. In some cases, as was highlighted above, teachers have been made aware of those who are opting out by the children themselves after receiving no guidance from their school. The lack of clear guidance given to participants is noticeable throughout the data collected, with one participant stating that the opt-out procedure had never been “brought up at staff meeting” (P 9). Another mentioned how “management haven’t even thought about it” (P 2). The ambiguity that exists around the opt-out procedure has certainly created challenges for those who took part in this research.

The experiences of teachers in this study of providing opt-out tasks for children in their class was largely a negative one; the pressure they were under in the class often left them with little choice but to give “busy work” (P 2) or “something pleasant” (P 3). Teachers described how they would ask their colleagues at the same class level, “what’ll we get them to do?” (P 4) as they did not “want to be interrupted” (P 5) when teaching RE by those who were opting out. The children who opted out were seen as needing to be able to “teach themselves basically” (P 5) during RE. One participant noted that they would have some “passive participants” (P 8) who were Christian but not taking part in the sacraments. This teacher said that they did not mind them taking part but told these children that they the teacher “wouldn’t be answering any of their questions” (P 8) in relation to what was being taught. Some described how teachers in their school would get complaints from parents saying that “they (i.e. their children) are fed up of doing the same Maths” (P 5), when referring to the work that was assigned during RE. Other participants mentioned how they

told parents that they would “try and have him busy with something else” (P 3), when reassuring a parent about the type of work being given during RE to their son who was opting out. However, it was noted by participants that there “wouldn’t be a lot of thought” (P 3) put into what work to give those who were opting out during RE. This participant also said that “there wouldn’t be too much planning involved” (P 3) either when it came to the opt-out strategy. Some teachers’ experiences seemed to highlight just how ineffective and at times unfair the opt-out solutions can be; “give them something to do at the back of the classroom” (P 4), “now you go down to that corner and work away on that reading or whatever” (P 3), “can you just go look in your pile for something to do” (P 8). Some who were involved in this study described almost a sense of conflict between some of the teachers in their school and the parents of the opted out children, “the class teacher didn't give in on anything else she said that he would have to stay with the class unless they went to the church” (P 3). This participant also stated how they “generally don’t give too much away on it” (P 3) when describing the provisions made for those not taking part in RE in their school. The challenges posed to teachers when trying to create positive opt-out solutions were seen as emanating from a lack of “flexibility” (P 3) and by the difficulties in providing “supervision” (P 7) for those who are not taking part in RE.

## **Conclusion**

The experiences of teachers who have children in their class from different belief backgrounds who opt out of RE was seen from the data collected during this research to have a largely negative impact on the professional practice of these teachers. The opt-out solutions available to the participants are limited in their ability to support the teacher or the children who are opting out. This lack of support can be seen through inadequate communication and planning in schools which generally has resulted in an increased workload for the participants in this study, one referred to it as being “an extra lesson you have to plan” (P 1) when

discussing their informal opt-out solution. The opt-out procedures that were described by the participants in this research come across as being fragmented, uncertain and at times quite impractical to follow. The conflict between change vs. religion can be seen throughout the data collected. Recent changes in the Irish Constitution most notably Article 41 of the Constitution has created a scenario where some teachers' personal beliefs and that of the majority of Irish society clash with the teachings of the largest patron body in the state. This has caused difficulties for some teachers when they are doing RSE programmes in school. There is a significant contrast between the personal beliefs of many of the participants and the teaching of RE in schools. This has created issues for some in relation to career progression and has left others in a situation where they believe their own beliefs must stay private in their workplace. The challenges facing teachers in trying to accommodate all of the different belief backgrounds in one classroom is very complicated and would appear to be very difficult to execute effectively in practice.

## Chapter 5: Conclusions and Recommendations

The purpose of this research was to answer the following question: what is the experience of primary school teachers in Ireland who work in denominational schools with children from diverse religious and philosophical backgrounds who opt out of RE? In this chapter the study conclusions will be outlined in the context of the broader education system in Ireland. In addition, recommendations for further research and suggestions for improvements in teacher experience in denominational schools in Ireland will be put forward.

### Study conclusions

#### *(i) Negative feeling of teachers towards RE*

The findings from this research suggest that many participants had negative feelings towards the requirements placed on them to teach RE. Firstly, some participants said openly during the interviews that they were not religious. Although not asked directly, none of the participants overtly stated that they were religious or that they were a member of a religious group. Secondly, most of the teachers who took part in the study expressed their opinion that religion should not be taught in schools. In addition, the participants also stated that they were acutely aware of the lack of religious affiliation among the children in their classroom, and as a result, found themselves frustrated by the requirement placed on them to teach religion when it was not a part of their students' lives outside school. Further to this point, many participants therefore felt that teaching RE was somewhat redundant at times, given that a significant proportion of children in their class either have no particular religious affiliation or actively opt out of RE altogether.

The lack of support for teachers during sacramental preparation was also seen as a significant challenge, and this emerged as a key theme from the research. The amount of time



devoted to sacramental preparation was perceived to be too much by most participants and this impacted on other subject areas and went over the amount of time that is suggested by the CSP for sacramental preparation. The increased workload for the teacher associated with sacramental preparation also resulted in the majority of participants believing that preparation for Communion and Confirmation should take place outside of school. These findings corroborate previous findings from a survey carried out by the INTO in 2013 which found that over 70 per cent of teachers spent more time preparing the children in their class for the sacraments than is officially allowed (INTO, 2013). In the current study, the participants discussed the inspection of RE by the diocesan advisors. Some participants also expressed negative feelings towards these inspections, and rather than the inspections being viewed as a source of support for the teachers, many looked upon them as a situation that was likely to cause further stress. Teachers expressed that they felt the need to spend time to prepare for these inspections on top of their current workload of preparing the children for sacramental preparation and also their full teaching curriculum, leading to a heavy workload and causing additional stress.

*(ii) The ambiguity and inconsistencies that exist around the opt-out procedure in schools.*

The findings from this research highlight the significant lack of guidance for teachers when it came to supporting children in their class who did not participate in RE (i.e. students who “opt out”). It was evident that the procedures undertaken by the teachers are often informal or impractical with teachers being left to figure out how best to manage the opt-out situation. This resulted in situations where participants were preparing an extra lesson each day or else trying to find additional resources that would be suitable for the children who were opting out. Some participants stated that they were often unsure of how best to provide support to children who opt out due to the lack of support they themselves received. There

appears to be an association here between the level of support children who opt out were receiving, and the level of engagement each participant's school had with the opt-out procedure. As was discussed in Chapter 4 the opt-out strategies that were put in place often alienated the students concerned and was something that participants in this study were very conscious of. The communication between school management and teachers around the identification of those children who were not participating in RE - and the general guidance on what they should do for those children - appeared to be limited. In some cases, teachers were completely unaware of those who were opting out. From the nine participants interviewed in this research, it was interesting that there was only one participant who was aware of, and could describe, their school's opt-out procedure. In this case, the opt-out procedure relied not upon the school management's plan, but instead upon the parents actively taking responsibility for their children during the time allocated to RE. It was also apparent from the research that some teachers felt that there was no professional development offered to them in the area of religious and philosophical diversity, and that there was no discussion of these topics at staff meetings despite the fact that every participant had someone in their class who was opting out of RE. These findings can be discussed in the context of the Intercultural Guidelines (NCCA, 2006), which describe how schools need to understand at a basic level how children of different faiths practise their religion as this can affect how lessons are planned and certain things are taught (NCCA, 2006). Clearly, despite these Intercultural Guidelines (NCCA, 2006), there is still a real absence of clarity and lack of support experienced by the teachers interviewed in this study on how best to facilitate students who opt out. This ambiguity and lack of support appears to contribute to a situation where teachers in this study feel uncertain about how to engage with children who opt out. As a result of this, in some cases, there was no opt-out strategy put in place and this meant that students who were from different belief backgrounds ended up taking part in elements of the

RE programme and sacramental preparation. This was previously mentioned in Chapter 2 when referring to the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism which described this practice as being unsatisfactory and lacking in understanding (Coolahan et al., 2012). These practices could be seen as a form of assimilation and a major human rights issue. It was noted in Chapter 4 how one student converted to Catholicism just so they could be part of the confirmation. Participants mentioned how students joined school choirs and created artwork for the sacraments even though they had opted out of RE. The fact that these practices are still in place eight years after the publication of the report on Patronage and Pluralism further outlines the ambiguity that exists for teachers and the whole school community around how to support children who do not participate in RE. It also highlights significant concerns around the assimilation that is occurring in some denominational schools.

*(iii) The difficulties caused by the contrast between contemporary Irish society and religious-ethos schools*

The contrast between contemporary Irish society and the approach taken by denominational schools appeared to cause difficulties for the majority of teachers who took part in this research. Although religion is no longer permitted to pervade the school day since the rescinding of *Rule 68*, it still appears to be represented outside of the time given to RE lessons. Several participants noted how religious assemblies are held, prayers are said, and artwork is completed outside of the time allocated to RE. This causes difficulties for teachers in that they are required to do more religious activities and try to come up with opt-out strategies for multiple scenarios. The increased level of religious activity which teachers seem obliged to do, be it for sacramental preparation or school masses, may conflict with their own personal beliefs, as was the case for some of the participants in this study. These findings are in agreement with previous research conducted in this area, which indicated that these factors can cause “immense problems for non-Christian teachers” (Mawhinney, 2015,

p.293). The RSE programme is another area where challenges can arise between the values of contemporary Irish society and the more traditional approaches taken by the Catholic church. For instance, a recent RSE primary resource called *Flourish* that was released by the Catholic Primary Schools Management Association (CPMSA) states that when a teacher is teaching RSE “the church’s teaching in relation to a marriage being only between a man and a woman cannot be omitted” (Catholic Primary Schools Management Association, 2021, p.3). This conflict between the guidance from the CPSMA and contemporary Irish society - and Irish marriage legislation itself - clearly has the potential to create significant difficulties. This was made apparent in the findings of the current study, as many teachers expressed difficulties trying to comprehend how best to overcome the opposing guidelines. Some participants spoke of the fact that many teachers in schools are in same sex marriages or relationships, that children in primary schools may come from same sex families and could have siblings who are in same sex relationships. It must also be mentioned that this new RSE primary resource, *Flourish*, although optional, is now available for Catholic schools to use. At the time of carrying out this research the programme had not yet been released. It was published after the interviews had been completed.

Teachers in this study talked about the difficulties they faced as a result of the conflicting messages that children are receiving, and the responses they as the teachers are expected to give them. Ireland has significantly changed in terms of its level of religious diversity in the last 20 years (CSO, 2017) yet the CSP see religious diversity as the “least important” (Catholic Schools Partnership, 2011, p.6) measure of diversity. However, as could be seen from some of the data collected, in some classrooms in Ireland a large proportion of children in the class are not participating in sacramental preparations. This puts teachers in a very challenging position. Indeed, the lack of consideration of religious diversity has created challenges for teachers in primary schools in an Irish society that is made up of people from a

wide variety of backgrounds. Participants in this study suggested that religious symbolism, opt-out procedures, and sacramental preparation affect the ability of teacher to teach in diverse classrooms.

### **Recommendations**

The recommendations outlined here are based on the research findings.

(i) Sacramental preparation could be completed outside of normal school hours while still taking place within the school building by a teacher who opts in to preparing the children for the sacraments. This would still allow denominational patron bodies to prepare their students to receive sacraments but would not impinge on the educational rights of the children from different belief backgrounds. Sacramental preparation taking place outside of school hours in the school building would reduce the pressure on teachers and would lessen the need for opt-out strategies.

(ii) Currently there is a lack continuous professional development (CPD) courses for teachers on religious and philosophical diversity that are practical and that cover all curricular areas to ensure best practice is followed. The lack of knowledge around the different belief backgrounds was noticeable in the data collected. This resulted in teachers engaging in practices that often caused exclusion, this could be avoided if there was additional training during staff meetings and if CPD courses were offered throughout the year. CPD courses could help to reduce the sense of exclusion on the part of minority belief students by giving teachers tools which would allow them to incorporate all of the children in their class by knowing what they will and will not participate in. By tailoring their approach to adapt to the belief backgrounds of their class they will create a

more inclusive environment. These courses could also improve communication with parents and avoid any tensions that could arise.

(iii) In the short term, there is a need for a standardised opt-out programme to be adopted in denominational schools. Based on the current slow rate of divestment denominational primary schools will make up for vast majority of primary schools in the short term. While the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in 2012 recommended the need for greater choice, there has only been a 2.5 percent increase in multi-denominational primary schools since 2009 (Lawlor & Burke, 2020). The creation of a standardised opt-out programme for denominational schools could ensure children get a genuine opt-out solution and that teachers are enabled to provide effective support. It would also help to reduce some of the ambiguity that teachers have expressed with regard to current opt-out guidelines. A countrywide programme for children who opt out of RE would be beneficial to denominational schools who are currently struggling to provide effective support. Teachers in this research were caught between not wanting the children to work ahead in other subject areas without proper guidance but equally being conscious of the alternative rather basic and mundane opt-out solutions. Issues may arise here in terms of the exclusion of other students from an opt-out programme. However, the programme itself could be based on a revision of key topics relating to the school curriculum and would not mean that other children would miss out on new learning. It would also reduce the risk of opt-out solutions which provide inadequate educational supports or create situations where those not participating in RE are excluded from classroom activities.

(iv) The introduction of non-denominational schools and a greater provision of multi-denominational schools at primary level is needed in Ireland.

This has been recommended by (Daly, 2009; Kitching, 2020; O’Toole, 2015) and the IHRC who in a report published in 2011 said that the “state should ensure that there is diversity of provision” (Irish Human Rights Commission, 2011, p. 99). This would give teachers a greater choice of where they would like to teach. It would allow for the personal beliefs of teachers to be recognised and would help to ameliorate the feelings of some teachers who believe their careers may be limited as a result of their own personal beliefs (as was discussed in Chapter 4). Many participants noted that they were not religious but if they want to pursue a career as a primary school teacher, they have little choice but to teach in a denominational school. This was seen by Heinz et al. (2018) as potentially causing some teachers to consider an alternative career due to the conflict between “personal and professional lives” (Heinz et al ,p. 21). The obvious conflict between the personal beliefs of teachers and the values that denominational schools represent creates a situation where teachers’ right to freedom of expression is considerably impacted. A primary school system that had a high percentage of denominational, multi-denominational and non-denominational schools could provide greater choice to teachers and create a situation where the needs and desires of society are met. However, it must be acknowledged that given the cultural and traditional nature of the Irish primary school system this is not a quick or easy situation to resolve.

(v) New guidelines on how to approach teaching in diverse classrooms in denominational schools would be welcomed, with such guidelines having an increased emphasis on religious and philosophical diversity. The current Intercultural Guidelines are outdated; it is 15 years since they were released. They do not provide effective or up to date guidance for teachers when it comes to

supporting those students who come from different belief backgrounds in their classrooms. Practical guidelines that are easily implementable in a denominational setting would significantly benefit children, teachers, and the whole school community. They would also be welcomed by educators as was seen from the data gathered in this study. For instance, the findings from this study showed that many participants asked the children informally about their beliefs and there was some level of intercultural dialogue, but more formal instruction on this dialogue would be welcomed. This is something that needs to be encouraged and developed in primary schools.

Overall, this study showed the significant challenges faced by teachers working in denominational schools in Ireland. Issues related to the tension in schools between secularism and religious values, personal beliefs, exclusion, and the challenges of teaching children from minority belief/faith backgrounds in denominational schools were highlighted by teachers. Teachers play an invaluable role in the children's development, and their value, regardless of their own personal belief background, needs to be recognised. Moving forward, it would be of importance to have sacramental preparation take place outside of school hours and for there to be a genuine opt-out programme for those not participating in RE. It is also of importance to publish new intercultural guidelines that provide greater guidance on religious and philosophical diversity, and to increase the number of multi-denominational schools while also creating non-denominational schools. Finally, it is vitally important that increased support and guidance should be provided to primary school teachers working in denominational schools. A sustainable model of primary school provision needs to be created so that teachers can be supported regardless of their personal beliefs. This is vital given the important role in which teachers have in our society.



### References

- Agee, J. (2009). Developing qualitative research questions: A reflective process. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 22(4), 431–447. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09518390902736512>
- Anderson, G., & Arsenault, N. (2005). Fundamentals of educational research. In *Fundamentals of Educational Research*. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203978221>
- Basit, T. N. (2010). *Conducting research in educational contexts Tehmina N. Basit*. Retrieved from <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=cat05145a&AN=mie.25735&site=eds-live>
- Bocking, B., & Hyland, Á. (2015). Signature Pedagogies in Comparative Perspective Religion , Education , and Religious Education in Irish Schools. *Teaching Theology and Religion*, 18(3), 252–262.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Catholic Primary Schools in a Changing Ireland Sharing good Practice on inclusion of all Pupils*. (2015).
- Catholic Primary Schools Management Association. (2021). *Flourish*. 5–7.
- Catholic Schools Partnership. (2011). *Catholic Schools in the Republic of Ireland. A position paper*. Retrieved from <https://www.catholicschools.ie/csp/>
- Coolahan, J., Hussey, C., & Kilfeather, F. (2012). *The Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector Report of the Forum's Advisory Group*. (April), 174.

Central Statistics Office (2017) Retrieved from

<https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cp8iter/p8iter/p8rnraa/>

Community National School (2020). Retrieved from <https://cns.ie/>

Daly, E. (2009). Religious freedom as a function of power relations: Dubious claims on pluralism in the denominational schools debate. *Irish Educational Studies*, 28(3), 235–251. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03323310903335377>

Darmody, M., Lyons, M., & Smyth, E. (2014). *Religious education in a multicultural Europe* edited by Emer Smyth, Maureen Lyons and Merike Daemody. Retrieved from <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=cat05145a&AN=mie.23267&site=eds-live>

Denscombe, M. (2010). *The Good Research Guide For Small Scale Research Projects*. In *Open University Press*.

Department of Education. 1965. *Rules for National Schools under the Department of Education*. Dublin, Ireland: Stationery Office

DES. (2018). *Statistical Bulletin: Enrolments September 2019 - Preliminary Results*. (June), 10.

Drumm, M. (2012). The Future of Catholic Education in a Pluralist Ireland. *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review*, 101(402), 186–192.

Dunne, J. (1991). *The Catholic School, the Democratic State and Civil Society: Exploring the Tensions* \*.

Durham, W. C., Ferrari, S., & Santoro, S. (2008). The toledo guiding principles on teaching about religion and beliefs in public schools. *Security and Human Rights*, 19(3).

Educate Together. (2019). *Educate-Togethers-Charter.pdf*.

Equate poll (2017) Retrieved from <https://www.education.ie/en/The-Department/Action-Plan-for-Education-2016-2019/Submissions/EQUATE.pdf>

Faas, D, Darmody, M., & Sokolowska, B. (2015). Religious diversity in primary schools. *British Journal of Religious Education*. Doi:10.1080/01416200.2015.1025700.

Faas, Daniel, Foster, N., & Smith, A. (2020). Accommodating religious diversity in denominational and multi-belief settings: a cross-sectoral study of the role of ethos and leadership in Irish primary schools. *Educational Review*, 72(5), 601–616.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2018.1520689>

Faas, Daniel, Smith, A., & Darmody, M. (2018a). Children's Agency in Multi-Belief Settings: The Case of Community National Schools in Ireland. *Journal of Research in Childhood Education*, 32(4), 486–500. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02568543.2018.1494645>

Faas, Daniel, Smith, A., & Darmody, M. (2018b). The role of principals in creating inclusive school environments: insights from community national schools in Ireland. *School Leadership and Management*, 38(4), 457–473.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13632434.2018.1430688>

Faas, Daniel, Smith, A., & Darmody, M. (2019). Between ethos and practice: are Ireland's new multi-denominational primary schools equal and inclusive? *Compare*, 49(4), 602–618. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057925.2018.1441704>

Fischer, K. (2016). *Schools and the Politics of Religion and Diversity in the Republic of Ireland : Separate but Equal?* Retrieved from  
<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=e095mww&AN=1444081&site=eds-live>

- Fraenkel, J. R. (2012). *How to design and evaluate research in education* (8th ed.). New York: Mc Graw Hill.
- Franck, O. (2020). Critical dimensions of ethical competence in intercultural religious education: An analysis with special regard to three scandinavian curricular arenas. *HTS Theologiese Studies / Theological Studies*, 76(1), 1–10.  
<https://doi.org/10.4102/HTS.V76I1.5829>
- Heinz, M., Davison, K., & Keane, E. (2018). ‘I will do it but religion is a very personal thing’: teacher education applicants’ attitudes towards teaching religion in Ireland. *European Journal of Teacher Education*, 41(2), 232–245.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/02619768.2018.1426566>
- Hella, E., & Wright, A. (2009). Learning “about” and “from” religion: Phenomenography, the variation theory of learning and religious education in Finland and the UK. *British Journal of Religious Education*, 31(1), 53–64.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/01416200802560047>
- Hyland, Á., & Bocking, B. (2016). *Religion, Education and Religious Education in Irish Schools*. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-32289-6\\_8](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-32289-6_8)
- Ibáñez, A. I. B. L. D. (1993). General comment adopted by the human rights committee under article 40, paragraph 4, of the international covenant on civil and political rights. 26(2), 78–79.
- IHRC. (2011). *Religion & Education: A Human Rights Perspective*. Retrieved from [https://www.ihrec.ie/app/uploads/download/pdf/education\\_religion\\_\\_a\\_human\\_rights\\_perspective\\_\\_24\\_may\\_2011.pdf](https://www.ihrec.ie/app/uploads/download/pdf/education_religion__a_human_rights_perspective__24_may_2011.pdf)
- International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. (1988). *Annual Review of Population*

*Law*, 15, 148. <https://doi.org/10.32420/1996.2.45>

INTO. (2013). *Religion in primary schools: Analysis of data report*. Dublin.

Irish Human Rights Commission. (2011). *Religion and education- A human rights perspective 2011.pdf*.

Irwin, J. (2010). Interculturalism, ethos and ideology: barriers to freedom and democracy in Irish Primary Education. *REA: A Journal of Religion, Education and the Arts*, (6), 450–468.

King, N. (2004). *Essential Guide to Qualitative Methods in Organizational Research*. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446280119>

Kitching, K. (2020). A thousand tiny pluralities: children becoming-other than the requirements of postsecular neoliberal policy recognition. *Critical Studies in Education*, 61(2), 133–148. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17508487.2017.1381630>

Kvale, S. (1994). *InterViews: An introduction to qualitative research interviewing*. Sage Publications, Inc

Lapadat, J. C., & Lindsay, A. C. (1999). Transcription in research and practice: From standardization of technique to interpretive positionings. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 5(1), 64–86. <https://doi.org/10.1177/107780049900500104>

Lawlor, D., & Burke, S. (2020). Education in Ireland: Statistical Snapshot. *Oireachtas Library and Research Service*, (2019), 1.

Lodge, A & Lynch, K. (2004). *Diversity at School*. Dublin: Institute of Public Administration.

Marriage Act 2015.

Retrieved from <http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2015/act/35/enacted/en/print>

Mawhinney, A. (2012). A discriminating education system: Religious admission policies in Irish schools and international human rights law. *International Journal of Children's Rights*, 20(4), 603–623. <https://doi.org/10.1163/157181811X611054>

Mawhinney, A. (2015). International Human Rights Law: Its Potential and Limitations in Effecting Change to the Place of Religion in the Irish Education System. *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, 36(3), 291–305. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07256868.2015.1029891>

Mc Ardle, F. (2016). *The Complexity of Provisions for Opting Out of the Sacraments in a Denominational School*. Marino Institute of Education.

McGuire, P., & Faller, G. (2015, November 28). Non-Catholic in a Catholic school. *The Irish Times*.

McNamara, G., & Norman, J. (2010). Conflicts of Ethos: Issues of Equity and Diversity in Faith-based Schools. *Educational Management Administration and Leadership*, 38(5), 534–546. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143210373743>

NCCA. (2006). *Intercultural Education in the Primary school*. 368.

Nowell, L. S., Norris, J. M., White, D. E., & Moules, N. J. (2017). Thematic Analysis: Striving to Meet the Trustworthiness Criteria. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 16(1), 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406917733847>

O'Toole, B. (2015). 1831–2014: An opportunity to get it right this time? Some thoughts on the current debate on patronage and religious education in Irish primary schools. *Irish Educational Studies*, 34(1), 89–102. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03323315.2015.1010704>

Parker-Jenkins, M., & Masterson, M. (2013). No longer “Catholic, White and Gaelic”:

schools in Ireland coming to terms with cultural diversity. *Irish Educational Studies*.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/03323315.2013.851438>

Pépin, L. (2009). Teaching about Religions in European School Systems: Policy Issues and Trends. *Framework*.

Richardson, N., Niens, U., Mawhinney, A., & Chiba, Y. (2013). Opting out or opting in? Conscience clauses, minority belief communities and the possibility of inclusive religious education in Northern Ireland. *British Journal of Religious Education*, 35(3), 236–250. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01416200.2012.750595>

Riesman, C. K. (1993). *Narrative Analysis*. Sage.

Rubin, I., & Rubin, H. J. (1995). *Qualitative interviewing : the art of hearing data*. Retrieved from <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=cat05145a&AN=mie.15220&site=eds-live>

Rubin, I., & Rubin, H. J. (2012). *Qualitative interviewing : the art of hearing data Herbert J. Rubin, Irene S. Rubin*. Retrieved from <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=cat05145a&AN=mie.27212&site=eds-live>

Sakaranaho, T. (2018). Encountering religious diversity: multilevel governance of Islamic education in Finland and Ireland. *Journal of Religious Education*, 66(2), 111–124. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40839-018-0065-9>

Tisdell, E. J., & Merriam, S. B. (2016). *Qualitative research : a guide to design and implementation Sharan B. Merriam, Elizabeth J. Tisdell*. Retrieved from <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=cat05145a&AN=mie.27188&site=eds-live>

e=eds-live

Torvey, H., & Share, P. (2003). *A Sociology of Ireland* (2nd ed.). Dublin: Gill and Macmillan.

Tuckett, A. G. (2005). *Applying thematic analysis theory to practice: A researcher's experience*, *Contemporary Nurse*. <https://doi.org/10.5172/conu.19.1-2.75>

Utdanningsdirektoratet. (2020). *Læreplan i kristendom, religion, livssyn og etikk (RLE01-03)*. 1–26. Retrieved from <https://www.udir.no/lk20/rle01-03>

Vermeer, P. (2009). Denominational schools and the (religious) socialisation of youths: A changing relationship. *British Journal of Religious Education*, *31*(3), 201–211. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01416200903112268>

Watson, B. (2011). Democracy, religion and secularism: Reflections on the public role of religion in a modern society. *Journal of Beliefs and Values*, *32*(2), 173–183. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13617672.2011.600816>

Williams, K. (1999). Faith and the nation: Education and religious identity in the Republic of Ireland. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, *47*(4), 317–331. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8527.00122>



Appendices

**Appendix A** Interview questions for participant teachers

**Appendix B** Letter of information for participants

**Appendix C** Letter of consent for participants

**Appendix A**

Interview questions for participant teachers

**Research interview questions**

1. Do you currently or have you previously taught in a classroom where children have opted out of religious education?
2. Do many of the children in your school opt out of religious education?
3. How do you find teaching religious education in a denominational school where some children opt out of religious education?
4. What is/was that experience like for you as a teacher?
5. How did the children react/respond at opt out time? What was that like for you as a teacher?
6. What provisions has your school made to allow children to opt out of religious education?
7. How have these provisions been working in practice?
8. Have you (or your school) ever communicated with parents of children who opt out regarding what their children does during religious education?
9. How have you practically managed that opt-out situation?
10. Do you include in your planning what work is assigned to children who opt out of religious education?
11. To what extent, if at all, does/did having children who opt out of religious education in your class increase your workload?
12. Is the work completed by children who opt out during religious education assessed?
13. What are your views on sacramental preparation taking place during school hours?
14. Have children of different religious and belief backgrounds ever participated in the preparation of artwork, drama, and other elements of the sacramental/religious education programme? If so, what are your views on this practice?

**Appendix B**

Letter of information for participants

Dear Teacher,

I am a Primary school teacher who is currently enrolled in the Master of Education programme in Marino Institute of Education. I am writing to ask for your help with a research study that investigates the experiences of teachers in denominational schools who work with children from different religious and belief backgrounds, who opt out of religious education.

I hope that the findings of the study will inform future teachers' practice and highlight the general issues around providing religious and confessional instruction in classrooms where there are diverse beliefs so that greater guidance can be given to teachers.

Participation in this study would involve an interview with me around the area of religious/philosophical diversity in denominational schools. The interview will last for 40 minutes or less and the audio from the interview will be recorded on zoom.

I hope you will be willing to participate because your responses are important and a valued part of the study. Your participation will remain strictly confidential. Your name will not be attached to any of the data you provide. You are welcome to discontinue participation in the study at any time, should you wish to do so.

The risks of participation in the study are very low. The audio recording will be kept on an encrypted device without your name attached to it. The audio will be retained only for the purposes of the current study. Once the study is completed, the audio will be destroyed based on the schedule outlined in the Institute's data retention schedule. If you would like more information on how long the audio data will be retained for, please do not hesitate to contact me directly. You will be asked to sign a form (below) indicating agreement to participate in the study.

If you agree to participate please contact me in one of the following ways: by email at [pmccarthy19@momail.mie.ie](mailto:pmccarthy19@momail.mie.ie) or call me on. Your participation in this project would be sincerely appreciated.

Should you have questions regarding your participation, please contact me. You may also contact my supervisor Barbara O'Toole by email at

*This study has been considered from an ethical perspective by the Marino ethics in research committee. Should you have any questions or concerns about the ethical approval or conduct of this study, please contact [MERC@mie.ie](mailto:MERC@mie.ie)*

Yours faithfully,

Philip McCarthy

***You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.***

**Appendix C**

Form of consent for participants

Permission for audio recording to be used in the research study.

I have read the above letter about the study into the teachers' experiences of working with children from diverse religious and belief backgrounds and I agree that my participation in an interview may be used anonymously in the research described above.

YES

NO

PRINTED NAME: \_\_\_\_\_

SIGNATURE: \_\_\_\_\_

DATE: \_\_\_\_\_