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The home–school interface in religious and moral formation: the Irish case

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With the student body across Europe becoming more diverse, the issue of religious education in schools has come to receive greater attention. In the context of the specific historical and institutional context of the Irish primary educational system, this paper addresses aspects of the religious and moral formation of primary school children. The methodology employed in this study is qualitative: it is based on in-depth interviews with school principals, teachers and parents, and focus groups with students in five case-study schools. The paper examines the role of both home and school in the development of religious and secular beliefs. It also examines the way children are active agents in their own moral development, specifically how they mediate and interpret three sets of influences, namely formal school-based religious instruction, the broader school climate, and the implicit values and beliefs communicated by school, parents and the wider family.

Keywords: religious education; primary school; parents; teachers

Introduction

In the context of increasing diversity in Europe, the issue of religious identity is of growing political and educational importance. Tensions over the role of religion in public life (including school) have become increasingly visible, culminating in legislative measures to regulate the use of religious symbols or styles of dress. Some countries have seen an increase in the establishment of separate faith schools, either public or private, while elsewhere change is more at the level of discussion on whether and how religious and moral education should be addressed in state-funded schools. Despite the current importance of this debate, little attention has been given to the interactions and negotiations between home and school over religious education (RE). Using qualitative research conducted in Irish primary schools in 2009, this article seeks to address this gap in knowledge. Specifically, this article addresses two main research questions. Firstly, how

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do parents and school staff view their respective roles in children's faith formation and moral development? Secondly, do any explicit tensions arise between parents and school over issues relating to religious and secular beliefs? And, if so, how are these issues 'resolved' in the context of the predominantly denominational (Roman Catholic) Irish primary education system?

In the next section, we place our research in the context of previous findings on the topic. The third section provides important contextual information on the role of RE in Irish schooling while the remaining sections present the main findings of the research on the interface between home and school.

Research on home–school interaction over religion

While a great deal of international research highlights the importance of parents as contributors to the faith formation and ethical and moral guidance of their children (Oman and Thorensen 2003), in Ireland and elsewhere, the education system plays a critical role, through explicit teaching of religious doctrine and values, the formal preparation of children for religious rites of passage, informal socialisation in relation to particular norms and values, and/or specific rules about dress and behaviour. The relationship between home and school in the area of religious beliefs and values is not without tensions, however (Vertovec and Rogers 2004; Jackson 2011). Tensions arise, in particular, over entry to schools which define themselves in relation to a particular faith and over the treatment of different beliefs within secular and faith schools (Broadbent and Brown 2002).

Across Europe, the place of religion in education has been the outcome of different sets of historical conflicts and compromises (Avram and Dronkers 2013). Different models include a complete separation of Church and state with RE explicitly excluded from schooling, the provision of parallel religious formation classes within state schools, the existence of separate faith schools and the focus of RE on 'learning about religion' (Valk et al. 2009; Smyth, Lyons, and Darmody 2013). Even *within* systems, schools can vary in the strategies they adopt to cater for religious and cultural diversity and equally parents are shown to adopt particular strategies to avoid conflict (Juchtmans and Nicaise 2013). In some contexts, sending children to separate faith schools is seen not only as a way of reinforcing the religious identity of children but also as a 'safe haven' from discrimination or bullying based on religious difference (Tinker and Smart 2011; Darmanin 2013). Even in systems where schools do not engage in religious formation but focus on 'learning about religion', some groups of parents have reported an implicit Christian world-view permeating the school day (Riddell et al. 2013). In Ireland, where state-funded but privately owned faith schools predominate, particularly at primary school level, minority

faith parents have the right to 'opt out' of RE on the part of their children (Mawhinney 2007). However, this approach to dealing with diversity coupled with the emphasis on sacramental preparation within Catholic schools has been seen by minority-belief parents as problematic, with some children reporting being teased or bullied as a result of not taking part (Lodge 2004). This echoes research in Northern Ireland which highlights the role of 'opting out' of RE in reinforcing differences between groups of children of different faith backgrounds (Richardson et al. 2012).

Religion and schooling in Ireland

Since the foundation of the state, the vast majority of the Irish population has self-identified as Roman Catholic, with 84% doing so in 2011, though this pattern has held in tandem with a decline in the level of religious practice (O'Mahony 2008; CSO 2012). Recent immigration into Ireland has resulted in a marginal increase in the relative size of Protestant (to 4% of the total population), Muslim (to 1.1%) and 'other religious' groups (to 3%) as well as those reporting no religion (6%). Given the structure of primary schooling in Ireland, such a shift has important implications for potential tensions concerning arrangements for RE.

Originally intended to be multi-denominational, state-supported primary schools were established in Ireland in the 1830s. By the 1850s, however, these schools had come firmly under denominational control (Coolahan 1981; O'Connell 1999), a pattern that persists to this day. Currently, 91% of the 3152 primary schools are under Catholic ownership and control, 5.7% are run by the Church of Ireland (Anglican Communion) with only one Jewish and two Muslim primary schools (DES 2013). New models of primary schools have emerged recently, with multi-denominational schools (known as Educate Together (ET)) comprising the fastest growing sector in primary education, alongside a small but growing number of multi-faith community national schools. Considering that they constitute a relatively small number, access to minority faith and multi-denominational schools varies by geographic area. The overwhelmingly Roman Catholic denominational nature of the primary school system means that in practice many Catholic schools have pupils from minority faith or secular groups, with 59% of such schools having at least some pupils of minority (or no) belief (Smyth et al. 2009).

In Catholic schools, a common RE programme is taught to children and preparation for sacraments takes place during the school day. Religious instruction also takes place within Protestant, Jewish and Muslim schools, while multi-denominational schools adopt a comparative world religions perspective. Within Catholic schools, minority/no faith children commonly remain within the class during RE lessons, participating or not depending on parental preference (Smyth and Darmody 2011). It has been argued that

such a lack of substantive as opposed to formal choice to leave classes during RE raises important human rights questions for children from minority or no belief backgrounds (Mawhinney 2007).

Methodology

The article draws on a larger study, the focus of which was the development of religious identities among primary school children in different national and institutional settings (Smyth, Lyons, and Darmody 2013). Given the lack of previous research on religion and schooling among this age group, the study adopted an exploratory, qualitative approach. In this article, we draw on individual interviews with parents ($n = 26$), teachers ($n = 9$) and school principals ($n = 5$) in five case-study schools (see Table 1). Of the five, three were Catholic, one Church of Ireland and one multi-denominational (ET). Four of the five schools were located in the greater Dublin area in order to tap into the implications of school choice.[1] All interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed using NVivo8 software (see Smyth, Lyons, and Darmody 2013).[2]

Results

Too much reliance on school for RE of children

The study yielded insights into the perceptions of teachers and parents on the relative role of home and school in religious and moral formation. According to the teachers and principals in the five case-study schools, while both school and family were certainly considered to have an important role to play in imparting values and beliefs to children, most viewed the school's role as supplementary with the family ideally being the primary educator. It was generally felt that religious and moral education should be mainly taught at home and then reinforced in school. Even within the multi-denominational school, which did not provide religious instruction, moral education was seen as an intrinsic component of schooling:

> The school certainly would be a very, very significant factor in a child's moral development. And moral development is part of the ethical core curriculum … it can't be divorced from education, [it is] very much part of it. (Principal, Greenside, Multidenominational)

Moral character formation – teaching children about right and wrong – was also considered a vital part of a child's schooling by staff within Catholic schools. In one such school (St Claude's), however, this was voiced in terms of a classed moral judgment similar to that identified by Sayer (2005):

Table 1. Fieldwork conducted in case-study schools.

	Greenside [Multi-denominational school]	St Helena's [Catholic girls' school]	St Matthew's [Church of Ireland school]	St Ita's [rural Catholic school]	St Claude's [Catholic boys' school]	Total number of interviews
Interviews with principal	1	1	1	1	1	5
Interviews with class teacher	2	2	1	2	2	9
Parents	5	6	5	5	5	26
Focus groups (FG) with children (involving 72 students)	4 FGs involving 24 5th class and 6th class pupils	2 FGs involving 12 6th class pupils	2 FGs involving 12 5th and 6th class pupils	2 FGs involving 12 6th class pupils	2 FGs involving 12 6th class pupils	12
Supplementary interviews						
Interviews with Muslim parents	7–5 male and 2 female					
Focus groups with Muslim children	4 involving 9 boys and 8 girls					

> You know a lot of kids and I know the backgrounds that they come from, the only sort of structure that they have would be in a school setting. … We do have some sort of influence and you like to think that they go out at the end of it, you know, well I mean, knowing right from wrong, you know have some sort of inclination to do right from wrong and I mean I know from the formal end of it, teaching prayers and things like that, an awful lot of that is left to the school, I'd say, you know what I mean. If it wasn't, it wouldn't be done at all. (Principal, St Claude's, Catholic Boys)

A negative assessment of parental input was not unique to this principal, however. A teacher in St Helen's, another Catholic school, asserted that the degree of support schools receive from families directly impacts on the school's success in the area of religious/moral socialisation, with little impact where parental backup is absent or limited. As in St Claude's, it was felt that some parents were seen to primarily rely on the school for this aspect of their child's development, especially in the context of the decline in frequent religious practice among the adult population:

> I think parents shelve their responsibilities and say: 'well, right, the teacher will do that'. And we are left trying to do everything and that is not right. (Teacher, St Helena's, Catholic Girls)

Consequently, the importance of greater parental involvement in the religious development of the child was highlighted by many of the teachers and principals interviewed:

> A lot of the families I think have given up, unfortunately.
>
> Interviewer: The religion part of it or the moral, values part?
>
> I think a bit of everything because even the fact that I have got to go down and talk to sixth class now about taking a better interest in the confirmation. Like I shouldn't have to do this, the families, this is a personal thing, this is their religion for their children and they're not doing it. (Principal, St Ita's, Rural Catholic Co-educational)

Parental views about the role of school in the religious socialisation of their children

By contrast with school principals and teachers, parents interviewed differed somewhat in their views on the role of the school and family in terms of religious and values education. For some, school was characterised as the 'best place' for RE to take place while others, particularly those whose religious outlook was not in keeping with the school's ethos, saw the role of faith formation as best residing within the family. For instance, a Catholic mother (Orla) whose children were attending a Church of Ireland school,

particularly valued the role the school played as, without this, 'the pressure would be on the home entirely'. On the other hand, while a Muslim mother (Jasmina) whose children were attending a Catholic school also perceived the school to have an important role to play in educating her children about values through formal RE lessons, faith formation was considered to be primarily a 'private matter'. Consequently, she and her husband were involved in formally instructing their children about Islam, both in terms of social mores and religious practice (such as how to pray).

In those cases where a school's ethos was found to match a family's religious identity, it was not inevitable that parents nominated the school as having the primary role to play in instructing children in a particular religion. A Catholic mother whose children attended a Catholic school believed that while the school had a role to play, religious formation was more appropriately located within the family sphere (Saoirse, St Helena's). In agreement with some teachers, a number of parents were of the view that school cannot instil religious belief where it is not first present in the home:

> If it is not at home, there's not much point in the school trying to get it into them. (Sinead, Catholic, St Ita's school)

The role of the school was not always seen as being one of religious instruction but was viewed by a small number of parents as providing a broader cultural socialisation of which religion formed one part. A father who espoused a non-religious perspective expressed the desire for his children to be familiar with religious matters, thereby ensuring a certain level of religious literacy. He was concerned that his children would not be 'too far out that they don't have a clue what's going on' (David, St Matthew's). Similarly, a mother, who 'take [s] for granted bible stories' due to her own religious upbringing, on realising that her children were unfamiliar with this literature, sought to introduce these stories and in a way that consciously framed their religious context (stating 'this is the story of how the Catholic Church explained') (Kate, Greenside).

Parents view home as important for modelling moral behaviour and instilling values.

Many parents were of the view that children learn by example and so endeavoured to model good behaviour as opposed to explicitly teaching children right from wrong:

> You're not teaching it to them at home … in a formal way but it is part of family life. (Hannah, Church of Ireland, St Matthew's)

Overt religiously oriented interaction tended to occur in a minority of families, with Muslim parents most likely to engage in religious instruction their children in how to pray, in the Qur'an, as well as later testing them on their recall of it:

> If they don't get used to it, they won't do it when they have to do it … So we have to try and train them from young. (Jasmina, Muslim)

Handling religious diversity

In the Irish context, parents have the right to 'opt out' of RE on behalf of their children. Because of lack of space and personnel, in four of the five case-study schools, this 'opt out' involved children remaining within the RE class while doing their own work, reading or listening to the lesson. In relatively rare cases, some of the children who opt out are withdrawn from RE lessons if practical arrangements allow this to happen:

> This Romanian lad I have he goes to the English teacher when we're doing religion so he's not exposed to Catholic beliefs that was the parents wish, that he wouldn't be exposed to Catholic beliefs from the very start. (Teacher, St Claude's, Catholic Boys)

In some ways, however, this may be a form of 'othering' of minority religions since it is predicated on non-Catholics being immigrants. Staff in other schools stated that they had limited capacity to accommodate pupils who wished to leave the classroom during RE lessons. An alternative strategy was adopted in St Matthew's, the Church of Ireland school, where RE lessons are deliberately time-tabled first thing in the morning so that those who do not wish to participate come to school at the end of this lesson.

Principals and teachers had, at times, ambivalent views about how religious diversity could be accommodated in a faith school context. The principal of St Ita's, a rural Catholic school, which served a large catchment area including some immigrant and minority faith students, felt that there are limitations to the extent the school can accommodate parents who prefer their child not to participate in the RE class.

> I ask the parents if they don't want him to do religion, I say well you're going to have to look after him, come in and mind him which is probably a bit unfair but I don't have the personnel here to look after somebody … when I tell them they have to do it, if they don't want to do religion they have to come in and look after him, they all, everybody backs down and says oh no, no, No. (Principal, St Ita's, Rural Catholic Coeducational)

Some teachers felt that children from minority groups should continue to follow the same rules as the majority in a particular school. While not expected to conform to the religion of the majority group in terms of RE, minority group children would be expected to conform to the rules of the school and the moral and ethical values of the wider society (St Ita's and St Claude's). In some instances, this was explained in terms of minority belief children 'respecting' the (majority group) religion being taught in the school. One particular teacher felt that with alternative schools available

(e.g. multi-denominational ET schools), minority faith children do not have to opt for Catholic schools (Teacher, St Ita's). However, this is contrary to the reality that non-faith schools are generally not an available option. This extended to a reservation by this teacher that in some (Catholic) schools too much change is being introduced because of minority students, such as not saying prayers, which she felt is unfair to the majority of children in the school: 'the minority should not change the whole routine, the whole ethos of the school', reflecting debates currently taking place in the broader educational arena (Darmody and Smyth 2013).

The necessity of 'opting out' of RE classes resulted in difficult decisions for some parents. For instance, Anna, a Christian whose daughter was attending a Catholic school, described how she had been 'sorely tempted' to opt her daughter out of religion classes, a path she ultimately rejected as she felt that this would signal her child as 'different'. This fear of highlighting difference was also an issue for a father whose children attended St Matthew's:

> I wouldn't push hard against [the Church of Ireland ethos] if it makes the kids stand out … I wouldn't have liked to have them stood out as being different. (David, No religion, St Matthew's)

A Muslim father (Zaheer) and his wife deliberately chose a multi-denominational school rather than a Christian school to avoid the necessity of having their daughter opt out of RE classes, a practice which he felt would engender alienation:

> In a Catholic school … during religious studies, the child will go to the library … I don't want to feel my child is isolated, all alone.

This perspective was described by one principal who reported that some parents expressed their preference for their child to be part of the class:

> A lot of the parents would say look let them go through the programme, do you know what I mean, be part of the class, say the communion programme and look he doesn't have to make his communion but, you know, to feel part of it. (Principal, St Claude's, Catholic Boys)

A related theme among some parents whose religious background was different from the ethos of the school was the perspective that they had chosen to send their children to such a school. For instance, a number of Catholic mothers acknowledged that they had chosen to send their children to schools 'outside their faith', therefore, they could expect to have limited say in the nature of the RE programme:

> I would accept that we are Catholic in a Church of Ireland school and I would have to respect that … I mean you bought into it. (Molly, Catholic, St Matthew's)

Similarly, when Anna was asked about possible changes to how religion is handled at St Helena's, her response was that she too opted into a particular type of education for her child:

> I have to stand by it. I sent her to a Catholic school. I knew what I was getting into. (Anna, Christian, St Helena's)

These perspectives meant that, in effect, explicit tensions between family and school values were deflected as parents were reluctant to single out their child as 'different' in a context where they had 'bought into' a school whose belief system did not match their own. It should be noted, however, that while religion is an important part in school choice for some parents, this is sometimes outweighed by other factors such as location, academic status or availability of learning support (Darmody, Smyth, and McCoy 2011).

Tensions between home and school

The majority of parents did not perceive any tension between the religious and moral messages children received at school and the worldview they themselves imparted at home. Ellen (Catholic, St Claude's), for example, contends that the religious and values education her child receives at school matches the messages received at home ('pretty close … much of a muchness'). Nonetheless, she stresses that she would 'make it me business' to visit the school if an issue did arise.

In the context of perceived congruity between home and school values, it is worth noting that many parents indicated that they did not in fact have detailed knowledge of the actual nature of the religious, moral and value messages taught at their child(ren)'s school: 'I'm not too sure now … God, I don't even know the name of the book!' (Molly, Catholic, St Ita's)

However, this mother expressed confidence that 'the school wouldn't be telling them anything that they shouldn't be told so I'm happy enough with what the school tells them'. Another mother, Caoimhe (Catholic, St Claude's), despite reporting that the messages on religious beliefs and value are 'pretty similar' at home and at school, then included the caveat that she is unsure exactly what happens and that she 'do[esn't] hear much about it'. Homework appears to be a central conduit of information between school and home and the absence of RE homework appears to mean that parents are less aware of what is covered in RE class (Smyth, Lyons, and Darmody 2013).

Significantly, disjoint between home and school in this regard was not necessarily perceived as problematic by parents. For one mother, such differences are perceived, as an opportunity to expand her daughter's outlook on life, thereby 'open[ing] her mind up more' (Anna, Christian, St Helena's). Zaheer (Muslim, multi-denominational school) has a similar

outlook, observing that whilst some parents might feel threatened by their child asking questions about the different behaviours and beliefs of others, he perceives it as advantageous to his daughter and a valuable source of:

> … enlightenment … I can teach her and show her that this is the way we believe [and] this is the way they believe – that builds up the knowledge of the child more.

Zaheer notes though that his daughter was initially confused by the varying beliefs she was exposed to between home and school:

> In the class on St. Patrick's day, they would draw colours and the plant – what it means, trinity and stuff like that … it was confusing for the child.

This confusion on the part of his daughter lessened, however, with the provision of further information at home.

A small number of parents from minority religious backgrounds reported specific incidents where they considered that the school displayed a lack of sensitivity to their religious beliefs. Despite congruence in terms of the values imparted to her son, one mother noted that the RE her son received at school was quite distinct from that which he received at home:

> We teach him what's in the Bible … they teach like the Hail Mary and stuff like that … I wouldn't pray the Hail Mary. (Amy, Christian, St Ita's)

Another Muslim mother whose children attend a Catholic school noted a lack of awareness on the part of teachers of the Islamic faith. However, this had not yet created undue difficulties as she considered her child to be too young to be required to fast or pray. An issue did arise for one father over the practice of meditation in his child's multi-denominational school:

> My child's teacher is big into Buddhism and she do a lot of meditation … I said one time to the teacher don't do that because it will come into more of religious thing. (Zaheer, Muslim)

Moreover, this father also notes that his daughter was taught something that 'was more of a Catholic belief'. On the whole, though, he believes the school to be respectful of his family's religious tradition:

> If you have comments [teachers] will listen. They don't have a rough like behaviour in religious beliefs.

Another parent (Anna) described a particular incident which occurred when her daughter was in first class and she questioned the Catholic Church's attitude to 'the Virgin Mary' in the presence of her child. When the child

subsequently mentioned this at school, her mother was asked to see the principal:

> I got called in … [principal] questioned me …'Was there any particular reason why you would choose your daughter to come to a Catholic school if you didn't think that [about Mary]?' (Anna, Christian, St Helena's)

Concerns did arise also among a minority of parents (primarily among those whose religious identification matched the ethos of the school) as to how accommodating those from minority/non-religious backgrounds might impact on the education of their child. Consequently, they challenge the notion that it is incumbent on the majority to adapt so as to alter the status quo. For some parents, the diminution in the Catholic ethos of their schools is viewed as a problematic by-product of the increased diversity of the school's intake. Nicole, for instance, strenuously objects to the downgrading of the school's Christmas nativity to 'just a sing along' (carols and pop songs) and has therefore refused to attend in recent years:

> It's a Catholic school and I personally believe if you're sending a child to a Catholic school that's what you're sending them for – Catholic beliefs … I can't understand people who send their children to [St Claude's] who are not Catholics. I don't know why they send them. (Nicole, Catholic, St Claude's)

Such a perspective can be accompanied by a conflation of diversity of religion and other beliefs (i.e. non-Catholic beliefs) with those from non-Irish backgrounds:

> If we went to their county, what would be in place for us? We would have to fit in. (Hannah, Church of Ireland, St Matthew's)

Although for some parents, the opt-out facility is problematic, the solution of scheduling RE class first thing in the morning (as is the case in St Matthew's), allowing those who are not participating to begin school once it has been completed, is the 'perfect solution' – not least because it does not require the school's resources to be diverted to supervise 'this tiny group' (Hannah). Molly expresses a similar view, articulating concern over accommodations which might negatively impact on her children:

> If it can be done … without changing anything in our lives then it is fine … If somebody wants to pray five times a day … [and a] teacher has to go and supervise it and then leave my children unattended or if they have to stand out in the rain to make a room free, it would probably impact on me. (Molly, Catholic, St Matthew's)

Conclusions

Across Europe, debate over the role of religion in education has become increasingly prominent. In spite of this trend, there has been little research on the extent to which tensions arise between parents and schools over the issue of RE. This article seeks to address this gap in knowledge by drawing on qualitative research in primary schools in Ireland, a country dominated by Catholic faith schools.

School staff and parents are found to have somewhat divergent views on their appropriate roles in the religious and moral formation of children. In a predominantly Catholic country, albeit one of significantly declining religious practice, schools increasingly feel that parents, especially those in more disadvantaged communities, are placing the responsibility for religious instruction on them. The parents interviewed, generally, saw themselves as the primary influence on their children's religious formation. At the same time, they tended to emphasise the modelling of good behaviour rather than the explicit transmission of religious beliefs, though religious activities such as saying prayers were more frequent when children were younger. A minority of parents, usually those whose beliefs did not match the religious ethos of the school, took a more proactive approach to cultivating religious beliefs and practices.

The lack of access to minority faith or multi-denominational schools has resulted in debates and contestation at the macro level over who should have the right to form and manage Irish primary schools (see Coolahan, Hussey, and Kilfeather 2012). The debates on these and other issues have coincided with divestment of some Catholic primary schools and revision of school admission policies. At the micro level, however, such tensions are largely deflected as parents, having 'bought into' a school outside their faith, are reluctant to highlight the 'difference' of their child and thus loath to challenge school practices. Only a small number of parents expressed explicit concern about how their religious beliefs had been dealt with by the school and an even smaller number had addressed their concerns directly with the school. Some concerns were evident too among majority faith parents regarding the impact of religious diversity on the education of their children.

A factor in the lack of explicit tension over religious values may be the general absence of communication with parents on the nature and content of school-based RE. Parents are largely unaware of what is being covered in RE class and take 'on faith' that the messages being imparted to children are congruent with their own beliefs. However, parents belonging to minority faith groups tend to be more aware of what is being taught and discuss the different traditions with their children at home.

In sum, the current structure of Irish primary schooling appears to result in a situation where tension over religious issues is expressed at the

macro-political level while minority parents access minority faith or multi-denominational schools where possible and otherwise 'accommodate' themselves to the ethos of the school their children attend and maintain religious formation as a largely private activity. However, the growing number of multi-denominational schools is likely to reflect parental demand for schools that do not provide RE during the school day. The absence of communication between school and home over RE appears to further restrict the possibility of vibrant debate and engagement over religious and moral values although setting up the Forum of Primary School Patronage in 2011 has opened a potential opportunity for parent groups to enter the political debate.

Notes

1. No specific issues arose regarding the school located outside of Dublin.
2. All individuals and schools are anonymised.

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