



Religion and Schooling in Ireland:

Key Informants' Perspectives



Fieldwork



15 interviews

State Agencies: 3

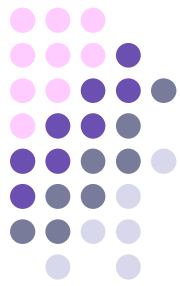
Representative Agencies: 3

Religious/Other beliefs
Organisations: 5

Patrons: 2

Academics: 2

Denominational Education

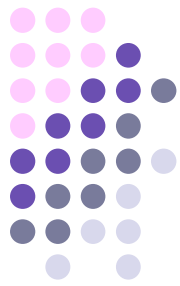


- **Historical legacy**

... where we are, patronage-wise....is because of history... You can argue whether it was good, bad or indifferent...but that's the way it was done and we are where we are.” (Key Informant, State Agency)

..it's an arrangement that has been there since the beginning of the State.....in an ideal world, if you were starting from a green field site, you'd do things different. But we're not. (Key Informant, Representative Agency)

Issues re Denominational Education



- A minority highlighted advantages of denominational education but not necessarily a denominational schools/structure
- Works well if there is congruence between home and school
 - ..if you're operating within a confessional system...and if the home, school and parish are working in tandem then there is a great continuity for the child and what they're learning is really reinforced...they can see the connectedness between their home lives and their schools live. (Key Informant, Academics)*
- But problem is that Children are being connected to Religion through School not Home

Nowadays when a child comes into junior infants... the vast majority of the children do not know how to bless themselves. They really don't know an awful lot about God, the vast majority of them have never been to a church since the day they were baptised. And ... the school now seems to be doing something that is not part of life. [Key Informant, Religious/Other Beliefs Organisation]

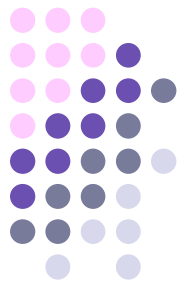
Issues re Denominational Education



My opinion is that religion is always good ...in religion there is morality so I have no problem and I do welcome like you know religious schools. However, I don't like the schools to be run by religious dictators [Minority belief] kids have to stand up and do the prayers in the morning. Some parents are not happy with that. Their kids are having a problem which is not good and I think it should be really resolved by the Department of Education because if a child is refusing, he does not want to do the prayers, the Catholic prayer in the morning and he's forced to .. its not good, like in 10 or 20 years time, its not a good thing to do. (Key Informant, Religious Organisation)

Issues re Denominational Education

cont.,



- Beneficial nature of denominational system for religious institutions themselves

..[sacraments] take place in primary school. It's a very important period within a child's life from the Church's perspective and they've always been done in primary school..” (Key Informant, Representative Agency)

... the fact that most of the catechetical eggs are in the school basket just shows a weakness of the approach of the church to the whole notion of catheterising ... we should be providing catechetical programmes and training sessions for parents and also for parish workers etc. (Religious/Other Beliefs Organisation)

Disquiet re Denominational Education



□ School Choice

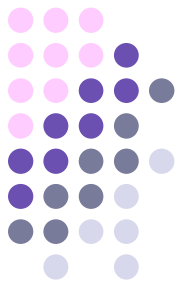
- : Denominational system hinders schools choice, especially in rural areas

..the simple fact is, if you're living in Mountbellew in Galway and you're not religious...[and] you would like your child to go to a school where it is completely secular, we don't have that. (Key Informant, State Agency)

..[parents] send their children to the local primary school, which is usually denominational...[where] their children are going to be open to proselytisation. (Key Informant, Representative Agency)

..a lot of parents would feel that it [Choice] is a notional aspiration, rather than a reality...if the vast majority of schools are under the patron of the Catholic Church, where is their choice?...I think parents are feeling 'Well, where is the choice? So you tell me I have a choice. You tell me I am the primary educator of my child. But, practically, where is my choice?' (Key Informant, Representative Agency)

- Choice is not solely an issue of religion, but also about social class and academic attainment (and possibly racial segregation)



....but some of these difficulties exist with or without a denominational influence. Because it does come down to what area of the town you live and what kind of other children you want your children to be mixing with, regardless of religion. They will all still exist and they are still playing out under the heading of this Catholic issue.... So sometimes it can be just perceived as well there is no choice but sometimes the choices are not about religion, they are about catchment areas, socio-economic areas ... And if we sort out the denominational choice, there will still be choice issues at play (Key Informant, Representative Agency).

... some parents actually chose ethos of schools that don't subscribe to their own because they believe that, that is the best school in the area ... (Key Informant, Representative Agency).

Denominational Education – issues within schools



□ Absenting children from RE classes

[Parents] send their children to the local primary school, which is usually denominational...the current guidelines don't permit children to receive instruction if their parents disapprove...But, in reality, *all* children are obliged to be present during religious instruction because arrangements for withdrawal cannot be made in most cases...What happens is the children are asked to do whatever down the bottom of the class...that's not respecting their particular desires.. *(Key Informant, Representative Agency)*

□ Religion pervades the school day, not simply RE classes

So, this is a massive issue. It is one of the deepest denial of human rights in Irish society...it's a fundamental obligation of the State to ensure that this situation does not continue into the future, especially at a time when our population is diversifying at an unprecedented rate. (Key Informant, Patron)

..in reality, many of our existing denominational schools are de facto multi-denominational schools while being de jure denominational...Increasingly, teachers are finding themselves providing religious instruction to a minority while being expected at the same time to provide alternative activities for the majority.. (Key Informant, Representative Agency)

Denominational Education: issues for parents

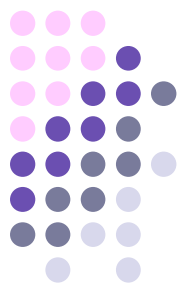


So we do not have a formed parental view as such, at the moment, an agreed parental view on this issue. (Key Stakeholders, Representative Agency)

...There are a significant amount of parents who are very happy and send their children to a Catholic school because they want faith formation, they want the ethos, they want the religious instruction, they see it as very much part of what schools should be doing, rightly or wrongly they see that. (Key Stakeholders, Representative Agency)

There is also a significant amount of parents who feel that while you might want to look at all religions and a moral development package in terms of that part of the curriculum, the specific faith formation should not be part of the school day. (Key Stakeholders, Representative Agency)

Denominational Education – Issues for Teachers

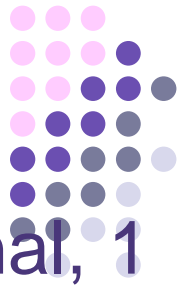


□ Employment rights for Teachers

I mean there are many teachers in our schools who do not share the religious faith of the school ... you know personally in their own lives who don't share it. Now they may have no problem with working in a school with a religious ethos or with a catholic ethos and I think that raises issues about them teaching RE, I mean out of respect for them as well as for the subject that they're teaching. [Key Informant, Religious/Other Beliefs Organisation]

For instance the parents and the children have an opt out that they can, technically they can opt out of the class of RE but the teacher cannot. So I think that's a disadvantage. (Key Informant: Lecturer)

Teacher Education



- 6 Teacher Education Colleges – 5 Denominational, 1 (Hibernia) online non-denominational
- Certificate for Religious Education expected for teaching in RC school
- No formal qualification for teaching other beliefs and values etc. e.g. in ET Schools

[The Certificate in Religious Education] is *theoretically optional*. I mean you will qualify as a teacher without it. But it will be more difficult to get employment unless you actually have your certificate and the colleges do provide the certificate for teachers who qualify abroad also, to enable them to be employed in the Catholic schools. [key Informant, Representative Body]

Future Directions for Primary Education?



- Currently in a state of “flux and change”

..[Community National School (CNS) model] is a very historic development...we're hoping it will work...[but] by no means are we out of the woods yet...and we'll see how it goes. (Key Informant, Representative Agency)

- Feedback re new CNS model

..the theory of home, school and parish is actually incarnate now in these two schools...this is the perfect model. (Key Informant, Religious/Other Beliefs Organisation)

There are lots of issues and some difficulties even arising within the VEC situation in dealing with these things but they cannot cater for everything, every person, I mean if there are 20 different religions in a community primary school how are you going to cater for them. (Key Informants, Representative Agency)

Community National School adopted a common religious programme in which children right from the start said prayers and sang songs acknowledging god as the creator ...But, if you're starting with an assumption that everybody believes in God or a personal deity you are going to get nowhere. (Key Informant, Representative Agency)

Future Directions for Primary Education?



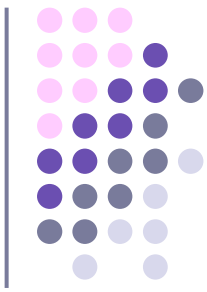
□ Future provision and Rights

..[need] a national network of schools which provide an alternative to faith-based education...[either] by establishing new schools...[or] through the transformation of existing schools where parents so wish. (Key Informant, Patron)

I mean I'm a catholic and I accept that that is the proper way people should be reared, whether one agrees or not, and in so far as it is my belief that the majority of the country, while they may not practice as much as they did in the past, I think they want that. (Key Informant, Patron)

It may need them to take the State to court to deliver their rights. Constitutionally, the State is forbidden to obliging a family to send their child to a school which conflicts their conscience or lawful preference and the reality is for an increasing minority of families all over the country, irrespective of region, the State is effectively doing that and that's a little time bomb which has been sitting there for a long time. (Key Informant, Patron)

Preliminary Concluding Comments



- ❑ Time of Transition
- ❑ Dialogue and Respect for Differences
- ❑ Need to differentiate between:
 1. Religious Education
 2. Sacramental Preparation
 3. Faith-based/Transmission Education
 4. Moral/Ethical Education