

# Children's perspectives

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# Understanding the child's perspective

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- Strong association between parental beliefs/practices and those of children
- Previous research often adopts a 'transmission model'
- Often frames children as passive
- But our study views children as active agents in their own religious and moral formation
- Bounded agency – family and school



# Information from children

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- Sixth class in 5 primary schools (included 5<sup>th</sup> class in multi-grade settings); mostly aged 11-12
- Additional interviews with Muslim children
- For all of the class cohort (169 children):
  - Written exercise – ‘what is important to me’ and ‘what religion means to me’
  - Questionnaire on beliefs and practice
- Focus groups with children (16)



# Children's self-labelling of beliefs

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- Variation across schools in children's self-described affiliation
  - Lower proportion Catholic in ET and Church of Ireland schools
  - Higher proportion from minority faith groups in ET and Church of Ireland schools
  - Proportion with 'no religion' – almost 1/3 of ET group and over 1/10 in C of I school
- Also variation in religiosity across schools and by gender

# Transmission or negotiation?

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- Children's religious affiliation was strongly related to that of their parents, especially mothers
- But not a simple picture of 'transmission'
  - (a) A number of children whose parents have 'no religion' described themselves as religious to some extent.

What happened for me I was learning about Buddhism and I kind of you know took to it ... So I decided to be a Buddhist. (*School 1, Educate Together school*)

If you are like sad you'd be just be like ... think about God and that sort of stuff and then if you are not you just don't have really any religion, you don't believe in anything. (*School 1, Educate Together school*)

# Transmission or negotiation? (2)

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(b) A number of children from religious backgrounds had begun to question the nature of content of beliefs.

But the thing I don't get with religion is that, do we actually know if this happened or not.

Because as you get older they kind of change the story a bit, like when you are younger they tell you like something and then as you get older like they change it.  
*(School 3, Church of Ireland school)*

My Mam made me make my confirmation. ... Yeah but like she still doesn't know that I don't believe in God, the only person who does know is my big brother ... and people in the class. *(School 1, Educate Together school)*

# Perspectives on religious belief

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- Assumption of parental beliefs is not uncritical – personalised sense of religion
- Belief as a source of meaning

Without beliefs what would the world be, it would just be a whole load of people who live on a big ball in the middle of a galaxy. (*School 1, Educate Together school*)

It [religion] is kind of like important because it helps you to like understand life more. (*School 2, Catholic school*)

- Religious belief as a source of security and comfort

If you sit down and pray or meditate or something, it kind of gets rid of half your worries. Some of them are still in the back of your mind, but you forget them for a while. (*School 1, Educate Together school*)

I kind of found it a comfort that I knew he [grandfather] was in God's hands now. (*School 3, Church of Ireland school*)

# Communication with parents

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- Most children reported talking about religion/beliefs with their parents at least occasionally but usually initiated by the child  
If I asked my Mum about it then she'd tell me all about it, because I think that she knows quite a lot about religion, but it wouldn't be a general topic. (*School 2, Catholic school*)
- Variation across schools in frequency of communication
- Religion class often acted as a prompt for later discussion with parents  
My Mam asks what did you do today and I'm going on the subjects that we do and what we talked about in religion, say if I do religion we just talk about it. (*School 4, Catholic school*)

# Degree of autonomy

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- Generally felt that children should choose own religion/beliefs
- But some moderation on basis of age

I think that while you are still young your parents should choose your religion so that you can kind of like follow the family tradition. (*School 2, Catholic school*)

When you are younger, you can't really pick your own choice. When you are only like a baby, your Mam has to. (*School 3, Church of Ireland school*)

## Degree of autonomy (2)

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- Variation in actual degree of choice

My Mam always says to me that I can pick whatever religion I want. (*School 4, Catholic school*)

So she [mother] made me do my communion, so I did that. And then all of a sudden she put me in confirmation classes. And I was like why and she goes because you wanted to and I go so if I don't want to I can just drop out of it and she goes, she just wanted me to make at least my communion, so I have the choice of making my confirmation. (*School 1, Educate Together school*)

# Peers and 'managing diversity'

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- Lower levels of communication with peers than parents
- Dealing with diversity: ignore/engage  
We don't talk about religion.  
Yeah we just play. (*Muslim group*)  
Like there was a boy from Thailand in our class last year and he talked about his religion in class, I think he was Buddhist and he used to talk about like his religion and that's how we learned about Buddhist and stuff. (*School 5, Catholic school*)
- Teasing/bullying less common
- Lack of awareness of other religions among majority faith group

# Religion and schooling

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- Generally positive about religious/moral education at school: more interactive, less homework, content engaging (esp. the 'stories')

Religion is something that people will relax in and express what they think about it ... [Teachers] don't really stuff it down your throat ... they let you express what you think about the different things.  
*(School 3, Church of Ireland school)*

- However, repetition of material was viewed critically
- Most would take RME class even if not required to do so

## Religion and schooling (2)

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- Learning religion v. learning about religion – related to school type

We only learn about being Catholic ... we don't really learn about being all the other different religions.

*(School 2, Catholic school)*

- Varying attitudes to learning about (other) religions

I'd prefer to just learn about my religion, like in my old school. *(School 1, Educate Together school)*



# Conclusions

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- Children perceived their religious identities in complex ways
- Strong relationship between self-described religious beliefs of children and parents
- But the child's view can differ from that of parents
- Even where they have a common belief system, there is evidence that children tend to have a personalised sense of religion
- Positive perceptions of RME class
- But variation in awareness of diversity in beliefs