

# School Sector Variation Among Primary Schools in Ireland

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## Executive Summary

There is now a substantial body of research on whether schools differ in shaping students' experiences and academic achievement. In contrast, there has been little systematic empirical research on the role of religion in school choice and in shaping pupil experiences in different types of primary schools. Yet, the matter is of interest, particularly with regard to the growing diversification of school sectors at primary level in Ireland. Despite demographic changes in recent decades, primary schools in Ireland have remained predominantly denominational, chiefly Catholic in ownership and management. However, increased diversity in the Irish population may have contributed to a growing demand for new types of school that are multi-denominational in character. While most of these new primary schools are under the management of the Educate Together sector, some are Irish medium schools managed by An Foras Pátrúnachta, and a small number are managed by Vocational Education Committees (VECs). The impetus for change in the primary school sector is also reflected in the establishment of the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in 2011 in order to enable all education partners to discuss and debate the future control of schools. The report of the Forum's Advisory Group, 'The Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector' (2012), notes that 'there is now a mis-match between the inherited pattern of denominational school patronage and the rights of citizens in the much more culturally and religiously diverse contemporary Irish society' and acknowledges the challenges involved in re-shaping the structure of primary school provision to bring it in line with recent changes in society.

Considering these developments, the authors of this report have undertaken an independent study of sectoral differences in Irish primary schools, funded by Educate Together, the patron body of schools run according to the Educate Together Charter. In particular, this study focuses on the social, economic and educational characteristics of students enrolled in the three main types of primary schools<sup>1</sup> – Catholic, Multi-denominational and Minority Faith schools. In particular, it explores the composition of students attending the three different types of schools, the social and economic background of students enrolled in these schools, the prevalence of students with special educational needs, levels of parental involvement and children's experiences of school. The focus of the study is on school composition and process, rather than academic outcomes.

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<sup>1</sup> A new model of primary school, community national schools, has emerged since 2008. There are now five such schools (2011/12), run by the VECs and described as 'multi-belief'. This report does not consider this school type since the data upon which this report draws predate the existence of community national schools. The composition of, and processes within, community national schools have yet to be subject to systematic research.

There are now over 60 multi-denominational primary schools in 19 counties, demonstrating an expansion of this sector. Despite this, the empirical research on this school sector has remained relatively sparse. This study aims to fill the gap in research by providing detailed information about the profile of multi-denominational schools and pupils' experiences in them compared to the other main types of primary schools – Catholic and minority faith (mainly Protestant) schools. Gaiscoileanna and DEIS primary schools constitute further dimensions of differentiation at primary level; however, these dimensions cross-cut other school types differentiated by multi-denominational or religious ethos. The analysis presented in this report draws on data from two large-scale national studies: *Growing Up in Ireland* (GUI) and *Adapting to Diversity* (AD), and a qualitative study, *Religious Education in a Multicultural Society* (REMC). The study is timely considering current debates on primary school patronage, school choice and school admission policies.

## SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

### *School choice and admission policy*

- Available data suggest that the number of primary school children is expected to increase until at least 2018 (DES 2012). This study demonstrated that the numbers of pupils coming into infant classes have, in most schools, either increased or remained relatively stable over the previous five years. Over half of the multi-denominational schools in the AD study had experienced a rise in pupil numbers. Only a small proportion of Catholic and minority faith primary schools had experienced falling student numbers with designated disadvantaged schools more likely to report a drop in student numbers.<sup>2</sup>
- There is a potential for between-school competition among Irish primary schools across all three sectors, with many schools located in the same vicinity as other schools. Minority faith and multi-denominational schools were more likely to report that there was another primary school in the vicinity.
- Qualitative research provides some insights into school choice processes. While for some parents, the (perceived) availability of resources for learning support was a deciding factor in choosing multi-denominational (Educate Together) schools, for others it was the multi-denominational character and inclusive ethos of the school.
- School choice may be constrained by the availability of places. Date of application seems to be the main criterion for admission to multi-denominational schools which are over-subscribed, although some schools gave preference to pupils who already had siblings in the school.

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<sup>2</sup> In most Catholic and minority faith schools the pupil numbers had remained stable or have increased.

### **Who attends multi-denominational Schools?**

- *Social class:* Both minority faith and multi-denominational schools had higher proportions of children from professional, managerial and technical backgrounds than Catholic schools. In addition, maternal education levels were higher in multi-denominational schools than in minority faith or Catholic schools. They also had higher proportions of children from families in the top income quintile (fifth) than Catholic schools. When social class background and parental education are examined simultaneously, education was found to have a much stronger effect on school selection than social class. High educational attainment is also reflected in parental expectations: the mothers of children attending multi-denominational schools had higher educational expectations of their children than those with children in other schools. The findings are not surprising since the existing literature suggests that middle-class parents are more likely to make active school choices.
- *Faith background:* The faith profile of children and their mothers varied significantly by school sector. Around half of children (and their mothers) in multi-denominational schools were Catholic. The minority faith schools were mostly made up of those of 'other religions', but with a sizeable (30 per cent) Catholic intake. While these two school sectors had some variety in pupil intake, the Catholic schools were predominantly Catholic (90 per cent of children and 87 per cent of mothers).
- *Ethnic minority and migrant background:* Children attending multi-denominational schools were more likely to come from immigrant backgrounds than those in minority faith or Catholic schools.<sup>3</sup> Compared to other schools, multi-denominational schools were least likely to have representatives of just one national group among the student body. The widest spread of nationalities was evident in Catholic schools. The number of pupils from the Traveller Community was relatively small across the three types of primary schools. Compared to the other two school sectors, multi-denominational schools were least likely to have pupils from the Traveller Community among their student intake.
- *Disabilities and learning difficulties:* In recent years the trend has been towards increasing use of mainstreaming<sup>4</sup> for students with special educational needs; although special school, special class and other forms of provision remain. Our study demonstrated that there were differences across individual schools in the number of such pupils, rather than between school sectors (i.e., Catholic, minority faith, multi-denominational).

### **Home-school interface**

- Levels of attendance at parent-teacher meetings are high across all school sectors. However, the extent to which parents approached the teacher

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<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that a significant number of Educate Together schools are in urban areas and that immigrant families are more likely to live in towns and cities.

<sup>4</sup> Mainstreaming refers to the practice of educating students with special educational needs in regular classes for some or all of the school day.

informally to discuss their child was highest in minority faith schools; it was also higher in multi-denominational than in Catholic schools.

## SCHOOL PROFILE

### *Facilities*

- In assessing school facilities, primary school principals were most likely to characterise after-school facilities, library/media facilities and facilities for children with disabilities as 'poor', a pattern that was broadly consistent across school types. Principals in multi-denominational schools report a much greater use of prefabs as classrooms than those in other schools. These schools were more likely to find computing facilities satisfactory compared to minority faith and Catholic schools.
- Compared to other schools, principals of multi-denominational schools were most dissatisfied with sports facilities<sup>5</sup> but more satisfied with administrative support.
- In terms of school size, Catholic schools were most varied in size (including very small and very large schools); whereas multi-denominational schools generally tended to be large (44.4 per cent have more than 200 pupils, compared to 26.6 per cent of Catholic and 6.3 per cent of minority faith schools).

### *Teachers in the school*

- While most primary school teachers are female, over half of the schools had a male principal. While both primary school teachers and principals are generally satisfied with their jobs, many reported being stressed by their jobs. Job satisfaction and stress do not vary by school sectors, but do vary by school characteristics. Teachers have been found to be more satisfied with their job where pupils are well-behaved and where parents are more involved in the life of the school (see Darmody and Smyth 2011).

### *School ethos and curriculum*<sup>6</sup>

- Principals in multi-denominational and minority faith schools were somewhat more likely to report environmental awareness, social justice and scientific education as very important.
- Rates of literacy difficulties were lower in multi-denominational schools than in Catholic schools but slightly higher than in minority faith schools.

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<sup>5</sup> It is possible that their dissatisfaction relates to the fact that many of these schools are in temporary premises which have limited space available for sports.

<sup>6</sup> It is important to note that these findings may reflect the mainly middle class intake in some schools, rather than the net effect of the school type.



- Children attending multi-denominational schools were somewhat less likely to be rated as below average in reading or imagination/creativity; they were more likely to be rated above average in oral communications.
- Children attending Catholic schools were somewhat more likely to report that they were doing well in homework compared to the other school sectors.

### *Children's perspectives*

- Most children across the three sectors liked their school and their teacher and reported doing well in their schoolwork. Pupils who were positive about the school and teachers came from a variety of backgrounds.

Irish primary schools across the Republic of Ireland cater for an increasing diversity of students with different cultural and religious backgrounds. This has sparked a debate on how best to cater for the needs of students and their parents as the majority of primary schools are characterised by a Catholic ethos. Addressing the needs of primary schools necessitates understanding their intake and how children perceive their experiences in the three main types of primary schools. Do these experiences differ across the primary school sectors? The findings in this report show that while the profile of children varies by school sector (multi-denominational, minority faith, Catholic), relatively few differences were found in terms of children's perspectives. This may reflect the fact that school process and climate varies significantly across individual schools so that each school sector encompasses schools with very different characteristics.



# Chapter 1

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## Background and Context of the Study

### 1.1 INTRODUCTION

Within educational research there is now a growing literature on school sector variation, mostly focussing on cognitive outcomes (see Carbonaro and Covay, 2010 in the US).<sup>7</sup> Much of the research comes from the US and the UK and focuses on denominational/faith schools. Societal changes across Europe – secularisation and religious revival - have brought to centre stage the issue of denominational schools, and parents’ right to choose education for their children that is in accordance with their belief systems (Henkel and Kippenberg, 2005). Denominational schools have a long history in Europe and elsewhere and they continue to play a strong role in the educational landscape in many countries (Avram and Dronkers, 2010). This could be explained by parental preference stemming from the reputation of these schools in terms of academic achievement and more positive school ethos (Avram and Dronkers, 2010). In addition, some parents may send their children to religious schools with a view to help preserve the religious identity of the family and inculcate religious values (Cohen-Zada, 2006). However, there are parents who may seek out schools where less importance is attached to the promotion of one specific faith system. In the US, studies have shown that both religion and religiosity drive the demand for private, Catholic, Protestant, and non-sectarian schools (Cohen-Zada and Sander, 2007).

In Ireland, primary schools have remained predominantly denominational, chiefly Roman Catholic, in ownership and management, despite significant demographic changes in recent decades.<sup>8</sup> Increased diversity in Irish society reflects a rise in the proportion of people of secular beliefs and/or not affiliated to an institutional religion as well as an increase in the number of groups representing different cultural and religious backgrounds. The changes at societal level have presented challenges to the Irish education system, both at primary and second-level. At present, only a small minority of schools are inter-denominational<sup>9</sup> or multi-

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<sup>7</sup> Several of these studies also cross-cut with school composition (see Agirdag *et al.*, forthcoming in 2012).

<sup>8</sup> According to the report on school patronage (Coolahan *et al.*, 2012), out of 3,169 primary schools, 2,841 or 89.65% are Catholic.

<sup>9</sup> Interdenominational schools bring together Christians with differing beliefs and allegiances in a form of Christian ecumenism. These schools provide religious teaching for children of more than one denomination during the school

denominational<sup>10</sup> (see Table 1 for different types of primary schools). In most primary schools religious education permeates the school day and the ideas of the recently unveiled intercultural education strategy<sup>11</sup> that put an onus on all schools to respond to diverse needs and ensure equality and inclusion are yet to be implemented. Yet, Gardner (2004) argues that in order to respond to the increasing changes in contemporary societies, schools need to develop among students an understanding of the global system; an awareness of other cultures and traditions; the knowledge and value of one's own cultural traditions; the nurturing of hybrid identities and tolerance, and approval across racial, linguistic, national and cultural boundaries. Furthermore, Guttman (2004) argues that democratic education should educate children to ensure that they are capable of assuming the rights and responsibilities of equal citizenship. She emphasizes its importance in supporting democratic deliberation within societies, including deliberation about how public schooling can best educate all children as civic equals.

**TABLE 1** Primary schools in the 2010-2011 academic year

Catholic	2884	91.1%
Church of Ireland	180	5.7%
Multi-denominational <sup>12</sup>	73	2.3%
Presbyterian	14	0.4%
Interdenominational	8	0.3%
Muslim	2	0.1%
Methodist	1	0.0%
Jewish	1	0.0%
Quaker	1	0.0%
Other/unknown	1	0.0
Total	3165	100

Source: [www.education.ie](http://www.education.ie).

Increased cultural and ethnic diversity among the student population in Ireland has contributed to a growing demand for schools that are multi-denominational in character. The Educate Together movement in the Republic of Ireland is one

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day. An interdenominational school is under the patronage or trusteeship of more than one religious community (DES, 2011).

<sup>10</sup> The multi-denominational school ethos refers to respect and acceptance of equality of beliefs, whether religious or non-religious. In Ireland, multi-denominational schools are those schools that do not carry out faith formation during the school day. In some multi-denominational schools, parents arrange for the teaching of religion after school hours. Another approach practiced by some multi-denominational schools is to provide some faith formation during the school day for different faith groups, as a response to parental request (DES, 2011).

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.education.ie/home/home.jsp?pcategory=10856&ecategory=51881&language=EN>

<sup>12</sup> In the academic year 2010-2011, there were 58 multi-denominational Educate Together schools. The rest of the multi-denominational schools include community national schools and other primary schools. It should be noted that there is some inconsistency in how these schools define themselves.

response to some parents' wishes for the provision of a new type of school,<sup>13</sup> centred on offering an inclusive, learner-centred environment of equal respect. This sector has expanded rapidly since it was established in 1978. There are now 60 schools in 19 counties.

The primary education system has been the focus of a good deal of research internationally with studies focusing on primary school choice (Burgess, 2009a), sectoral differences (Gibbons and Silva, 2011; Gibbons *et al.*, 2006) and the experiences of students of diverse backgrounds (Troyna and Hatcher, 1992). In Ireland, primary education has been a somewhat neglected area of research, with studies on school sectoral and compositional characteristics particularly sparse. In addition, there has been little systematic empirical research on the role of religion in school choice, and pupil experiences in different types of primary schools; although some insights are provided in a number of studies (see Lodge, 1999; Lynch and Lodge, 2002; Lodge, 2004; Devine, 2005; Smyth and Darmody, 2011).

Different types of school can have a specific ethos, i.e. a distinctive range of values and beliefs, which define the philosophy or atmosphere of an organization. The concept of ethos is often used to explain the differences between school types. One determinant of school ethos may be the moral/ethical/religious nature of each school (Catholic, minority faith, multi-denominational). However, according to Buchanan and Fox (2008), school ethos in Ireland is a 'multidimensional matter' as some all-Irish schools (Gaelscoileanna) have different religious ethoses (e.g. Catholic or inter-denominational) while the defining ethos of this school type is the language of instruction and promotion of Irish culture. Furthermore, Catholic and minority faith schools can be co-educational or single sex, DEIS<sup>14</sup> or not. For these schools the distinctive ethos is most likely religion.

This study sets out to examine the profile of multi-denominational primary schools in terms of both pupils' experiences as well as teachers' perceptions of schools within this sector. The results will be compared with those gathered from Catholic and minority faith (mainly Church of Ireland) schools.<sup>15</sup> This approach

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<sup>13</sup> In addition, under the patronage of VECs, new multi-denominational primary schools have been opened with a focus on catering for a growing diversity among student population.

<sup>14</sup> DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) was introduced by the Department of Education and Skills with the aim of supporting schools with disadvantaged intakes.

<sup>15</sup> Where appropriate, the report also refers to DEIS schools and Gaelscoileanna, a further dimension of differentiation within the primary sector.

allows an examination of the choices parents are making, relating it to their belief systems. The following two sections place the study within the context of the historical development of the primary school sector and its current characteristics, crucial for understanding the reasons behind establishing multi-denominational schools in Ireland. The objectives of the study are outlined in section four.

## 1.2 HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE IRISH PRIMARY SCHOOL SYSTEM

In order to understand developments in the Irish primary school system, it is important to consider the educational system in the context of changes that have taken place in society. For centuries, the majority of the Irish population have been Roman Catholic (Coolahan, 1981). However, there has always been some ethnic and religious diversity in Ireland, with Protestants representing the biggest minority faith group. In addition, a number of various other minority faith (Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, and other) as well as secular groups have been present in Ireland. Today, the overall majority of the population in Ireland remains Catholic, although the numbers are declining.

At the time of the foundation of the national school system in 1831, Irish educational policy aimed to create an inter-denominational education framework suitable for catering for the needs of children from different religious backgrounds (mostly Catholic and Protestant) (Devine *et al.*, 2004). The system was designed to offer combined moral and literacy education, but separate religious education. It was envisaged that the Patron of each school would determine the form and content of religious instruction in the schools under their patronage (Hyland, 1996). State aid was to be prioritised for schools comprising mixed denominational groups (Lynch, Crean, Lyons, 2010). However, this approach was challenged by the Catholic and Protestant Churches, who preferred to have schools under the management of individual religious orders (Hyland, 1996). As a result, only a small proportion of national schools were under mixed management, despite the fact that the system was officially envisaged as multi-denominational (Alvey, 1991; Hyland, 1996). By the beginning of the twentieth century, most state-supported primary schools had come under denominational Church control and management (Drudy and Lynch, 1993). The Catholic Church exercised considerable power and control over policy formation and ideology in education, including primary education (Coolahan, 1981; Akenson, 1970), largely stemming from the investment made by the Catholic Church in education (Drudy and Lynch, 1993). Religious socialisation was further encouraged by the 'new' primary curriculum introduced in 1971 that encouraged the integration of subjects, both religious and 'secular', resulting in a denominational ethos permeating the whole school day (Hyland, 1996).

However, the Constitution of Ireland (1937) referred to parents' rights to the religious and moral formation of their children: according to Article 42, the family is defined as '*the primary and natural educator of the child*' (Article 42.1) and it is the parent's right to provide for the religious education of children. Article 44 refers to state aid to religious institutions: it stipulates that the State cannot discriminate between the different denominations and notes that children have a right to attend state-aided schools without religious instruction (Lynch *et al.*, 2010). Yet, given the denominational ethos of most schools, 'if all subjects are to be imbued with religious values, it would seem impossible to protect the pupils' constitutional right not to receive religious instruction should he or she not want it' (Drudy and Lynch, 1993: 78). To this day, the vast majority of primary schools in Ireland continue to be state-financed but Church owned, controlled and managed denominational schools, as discussed in the following section of this chapter.

### 1.3 FEATURES OF THE CONTEMPORARY IRISH PRIMARY SCHOOL SYSTEM

This section provides an overview of the main features of the contemporary Irish primary school system. Ireland has signed and ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), and in so doing, has undertaken to respect the Convention as international law and to implement its provisions. Article 30 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child declares the 'right to children of minority groups to enjoy their own culture, language and practice their religion'. Yet, as discussed in the previous section, the Irish primary school system remains mostly denominational, with most schools characterised by a Catholic ethos.<sup>16</sup>

The majority of primary schools are owned and managed by the Roman Catholic Church;<sup>17</sup> these schools cater for the majority of pupils. The largest proportion of minority-faith schools are owned and managed by the (Protestant) Church of Ireland. Over the years, other denominational schools have been set up - a small number of Presbyterian schools, one Methodist school, one Jewish school and 2 Muslim schools. There are also an increasing number of primary schools that operate through the medium of Irish.<sup>18</sup> Multi-denominational primary schools are one of the fastest growing primary school sectors. The majority of these schools are members of a non-profit limited company, Educate Together, and the majority of those members operate with this company's patronage. In addition,

<sup>16</sup> Statistics accessed via the Department of Education and Science Education Provider Service Facility at <http://www.education.ie/home/home.jsp?pcategory=10917&ecategory=12016&language=EN>

<sup>17</sup> Statistics refer to the 2006/2007 list of primary schools accessed from the Department of Education and Science Education Provider Search facility at <http://www.education.ie/home/home.jsp?pcategory=10917&ecategory=12016&language=EN>

<sup>18</sup> These schools are predominantly Roman Catholic.

in 2008, the Minister for Education and Skills sanctioned the first of a new type of school, known as the community national school, with the intention that this new school type would be managed by VECs.<sup>19</sup> There are currently 5 such schools in operation. Finally, there is a small number of independent fee-paying preparatory schools, most of which are under the patronage of a religious order. In an attempt to address the changes in Irish society and parents' attitude towards religion, a forum was established to discuss the future patronage of Irish primary schools and reported in 2012 (Coolahan *et al.*, 2012).<sup>20</sup>

In the academic year 2010-2011, there were 509,652 pupils attending primary level schools in Ireland.<sup>21</sup> Although children are not obliged to attend school before the age of six, almost half of four year olds and the majority of five year olds are enrolled in infant classes in primary schools in Ireland. The infant classes correspond largely to what is considered 'pre-schooling' or 'kindergarten years' in other European countries. Primary schools operate an eight-year programme, and children transfer to second-level schools at the age of 11-12. Parents have a right to have their child home schooled; however, relatively few families avail of this option.<sup>22</sup>

While in theory parents can choose any primary school for their children, in practice the options may be limited because of available places in specific primary schools or the admission policy practiced by the school (see Smyth, Darmody, McGinnity, Byrne 2009; Smyth and Darmody, 2011 for further discussion). Under the Education Act 1998, all schools must develop and publish their own admissions policy and different schools use different criteria for enrolment when they are oversubscribed. Some denominational schools, for example, give preference to children living in the area, or children of families who practice the particular faith of the school, while most multi-denominational schools allocate places by date of application.

Access to the different school types is geographically variable; for example, the Muslim and Jewish schools are located in Dublin while multi-denominational schools are available only in 19 counties, mostly in urban areas. The overwhelmingly denominational nature of the primary school system means that

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<sup>19</sup> The Education Amendment Bill has been withdrawn.

<sup>20</sup> For more detailed discussion, see: [http://www.education.ie/servlet/blobServlet/fpp\\_prof\\_coolahan\\_address\\_november\\_2011.pdf?language=EN](http://www.education.ie/servlet/blobServlet/fpp_prof_coolahan_address_november_2011.pdf?language=EN)

<sup>21</sup> See Key Statistics 2010-2011, [http://www.education.ie/servlet/blobServlet/stat\\_web\\_stats\\_10\\_11.pdf](http://www.education.ie/servlet/blobServlet/stat_web_stats_10_11.pdf)

<sup>22</sup> Legislation requires that parents register with the National Education Welfare Board if they wish to educate their child at home. While it is difficult to provide a precise figure of home-schoolers, the HSLDA website notes that about 750 children are home-schooled in Ireland.



many Catholic schools have pupils from minority faith or secular groups among their student body. Ireland was criticised by different UN human rights committees in 2005, 2008 and 2011 for not providing alternatives to denominational primary education.<sup>23</sup> Recent policy developments, such as the establishment in April 2011 of the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism and publication of the report of the Forum's advisory group in 2012 (Coolahan *et al.*, 2012), suggest a shift towards the promotion of greater diversity of school type.

The primary school system is characterized by a child-centred approach and is founded on the belief that every child has the right to reach their fullest potential. Irish primary schools follow the new Primary School Curriculum (introduced in 1999) that was devised by the National Council of Curriculum and Assessment. The aims of the curriculum are to ensure that all children are provided with learning opportunities that help them to achieve their full potential and, by promoting active learning and using a variety of teaching methodologies, it prepares them for the next stages of schooling. The curriculum comprises six curriculum areas including religious education. The key areas include: language, mathematics, Social Environmental and Scientific Education (SESE), Arts Education, Physical Education, and Social Personal and Health Education (SPHE). The curriculum aims to foster the development of key skills in communication, problem-solving, critical thinking, inquiry, investigation and analysis, and social and personal awareness and interaction. The formulation of the religious education curriculum is the responsibility of the patron of the school, usually the religious authorities. With regard to religious education, in Catholic schools a common *Alive-O* programme is taught to children, and children receive preparation for the sacraments, including Communion and Confirmation, as part of the school day. Church of Ireland schools use the *Follow Me* programme, broadly similar to the approach used in *Alive-O*, but with preparation for the sacraments taking place in the community, outside the school day. In Educate Together (multi-denominational) schools, a specific ethical curriculum, *Learn Together*, has been developed which combines a focus on ethics and values with a comparative view of world religions. The curriculum has been developed in agreement with parents in the Educate Together sector. In some of these schools, parents have arranged for religious instruction to take place outside of school hours within the school. Within denominational schools, parents have the right to withdraw their child from religious instruction. However, there is evidence that minority/no faith children commonly remain within the class during religion class, participating or not participating in the lesson depending on parental preference

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<sup>23</sup> UNCCPR 2008 - Concluding observations of the Human Rights Committee – Ireland <http://daccess-ods.un.org/TMP/2104265.98787308.html> UNCERD 2011 – Concluding observations of the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination – Ireland <http://daccess-ods.un.org/TMP/453855.246305466.html>

(Smyth and Darmody, 2011). In Community National Schools (CNS), which are described as ‘multi-belief’ in nature, religious education is provided in the form of a multi-belief programme *Goodness Me! Goodness You!* This programme provides separate faith formation for children from different faith backgrounds.

#### 1.4 OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY AND OUTLINE OF THE REPORT

To date, empirical research explicitly dealing with variation across school sectors at primary school level has remained sparse. Little is known about the profile of pupils and parents in faith schools and multi-denominational schools, or about the experience of pupils and teachers in these schools. Yet, considering the recent diversification in primary schools, information on the social, economic and educational characteristics of students enrolled in different kinds of primary schools would be particularly timely. For the purposes of this study, we have undertaken to explore these issues in Catholic, minority faith and multi-denominational schools as reflecting the main school types.<sup>24</sup> To address the gap in research on sectoral differences in primary schools, this research report addresses the following topics:

1. School choice and admission policies.
2. The profile of families who enrol in different types of primary schools (family structure, parental employment, socio-economic position, the educational attainment of parents, ethnic background, and religious identity and practice of the family).
3. School profiles (school characteristics, facilities, staff, and curriculum).
4. Levels of parental involvement with the school.
5. Pupils’ perspectives.
6. The climate and ethos of the three school sectors.

The study is divided into the following parts: Chapter One provides an introduction and outlines the rationale and research questions for the study. Chapter Two presents international research literature on school choice and sectoral differences. Chapter Three describes the methodology used. This is followed, in Chapter Four, by a discussion of the main results. The concluding chapter revisits the topics explored in the light of existing international research.

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<sup>24</sup> Parents may also choose Gaelscoileanna, but a focus on these schools is outside the parameters of the current study.

# Chapter 2

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## Exiting Research on School Choice and Sectoral Differences

### 2.1 INTRODUCTION

Central to this study is the issue of school choice and the factors that shape this process. School choice has become an important issue for educational policy in a number of countries and has been subject to numerous international studies, creating a lively debate due to its multi-dimensional and controversial nature (OECD, 1994). As Irish society has become more diverse in terms of cultural and religious background, the debates around school choice and admission policies have intensified. In 2011, the Minister for Education and Skills published a discussion document on admission policies with a view to changing the system.<sup>25</sup> A year later, the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism report (Coolahan *et al.*, 2012) set out proposals for addressing diversity of beliefs within the primary sector.

Drawing on the wealth of research evidence, the first section in this chapter demonstrates how, on the one hand, parents and students choose a school that is most likely to fulfil their requirements while, on the other hand, schools choose students that provide the best ‘fit’ to their existing requirements with regard to school composition and the prevailing ethos. The discussion then moves on to sectoral and compositional differences between schools. The final section gives an overview of Irish research.

### 2.2 SCHOOL CHOICE

In general, school choice is a broad term referring to parental choice of an educational institution as well as to pupil selection by the schools and is connected to wider reforms in educational politics (Seppänen, 2003). In other words, school choice can be seen as a two-way process involving families and educational institutions. There is now an extensive international literature on this area from a number of countries. Most of the studies discussing school choice do so by looking at parental decision-making processes and factors that influence their choice. However, it is important to consider children’s role in the choice process. Internationally, several studies explore this topic (see, for example, Lansdown, 2001). In line with international literature about engaging children in

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<sup>25</sup> See [http://www.education.ie/servlet/blobServlet/sp\\_enrolment\\_discussion\\_paper.pdf](http://www.education.ie/servlet/blobServlet/sp_enrolment_discussion_paper.pdf).

the decision-making process, in Ireland, Seery *et al.* (2007) found that in a large number of cases both parents and child were involved in choosing the school,<sup>26</sup> emphasising the importance of promoting schools both to parents and to children. The following subsections provide an insight into the complexities involved in the choice process.

### 2.2.1 Parental school choice

There is an abundance of international research that deals with school choice. The majority of studies on school choice focus on the decision-making of parents (Schneider *et al.*, 1998; Bryk *et al.*, 1999). This section discusses constraints and the complexity of school choice, including various factors that shape this process. Matson (1993) argues that the decisions made are ultimately based on perceived student-environment fit. In other words, parents and students choose schools that they consider best for them. Reay (1996) in the UK notes that parental choice cannot be adequately conceptualised without considering a number of issues including background of the family and the influences of unequal access to social power and material resources. Not all parents are able to have a ‘real’ choice. In general, choice is a complex procedure involving a number of decisions on behalf of a parent. Kristen (2008) in Germany identified three stages in parental school selection decisions: the perception of school alternatives, the evaluation of these alternatives, and school access. However, selection decisions vary by parents’ socioeconomic background and their views on education (Denessen *et al.*, 2001) with genuine choice available only for middle-class parents while less advantaged parents experience constrained choice (Burgess *et al.*, 2009b). In the same vein, Buchanan and Fox (2008) noted that the advantaged middle-class parents were more likely to be able to exercise real school choice whereas low income and minority families were more limited in their choice. Possessing higher levels of economic, social and cultural capital, middle-class parents are in a better position to negotiate their way through the mainly middle-class culture of the school system compared to working-class parents (Reay and Lucey, 2003). In the process of choice middle-class parents employ a variety of strategies to ensure advantage for their children, including home tutoring, making applications to other than local schools and buying properties in the catchment areas of high-performing schools (Reay and Lucey, 2003). In fact, there is voluminous empirical literature on the influence of schools on housing demand (Gibbons *et al.*, 2006; Kain, Staiger and Reigg, 2005).

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<sup>26</sup> The survey utilised data collected from five Educate Together schools and focussed on parents’ attitudes and views on choosing a second-level school.

Burgess, Greaves, Vigonoles and Wilson (2009a) in the UK found that less advantaged parents also got their choice of school as they were making less ambitious choices. In areas where there was a lot of potential competition between schools, more advantaged families had a higher chance of achieving their more ambitious choices compared to less advantaged parents. The authors felt that this could intensify social segregation in schools. Discussing issues around school choice in the UK and in the US, Ball (1993) maintains that the process of choice is socially constructed, and by its nature disadvantages working-class families who often find it hard to get access to certain types of schools. This invariably results in school segregation and unequal student outcomes (Lauder *et al.*, 1999). While for many parents the academic results of the school, or its location, are the main factors, for some, the ethos of the school (multi-denominational or denominational) is equally important.

### 2.2.2 Institutional Choice Mechanisms

The previous section discussed parental school choice and factors that influence the choice-making processes. This section considers choices made by schools with regard to selecting their student intake. In short, schools exercise their choice by selecting the most suitable candidates from a set of applicants during the enrolment period. The factors influencing this process may include preferences with regard to gender, religious background, residential location, previous link with the school, date of application, and so on. In their study on the selection criteria used by schools, Echols and Wilms (1993) referred to the good behaviour of students as a rationale for schools selecting their student intake. In addition, schools may prefer to admit students from family backgrounds that comply with central school objectives. These processes may translate into differential admission chances for pupils and be a cause of discrimination (Becker, 1971).

Institutional choice mechanisms, by which schools select the students they intend to admit, can be either overt or covert. Overt techniques utilised by schools include entrance tests. This can place children under additional pressure to do well in the tests in order to gain access to what are seen as the more prestigious schools. Failure to succeed in these tests may lead to exclusion from these schools and may have a detrimental impact on students' self-esteem, confidence and later life-chances. A preference for students from certain faith backgrounds can also be considered an overt technique used by some schools. In addition to overt selection mechanisms based on academic results, there are often other more subtle ways of determining admission to certain more popular schools:

Evidence also suggests that covert selection may still be an important factor in determining which children are admitted to particular schools and that the

perception of covert selection may also influence those applications. (Noden, 1998:234)

This covert selection can be practised through expensive school uniforms; expensive sports equipment and suggested monetary contributions from the parents to the school (Lynch and Lodge, 2002) and is embedded in social class, encouraging the admission of some students and not others.

### 2.3 SECTORAL DIFFERENCES

The school environment is one of the most influential socialisation domains in a young person's life and can have either positive or negative influences on their experiences. Literature on how students fare in schools can broadly be divided into research focussing on compositional effects (an average of individual effects) and others focussing on contextual effects (the influence of the general school environment on an individual) (Osgood and Anderson, 2004). International research indicates that attending a particular school is likely to modify a student's outcomes (Raudenbush and Willms, 1995). The authors argue that particular policies and practices contribute to the overall effect of the school on each student. In the same vein, Bryk and Thum (1989) note that both structural differentiation (e.g. academic orientation) and normative environments (e.g. promoting student engagement) have an impact on student outcomes. Existing evidence demonstrates that the experiences of students may vary between school sectors (Bryk, Holland, Lee and Carriedo, 1984). There is now a growing literature on sectoral differences with regard to school choice, factors that inform this process and students' experiences in different types of schools. The following sub-sections provide an overview of international research in the area.

#### 2.3.1 Fee-paying, private and public schools

Previous studies have found that the type of school chosen is closely associated with parents' socioeconomic background and their levels of education (Hansen, Joshi and Dex, 2010). Drawing on the UK-wide Millennium Cohort Study (MCS), Hansen *et al.* (2010) found that in England, about one in eleven middle-class children with graduate mothers attended a fee-paying school at the age of five, whereas only a small proportion of children whose mothers had no more than GCSE-level qualifications were educated privately. The authors also found that a child whose mother had a degree was twice as likely to attend a fee-paying school in England, than in Wales, Northern Ireland or Scotland. Other research has focussed on different school types in the context of students' academic performance. In most countries student academic performance is considered to be greater in private schools. In France, Langouet and Leger (2000) found that the

main reason families use the private sector was to improve their children's education. Checchi and Jappelli (2004) in Italy noted that the quality of schools was one of the driving factors in the choice between private and public schools. However, once student socioeconomic status is controlled for, private school advantage has been found to disappear or become minimal (Gorard, 2006). Lubienski and Lubiensky (2005) and Matear (2006) compared the average academic performance of students from similar socioeconomic status backgrounds in public and private schools, and found that there were no significant differences in achievement. These studies suggest that private schools have a performance advantage because of their student composition, rather than their institutional characteristics. However, there is an absence of research in Ireland on this issue.

### 2.3.2 Multi-denominational and faith schools

One factor found to influence school choice is religious affiliation. Parents with a specific religious background may seek out schools with an ethos which corresponds to their beliefs, as discussed in the earlier sections of this chapter. In the same way, faith schools may prefer to admit students that share the same beliefs and values promoted by these schools.

There is a growing research literature on faith schools, particularly focussing on the academic attainment of students in these schools. The bulk of existing research on the impact of faith schools on education originates in the US (largely inspired by the work of Coleman, 1982), and has focussed on Catholic schools.<sup>27</sup> Gibbons *et al.* (2006) in the UK investigated whether faith schools raised pupil attainments more than other schools and whether any beneficial impact of attending a faith school came from its religious affiliation, or from specific governance and admission arrangements. Their research focussed on pupils at the end of their primary schooling in England (age 11). The authors found that pupils studying at religiously affiliated schools differed from secular students along several dimensions, many of which – such as family background – were correlated with their academic achievement. The authors argued that these differences may arise, on the one hand, due to different preferences and attitudes towards education among students attending the school.<sup>28</sup> On the other hand, these differences may also arise because many faith schools operate some

<sup>27</sup> In the US, Catholic schools are private-sector schools whereas many English faith schools are part of the state school system.

<sup>28</sup> Parental background seemed to be a factor in choosing a specific type of school in a study by Burgess *et al.* (2009b). The authors found that parents who stated religious grounds as an important factor in school choice were much more likely to choose the 'rich, high scoring faith' school rather than other school types.

forms of ‘covert’ selection in their admissions procedures. Their study showed that average pupil outcomes appeared to be favourable when compared to other types of school. Their results suggest that faith primary schools could offer a very small advantage over secular schools in terms of age-11 test scores in Maths and English. Yeshanew, Schagen and Evans (2008), exploring the impact of faith schools on the performance and progress of pupils, found that all faith schools, in particular, Roman Catholic and Church of England schools, made slightly more progress with their pupils than non-faith schools. Their research also showed that pupils with special educational needs (SEN) attending faith schools performed better at key stage 2 than pupils with SEN in non-faith schools.<sup>29</sup>

Another example of schools with a distinct ethos are integrated schools in Northern Ireland. In an overview of the developments associated with setting up integrated schools in Northern Ireland, McMackin (2008) discusses the profile of this school sector. Since partition, the majority of Roman Catholic and Protestant students have been educated separately. Being concerned that this division may reinforce community divisions in society, a group of parents initiated a new type of school that offers integrated education for all children irrespective of their religious background. Integrated schools are either planned or grant maintained integrated schools that aim at a balanced pupil intake among Protestant, Catholic and other communities, or controlled integrated schools – controlled (state) schools which have transformed with parental approval to become integrated. While broadly of a Christian nature, integrated schools deliver programmes that cater for the specific denominational needs of pupils, additional to the statutory Religious Education syllabus. Having established a distinct inclusive ethos, this school type promotes a whole-school approach to celebrating diversity.

Abbott, Dunne and Morgan (1997) note that the first integrated schools were opened as a direct result of parental action and their belief that they had a right to choose the type of school they wished for their children. The authors note that in addition to a religiously balanced enrolment, valuing different cultural and religious traditions, the management structures in these schools encourage active parental involvement. Abbott *et al.* (1997) note that establishing who attends integrated schools and defining the ways in which the classroom experience in integrated schools differs from that in other sectors is difficult due to the lack of empirical data and sparse research.

A sample audit of current provision in integrated schools by McAllister Hart (2008) offers another insight into this education sector at a time of large-scale

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<sup>29</sup> The study controlled for prior attainment, ethnicity, sex, eligibility for free school meals, alternative measures of deprivation based on census information, special educational needs and English as an additional language.



immigration to Northern Ireland from other countries. She noted that in the academic year 2007-2008 there were large numbers of 'newcomer' pupils recorded in integrated schools (10% of pupils). However, she found that while some integrated schools had large numbers of newcomers, others had none. Of the two types of integrated schools, the maintained sector had attracted the highest number of newcomer pupils.

There has been anecdotal evidence that integrated schools have a mostly middle-class intake (see Abbott *et al.*, 1997). A report by Gallagher, Smith and Montgomery (2003) seems to suggest that the level of social disadvantage in the integrated sector overall was not as marked as in other secondary schools.

Although religion and beliefs may play an important role in school selection, international research shows that choosing a particular school is a complex process. Morgan, Dunn, Cairns and Fraser (1992), for example, observed that choice involves a number of different factors and considerations, including ideology, educational motives, geographical proximity as well as religion and belief.

## 2.4 SCHOOL COMPOSITION

Perry (2007) notes that school composition is defined by the social mix of the students who attend a school and can be measured by the socio-economic status of the students or by the school's racial/ethnic composition. The nature of existing work on the topic reveals its multi-dimensional nature. This section discusses the factors that influence school choice and shows how school choice and school composition are interlinked. The socioeconomic composition of schools has been recognised as an important characteristic of schools affecting student achievement since the Coleman Report (1966). Since then, many international research studies have explored this association. Perry (2007) in Australia argues that school choice and school composition are mutually related and that the social composition of schools can positively or negatively affect a family's choice of schools. At the same time, school choice can positively or negatively affect a school's composition.

"Class-related social, educational and cultural factors ... not only inform 'choice' but, more importantly, they enable some groups to recognise its possibilities and execute it more advantageously than others" (Edwards, *et al.*, 1989:215). By choosing middle-class schools, parents from middle-class backgrounds can be certain that the ethos and values attached to their class are being transmitted to their children and their class status is perpetuated:

Children from affluent middle-class areas were well catered for. In addition to their strong parental support and stocks of cultural capital, the active parent-teacher associations ensured that any necessary extras were provided. These schools were successful and efficient and would ensure that there was a high chance of adequate certification to legitimise social class reproduction. There was certainly no social mixing with X overspill children living north of the borough. (Walford and Jones, 1986:251)

In the same vein, Burgess, Greaves, Vignoles and Wilson (2009a), discussing parental choice in England, found that primary school choice was associated with parental social class as well as the level of parental education. More educated and higher socioeconomic status parents were more likely to value academic standards in the school, while less educated and lower socioeconomic status parents were more likely to cite proximity as an important factor in choosing one school over another. More advantaged parents tended to choose better performing schools and schools with lower proportions of pupils eligible for free school meals (an indicator of student composition in the school), relative to other schools available to them. The authors observed that whilst parents did not admit to choosing schools on the basis of social composition, this happened in practice.

Kirsten (2008) observes that depending on student composition, individuals face differential learning conditions and achieve better results in some contexts than in others. School composition can become an important factor, particularly for some parents who believe that the social composition of a school influences the academic achievement of their child. From the set of alternatives available, they choose the school that seems to offer the most favourable opportunities for their child's achievement. It then follows that in the context of school choice, one of the core characteristics is a school's student composition. In the same vein, Buchanan and Fox (2008) in the US found that middle-class parents in particular are likely to choose a school based on social composition, favouring schools with the same or higher than average socioeconomic status as their own family. Lauder *et al.* in New Zealand (1999) and Lamb (2007) in Australia found that higher socioeconomic status families in a lower socioeconomic status community were likely to choose a school other than the local neighbourhood school.

It is important to note that there is rarely just one factor that determines school choice. The interconnectedness of parental background and different factors that determine school choice was also evident in a study by Burgess *et al.* (2009b), who explored stated versus revealed reasons for primary school choice. According to the authors, the family characteristics that affect the 'type' of school chosen included parents' socioeconomic status, parents' education, parents' religion, Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) of area, and child characteristics. In

terms of school characteristics, the parents listed eligibility for free school meals (FSM), percentage of pupils with special educational needs (SEN), percentage of pupils with English as additional language (EAL), percentage of pupils that are White British, the proportion of students that achieves the highest level at KS2, and distance from the home. As in the UK research, Goh and Dolnicar (2006) in Australia found that the factors affecting parental school choice were complex, including proximity of school, academic and religious reasons.

Kirsten (2006) noted that fewer children from immigrant families or pupils from lower socioeconomic status groups were considered to contribute to a more positive evaluation of the school's achievement potential, whereas educational quality was perceived as declining as the number of disadvantaged children increased. Elsewhere it has been found that when a school has a large number of students who are academically prepared and motivated, a culture of achievement is evident in the school that lifts up the achievement of students from lower socioeconomic status (Hanusehek, Kain, Markman and Rivkin, 2001). Palardy (2009) expresses his concern that socioeconomic segregation may heighten inequity in learning environments.

As discussed above, in addition to social class, school choice is also influenced by other factors such as the family's migrant background. Perry (2007) noted that native families were choosing schools outside the neighbourhood as a way of avoiding migrant students. According to him, this was likely to result in segregation between ethnic and religious groups. The results of Kirsten's (2008) study revealed that migrant children were more likely than German children to enter local schools with a relatively larger proportion of foreign nationals. She noted that the parent perception of the school was of primary importance, over and above other factors. Kirsten argued that being unfamiliar with the German elementary school system, the migrant families tended to consider only a single school, typically the one that accommodated more foreign nationals than the alternative local school. Other research also shows that differences in school choice can stem from preferences for segregation along certain group characteristics, such as skin colour or ethnicity (Schelling, 1978). The author notes, for example, that families may favour schools in which students of their own ethnic origin concentrate. Depending on the group considered, this would result in a differential evaluation of schools.

#### 2.4.1 Parental involvement

In discussing literature on school choice and school composition, it is important to refer to an extensive literature on parents' involvement in their children's education. Previous studies have pointed to the impact of school contexts and their relations with various groups of parents (Kessler-Sklar and Baker, 2000; Stanley and Wyness, 1999; Tett, 2004). According to Domina (2005), parental involvement contributes to the socialisation of children into believing in the importance of education. Research on parent involvement emphasizes the role of middle-class status in providing access to dominant forms of cultural and social capital (Lareau, 1989; Lareau, 2003). Sometimes parental involvement can be constrained by background and resource-related factors. Reay (1996) and Bell (1994) write about the localised habitus of working-class parents. The authors note that working-class mothers were not in a position to move home or look for better schools further afield. In addition, parental involvement in choosing schools is also linked to the ethnic background of the family. A study carried out by Denessen *et al.* (2001) in the Netherlands indicated that significant barriers existed for immigrant parents that influenced their involvement in their child's formal education. Reay (1996) argues that existing research on parental choice as well as policies in this area often focus on middle-class parents and do not sufficiently consider ethnic minority and working-class parents for whom choice and involvement processes may be different.

When discussing school choice it is also important to acknowledge the various processes involved. Ball and Vincent (1998) distinguish between 'grapevine' knowledge that parents use in gathering information about different schools as opposed to 'cold' formal knowledge produced by schools themselves or disseminated as published exam results or league tables. The authors argue that the former is socially embedded in networks and localities and differs by social class. Reay and Ball (1998) also note the importance of gender in the dynamics of school choice. The authors found that notwithstanding the gender of the child, it was mostly mothers that were actively involved in the choice processes.

## 2.5 IRISH RESEARCH

Research on sectoral differences, schooling and student experiences in Ireland is limited, particularly with regard to the primary school system. However, there are some studies in related areas that yield some insights into the processes at work. In order to explore processes of enrolment, in 2007 the Minister of Education and Skills initiated a school enrolment audit that included pupils from migrant and Traveller backgrounds and those with special educational needs.<sup>30</sup> With regard to school sector, the audit covered Educate Together, denominational and

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<sup>30</sup> See [http://www.education.ie/insreports/des\\_enrolment\\_audit\\_report.pdf](http://www.education.ie/insreports/des_enrolment_audit_report.pdf).

Gaelscoileanna sectors. The report showed that there was a variation in the proportion of migrant and SEN pupils in these schools but did not provide social background information on these pupils.

Some existing studies have explored the effect of social class background on school choice (see Lynch and Lodge, 2002; Lynch, 1999). In line with international research, the authors found that parents with a more affluent background and high in social and cultural capital were generally in a better position to secure the ‘best’ schools and education for their children. School choice processes have also been discussed by Seery, Loxley and Limond (2007), who distinguish between five key areas in the literature on parental school choice: academic standards, home-school liaison, school environment, student development and school leadership. The authors found that the school’s values were an important factor for parents choosing Educate Together primary schools; more important than location.<sup>31</sup> Elsewhere, O’Mahony (2008) found that many parents across Ireland have little choice within a reasonable distance when it comes to enrolling their child in primary school: the Catholic parish school is generally the local school. In many cases non-Catholic parents were knowingly sending their children to a Catholic school. According to this study, the majority of the respondents indicated that the school where their child was attending “was our first choice”. Distance from home was also considered a factor when choosing schools. Just under half of the respondents in the study preferred a school under the management of a religious denomination, while 37% would choose a school under management that provides a “common religious framework”; a further 10% would choose a school not under the management of a religious denomination.<sup>32</sup> Nationals of other EU member states were 3.8 times more likely to choose a school not under the management of a religious denomination compared to their Irish counterparts.

Other studies focus on religion and diversity in Irish schools. A study by Lodge (1999) demonstrated that sacramental preparation remains an important part of a school day in Catholic primary schools, and that a good deal of effort was put into sacramental preparation of the children. One of the few studies discussing the experiences of minority faith parents in denominational schools (Lodge, 2004) showed that sacramental preparation was a problematic issue for some parents and pupils who found that schools did not recognise the growing diversity in most Irish schools in recent decades. The same finding was evident in a study by Lynch and Lodge (2002) on second-level students. In this study, minority belief students

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<sup>31</sup> Interestingly, the authors found that income level did not seem to be a factor in the perceived importance of academic standards with regard to school choice.

<sup>32</sup> It is important to note that this sample was selected from parents who have their child already in a school under the management of a religious denomination.

also tended to report non-recognition of minority beliefs. More research has emerged in recent years that deals with the experiences of newly arrived ethnic minority students (see Devine, 2005; Smyth *et al.*, 2009). The common theme of the studies is that schools feel inadequately equipped and prepared for catering for ethnic minority students who represent various creeds and none.

## 2.6 SUMMARY

This chapter explored international research on the link between school choice, school sector and composition. The existing studies show that more privileged middle-class parents are more likely to exercise real choice while choice is constrained for less advantaged parents, particularly those from lower socioeconomic or ethnic minority backgrounds. Middle-class, highly educated parents, who are more actively involved in the education of their children, are likely to seek out schools that ensure academic success and status perpetuation for their children. On the other hand, schools promoting a specific ethos are likely to select students that would be the best 'fit' for the school. While school choice is closely linked to student composition, especially in terms of socioeconomic background, race and religious affiliation, Petch (1986) found that parents in her study appeared to be influenced by considerations of a pragmatic and pastoral nature rather specifically educational concerns. Proximity of the school and child safety were of primary importance, with a major emphasis also placed on the 'happiness of the child'.

Critics of school choice processes tend to point to increased inequality between schools. They argue that more advantaged parents are more able to make good decisions about school quality and are likely to gain access to good schools; these parents are also less constrained by transport costs. The main concern arising from these studies is that schools may become segregated in terms of pupils' ethnicity, socioeconomic background and academic achievement. This is highly relevant in the current context of changing policy in relation to diversity of school type in Ireland.

# Chapter 3

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## Methodology

### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

Chapter Two gave an overview of international research on sectoral and other differences between schools. This chapter summarises the methodology adopted in this study and describes the data used for carrying out the analysis. Drawing on secondary analysis, the study adopts an exploratory approach, widely used in the social sciences. The main part of the study, presented in Chapter Four, presents detailed analysis of data collected during previous studies conducted by the ESRI. In particular, the study draws on data from two large-scale studies, *Growing Up in Ireland* and *Adapting to Diversity*, as well as a qualitative study, *Religious Education in Multicultural Society*.

### 3.2 DATA SOURCES

*Growing Up in Ireland* (GUI) is a national study of children. The main aim of the GUI study is to paint a full picture of children in Ireland and how they are developing in the current social, economic and cultural environment. The analysis focuses on the first wave of this longitudinal study of over 8,000 nine-year-olds conducted in 2007/2008. The study combines information from parents, school principals, teachers and children themselves. In doing so, it provides valuable and detailed information about the home environment of these children, their family and peer relationships, their expectations and aspirations, and their engagement with the schooling process. The *Growing Up in Ireland* study was conducted by the ESRI and TCD and funded by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, in association with the Department of Social Protection and the Central Statistics Office.

There were two main components to the fieldwork: school-based and household-based. The school-based fieldwork involved a self-completion questionnaire for the school principal and two self-completion questionnaires for the child's teacher. The principal questionnaires recorded school-level details on school characteristics including size, challenges, ethos etc., along with some personal details about the principal. The teacher-on-self questionnaire recorded class-level details such as class size, curriculum, teaching methods etc., and some personal details about teachers themselves. The teacher-on-child questionnaire recorded child-level details on the child's temperament, academic performance, school

preparedness and peer relationships. Teachers were asked to complete one teacher-on-child questionnaire for each sample child that they taught. The final part of the school-based fieldwork consisted of academic assessment tests (Drumcondra reading and Maths tests) and a short self-concept questionnaire completed by the child.

The informants in the household-based component of the fieldwork were the nine-year-old child, their primary caregiver (defined as the person who provides most care to the child—in most cases, the child’s mother) and, if resident in the household, the spouse / partner of the child’s primary caregiver (usually, but not always, the child’s father). Detailed information was collected from 9 year old children on their perceptions of school and their teachers. In addition, parents were asked about their involvement in their child’s school. The GUI survey tapped into a number of areas relevant to this study:

- School choice and admission policies;
- Socio-economic background of the families;
- Parental attitudes to schooling;
- Pupil characteristics;
- School characteristics, ethos and infrastructure;
- Pupil school engagement and behaviour.

The research micro data file (RMF) allows us to distinguish between Catholic, minority faith and multi-denominational schools. Two per cent of 9-year-olds in the sample were attending multi-denominational schools, in keeping with the population figures. Crucially, the data allowed analysis of both the characteristics of these different types of schools (in terms of physical structure, ethos, teaching resources, and enrolment criteria, for example), the composition of different types of school (in terms of prevalence of special needs, socio-economic composition, newcomer students, student aspirations and performance on reading and maths tests), and student’s experiences across different school settings.

***Adapting to Diversity*** (AD), carried out in 2007/2008, was the first national study on provision for the needs of newcomer/immigrant students in Irish primary and second-level schools. The aim of the AD study was to explore the types of schools which have newcomer students relative to those who have none, how different kinds of schools address the language needs of, and provide support to, newcomer students, and to consider the perceived adequacy of the curriculum and teaching methods used in schools in catering for a diverse student



population. The study involved a postal survey of all (733) second-level principals and a sample of 1,200 primary principals selected to be representative of all primary schools in size, location and disadvantaged (DEIS) status.<sup>33</sup> A high response rate was achieved for both primary and second-level sectors (62% and 63% respectively). The analysis presented in this report focuses on the survey of primary school principals.<sup>34</sup> The survey focused on the views of principals as it was felt that they would be in the best position to give an overview of available resources and support structures within the school. The topics included in the survey were based on international research and on prior consultations with key stakeholders in the Irish educational system.

The questionnaire collected detailed information on a number of aspects of school policy and practice regarding newcomer students, including:

- The number and profile of newcomers in the school;
- Admissions policies in the school;
- General support structures and specific supports for newcomer students;
- Language support provision: practice and perceptions;
- Perceived academic outcomes of newcomers (including achievement, motivation and aspirations);
- Perceived social integration of newcomers.

In analysis of the data, 'school type' consists of three categories: Catholic schools, Minority faith<sup>35</sup> schools and Multi-denominational schools. All analyses are cross-tabulated by this variable. International research has identified faith background of the family as a salient factor in school choice. Considering the focus of the study on choice between different types of primary schools, this division captures the choices parents are making for their children that are sometimes, among other factors, based on their belief system. Special schools are excluded from the analysis and Gaelscoileanna are incorporated in the three types presented.

*The Religious education in a multicultural society: School and home in comparative context* (REMC) study explored the transmission of religious beliefs and values through the education system and the family across different EU

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<sup>33</sup> The achieved sample for primary schools was 746.

<sup>34</sup> The proportion of multi-denominational schools in the sample was 1 per cent, broadly in keeping with the population figures at the time the research was carried out.

<sup>35</sup> Mainly Church of Ireland.

country contexts.<sup>36</sup> In particular, the study focussed on younger children's perspectives on religion and schooling. A semi-structured interview schedule was developed for three groups of respondents: pupils, their parents and teachers. Respondents were targeted through the school setting in order to allow for an exploration of differences in experiences within as well as between schools. The aim was to capture a diversity of school types as well as families with different belief systems in those schools.

Within each of the schools, one-to-one interviews were conducted with school principals and teachers of students in the selected age-group (either classroom or specialist religion teachers, depending on the context). These interviews covered topics such as:

- Overall philosophy of the school, and the place accorded to religion;
- Perceived profile of students and parents in terms of beliefs and practices;
- Nature and content of religious/moral education taught in the school;
- Day-to-day activities relating to religion/beliefs (e.g. celebration of specific festivals etc.);
- Teacher education regarding religious/moral education;
- Relative role of home and school in the religious formation of children.

Within these schools, students were interviewed in small groups. Where possible, these groups were selected so that children with similar belief systems were interviewed together. The student interviews covered topics such as:

- Perceptions of religious/moral education in the school;
- Awareness and perceptions of other belief systems;
- Participation in religious-related practices and activities outside school;
- Communication with their parents regarding religion and belief.

The parental interviews covered topics such as:

- Factors influencing the choice of school for their child;
- Knowledge and perceptions of religious/moral education in the school;
- Own religious/moral beliefs, values and practices;
- Communication of beliefs to their child;
- Relative role of home and school in the religious formation of children;

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<sup>36</sup> The two-year study was funded through the EU Seventh Framework Programme involving a consortium of seven partners.

- Potential tensions between home and school in relation to religious/moral issues.

Analyses presented in this study draw on parent and teacher perspectives.

These three sources of data provide complementary information on a range of relevant issues. While the national survey *Adapting to Diversity* provides useful information on primary school principals' perceptions of various aspects of institutional structure, procedures and characteristics of pupil intake, the *Growing Up in Ireland* study provides detailed pupil and teacher level survey responses on a range of issues explored in this report. Descriptive analysis based on GUI data is accompanied by a multivariate analysis, in order to provide more detailed information about the factors influencing selection of minority faith and multi-denominational schools compared to Catholic schools. In addition, the REMC study allows for a valuable insight into parental school choice processes. The combination of these three sets of data allows a more detailed insight into the profiles of different primary school sectors. The following chapter presents the results obtained from analysis of the three data sets.



# Chapter 4

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## Primary School Differences by Sector – An Empirical Analysis

### 4.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents research findings based on secondary analysis of the *Growing Up in Ireland* (GUI) and *Adapting to Diversity* (AD) data. To complement the analysis, the chapter also draws on qualitative data gathered for the *Religious Education in a Multicultural Society* (REMC) study.<sup>37</sup> These data sources provide the first systematic way of comparing different primary school sectors in terms of composition and school process.

As seen in Chapter Two, pupil experiences at school are shaped by their own social background as well as school organisation and climate. School organisation includes facilities, policies, procedures and practices while school climate includes the quality of interaction among teachers and students in the school as well as the broader school ethos. The results presented in this chapter focus on sectoral differences at primary school level. The question that we attempt to address here is whether the profile of the three sectors – Catholic minority faith and multi-denominational primary schools differs in terms of school processes, student profile, school characteristics, ethos and climate.

### 4.2 SCHOOL CHOICE AND SCHOOL ADMISSION POLICIES

In the year 2010/11, there were 3,165 primary schools in Ireland, catering for 509,652 pupils.<sup>38</sup> Chapter Two of this report demonstrated that there is a great deal of international research that focuses on school choice. The results of these studies show parental school choice is often influenced by the socio-economic, religious and ethnic background of the family. In addition, school ethos and reputation are often salient factors. As we have seen, there is rarely just a single factor informing parental choice; rather, several interlinking factors determine which schools parents select for their children. Other studies show that schools can influence the nature of their student intake by adopting specific admission

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<sup>37</sup> REMC was a European study, involving Ireland, Scotland, Belgium, Germany and Malta. We would like to acknowledge that the research reported here draws on the contributions of the other members of the Irish team – Etaoine Howlett, Kathleen Lynch and Maureen Lyons (University College Dublin).

<sup>38</sup> See Key Statistics 2010/2011, [www.education.ie](http://www.education.ie).

policies which reflect the school's ethos (e.g. the requirement to be a member of a particular faith community to attend some religious schools).

#### 4.2.1 Changes in pupil intake

In order to gain background information about the schools, as a first step, we explored whether the pupil numbers coming into infant classes had changed over the years; whether there were any other local primary schools which pupils could have attended and whether all of the pupils who had applied for a place in the school had been accepted. The results (presented in Figure 1) show that across all primary schools, 45 per cent of Principals reported increased pupil numbers over the five years prior to the survey, while 44 per cent of the schools stated that the numbers of incoming pupils had remained relatively stable. The number of applicants had decreased only in a small number of schools (11%). As a next step, we explored whether changes in pupil intake differed by school sector. Fifty-seven per cent of multi-denominational schools reported that their pupil numbers had increased.<sup>39</sup> Numbers had also increased in 46 per cent of Catholic and 36 per cent of minority faith schools. Only a small proportion of Catholic and minority faith primary schools had experienced falling student numbers (12% and 4% respectively; and none in the multi-denominational sector). Twenty per cent of schools with disadvantaged (DEIS) status experienced a fall in student numbers in the last five years, compared to only 10 per cent in the non-DEIS schools ( $p < .001$ ).<sup>40</sup>

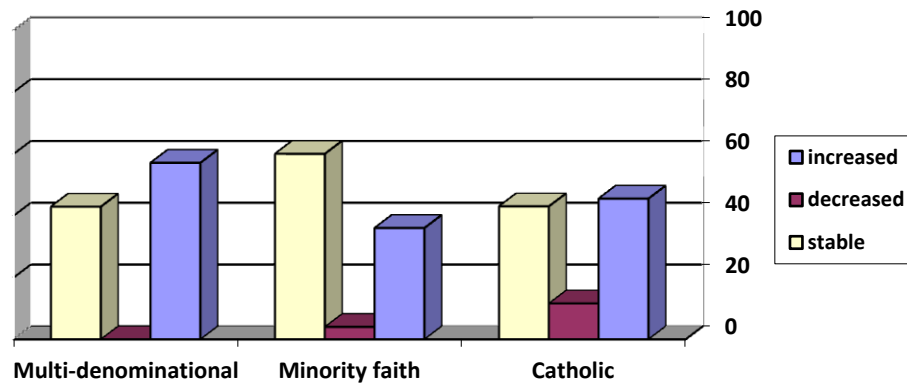
It is likely that all primary school sectors will experience a rise in pupil numbers in the future as the number of children of primary school age is expected to increase in number until at least 2018 (DES 2012)<sup>41</sup>.

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<sup>39</sup> Although this study does not explicitly examine the experiences of Irish-medium schools, it is worth noting that over half of the Gaelscoileanna had also experienced an increase in the number of students coming to infant classes within the past 5 years.

<sup>40</sup> In this analysis cross-tabulation between the main variables was utilised. In order to test the relationship between the variables, a Person's chi square test of significance was used. A significance level of  $p < .001$  means that the likelihood is less than one in a thousand that this relationship would occur by chance.

<sup>41</sup> <http://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Statistics/Projections-of-full-time-enrolment-Primary-and-Second-Level-2012-2030.pdf>

**FIGURE 1** Changes in pupil numbers enrolling in infant classes in the last 5 years<sup>42</sup>

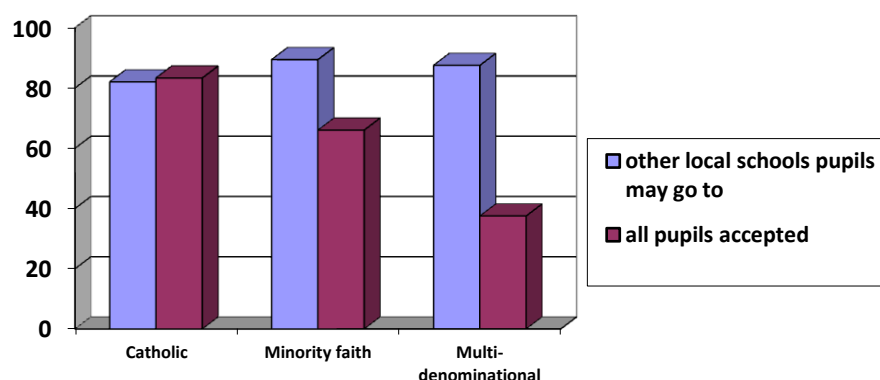
Source: Adapting to Diversity data.

#### 4.2.2 School choice and availability of places

Our analysis shows the potential for between-school competition in the Irish primary school sector, with many schools located in the same vicinity as other schools. Most Principals in all three primary school sectors reported that there were other schools in the neighbourhood to which their pupils could have gone (see Figure 2).<sup>43</sup> Increased pupil numbers in multi-denominational schools, as shown in Figure 1, clearly indicate the demand for places in these schools. This is not surprising considering the relatively small number of such schools available across the country. Currently (2010/11) there are 73 multi-denominational schools (see Table 1, Chapter 2). School choice and availability of places in schools also has an impact on the distance between home and school. The analysis showed that children attending minority faith schools lived further away from school than other children. In addition, children attending multi-denominational schools lived further away than those attending Catholic schools. Location may also curtail school choice: nineteen per cent of primary schools outside cities reported that there was no other school that the pupils could attend ( $p < .006$ ).

<sup>42</sup> The study was conducted in the 2007-2008 academic year.

<sup>43</sup> The analysis of gender composition and school choice revealed that 81 per cent of coeducational and 91 per cent of single-sex schools reported that there were other schools that pupils could have gone to, demonstrating that the gender composition of the school was also a potentially important factor in the choice process.

**FIGURE 2** Other schools in the area that pupils could go to; whether all students accepted by school

Source: Adapting to Diversity study.

The existing international literature demonstrates that schools frequently choose between the applicants to their school. This choice is often determined by the availability of places, that is, schools must put in place procedures to admit pupils if they are over-subscribed. In some cases, specific admissions criteria (such as giving preference to pupils from a specific faith background, or to those who already have a sibling in the school) may be used. In this study, further analysis of the data showed that schools differed in whether they accepted all students who applied or not ( $p < .001$ ). Of all the primary schools participating in the survey, 82 per cent accepted all who applied while 18 per cent were over-subscribed. Multi-denominational schools were the most likely to be over-subscribed, at 37 per cent, compared to 34 per cent of minority faith schools and 17 per cent of Catholic schools. There was also a significant association between DEIS status and acceptance by the school ( $p < .001$ ). Ninety-four per cent of DEIS schools accepted all applicants, whereas the figure was somewhat lower, 79 per cent, for non-DEIS schools. A significant relationship was also found between location and acceptance ( $p < .001$ ) – city schools tended to be more selective of their student intake compared to rural schools.

As already mentioned, schools used various admission criteria for selecting students. These included having siblings already in the school, living in the local area, date of application, religious background, pupil's age, and having attended Early Start in the school. In some schools, preference was given to the children of past pupils and school staff.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>44</sup> In the case of Irish-medium schools, children whose home language was Irish were sometimes given preference.



There were some differences between the three school sectors with regard to the admission criteria used. For multi-denominational schools, the most important criterion was the date of application, although some schools gave preference to pupils who already had siblings in the school. In a majority of Catholic schools, priority was given to children who already had siblings in the school and who lived in the local area. This was followed in frequency by date of application, religion and attending an Early Start programme in the school. With regard to the minority faith schools, the majority used religious affiliation of the children and previous link to the schools as part of their selection criteria followed by the date of application.

#### 4.2.3 Parents' views on school choice

In order to gain a deeper insight into the factors influencing parental school choice, we utilised qualitative data from the Religious Education in a Multicultural Society (REMC) study. Among other issues, the study explored factors that impact on parental decision-making about school choice. The information was collected on the basis of interviews with teachers, parents and pupils from one Educate Together school, one minority faith school and three Catholic schools.

Analysis of interviews with parents indicated a good deal of active choice, with many parents weighing up the options open to their children. Parents rarely consider just one factor when making their choice; rather, this choice is informed by a number of different factors. The most dominant factor is proximity of the school to home, with school reputation and previous links to the school (especially older siblings attending the school) emerging as a factor for some parents. The extent to which religious or secular beliefs were a factor varied across parents, with beliefs being most salient for those with a minority faith or no religion.

For some parents, choice of an Educate Together school was motivated by wanting to avoid the religious instruction model of denominational schools:

*Father 2:* '...religious education was probably my personal top concern when choosing the school for our children...I was anxious to avoid a traditional school model where you have **religious instruction** rather than **religious education**....I don't have any particular religion, however I was very anxious that the children would learn about religion, would have an understanding about religion'.

There were other primary schools nearer to the family home but when the Educate Together school opened, the family opted for it. The family had two

children in the Educate Together school and the parent noted that both children enjoyed going to the school and liked the ethos of the school: ‘they both have said to us that they really like the nature of the school... they tend to express an **identity as being ET kids**, it means something to them and I think it is partly around how religion is dealt with’. The parent was also satisfied with the way the school welcomed **parental involvement**: ‘There is a higher level of parental involvement than in the traditional model of school’.

However, belief was not the only factor in the choice of ET schools, since many parents mentioned other factors and the ET school included in the study had a significant number<sup>45</sup> of children from Catholic families. Coeducational classes and an inclusive approach to teaching (including the approach taken in teaching about religion/belief) were also seen as important in choosing the school:

*Interviewer:* And did you have a choice about what school your child would attend?

*Mother 1:* Originally [the child] was in a Catholic school...then I heard about the Educate Together school because it only opened in the past few years so I took her out of the Catholic school and put her to Educate Together .... It wasn't just the religion thing, you know that they were **mixed classes** which I particularly liked and it was a **more inclusive curriculum**. I was also worried about, I don't know from being in Ireland, like about the first communion and stuff is a really big thing and I was just, you know, conscious of her **feeling left out in the class** and stuff so there was a few different things.

This mother was impressed by the ethos of the school and felt that in the Educate Together school the children's opinions were more valued. In addition, she noted that the classes were smaller compared to the school her children had previously attended. According to her, the children liked the individual attention they received in the Educate Together school; they liked the idea that they could call the teacher by their first name and ‘it just seemed to be more on a personal level. In addition, she noted that ‘the children seemed to make friends ‘straight away’.

Another parent [Father1] chose an Educate Together school for different reasons. For him, the school provided access to a secondary school that he had earmarked for his son who had special educational needs (dyslexia):

*Father 1:* ...because I believe it is a **pathway to a secondary school**, a better secondary school option and so it was on the grounds of my son's **educational needs**, not on any ethical grounds or moral grounds or religious grounds, it was more to do with pure pragmatism of thinking in terms of our own catchment area here for schools for boys and the school that would be appropriate for him to attend. ... While the Educate Together is not a feeder

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<sup>45</sup> 42 per cent of the children in this school were from Catholic families.

school, a lot of the children traditionally go from this school to the secondary school that I am thinking of.

The father noted that his son liked the Principal, and the fact that the Educate Together school had small class sizes. Overall, the child settled in well: ‘because he was used to that [small class sizes]...I was happy that he would be happy enough so he was content enough to go and settled into it well’. Meeting the son’s special educational needs was particularly important to the Father, but this was intertwined with other factors such as the ethos of the school:

*Father 1:* I’m more to do with **meeting his educational needs**, had they learning support teachers, what type of learning support was it, how frequently would he get learning support. I was also familiar with their code of ethics, more so code of ethics and then their ideas around religion and the idea of being open and eclectic and sort of if you want to [you can prepare for confirmation]. ... It has been a very positive thing and he’s enjoyed it and also he’s met children from other faiths and he’s met children from other countries and it’s more so the country thing and the language thing and the ethnic thing that would dominate [influence] him more than religion.

*Interviewer:* Let’s suppose your child would not have had educational needs, would you have still considered an Educate Together school?

*Father:* Probably not necessarily so.

A school’s ability to adequately cater for pupils with special educational needs was a strong factor for another parent [Mother2] who had two children in the Educate Together school. She had chosen this Educate Together school because of her daughter’s dyslexia. She was particularly impressed by the (perceived) resources available in the school for catering for children with learning difficulties and the general atmosphere in the school. In addition, for her, provision of religious education was also important:

‘I saw her [Principal’s] **school resources** etc. and was very impressed [by] the **teaching method** and **atmosphere** in the school etc. I thought it would be more suitable, it was just more child friendly than anything else. ... Teaching **religion** was important and the after school option was satisfactory. ... Old school wasn’t suitable for her, it was too regimental for [the child] and wasn’t really focussed on the children, so I found the Principal in the Educate Together school was very proactive and very understanding and more child friendly rather than Department of Education friendly.’

She noted that ‘the child adjusted very well in the school because it ‘has a lovely atmosphere’. The choice was also informed by an earlier contact with the schools as another daughter [also dyslexic] had gone to the same school previously. In short, the interviews conducted with the parents demonstrated that the issue of school choice is complex and is often influenced by a number of factors.

An analysis of DES data shows that access to different school types varies by region; for example, both Muslim schools and the single Jewish school are located in Dublin while not all counties have multi-denominational schools. Thus, parents may sometimes be constrained by external factors when choosing a primary school for their children. A further constraint relates to the level of demand for the school. The above analysis indicated that Educate Together and minority faith schools were more likely to be oversubscribed than Catholic schools. This pattern was reflected in the experiences of a number of parents interviewed for the REMC study who did not get their first choice of school (minority faith or multi-denominational) because of the long waiting lists involved. The use of waiting lists and/or admissions criteria may impact on the type of families who access particular schools, with immigrant parents or parents with lower levels of education (who do not know 'the rules of the game') less likely to access sought-after schools (see Chapter Two). In the REMC study, the Principal noted that wanting to secure a place for their child in an Educate Together school, some parents register the child as soon as possible. She also expressed a concern that this trend may disadvantage immigrant families who enter the country at a later stage; the Principal felt that this was likely to impact on the student profile of the school:

'In the locality our name has become established in the region and people are putting down their children's names as soon as they are born because the system would need that because first come first served, if the name is down well then you are going to get a place. So they actually ring us from the maternity hospitals'. ...' when you really consider the first come first served aspect of the school, it is possible that unfortunately we may not have as many children from foreign countries because they won't have the name down in time. Whereas when we were a new school, they arrived and they got their name down and that was it, so then that will mean that the cohort of children coming in will as they usually are the majority Catholic, the majority of classes will be Catholic'.

The extent of variation in the actual profile of students across the three sectors is discussed in the following section.

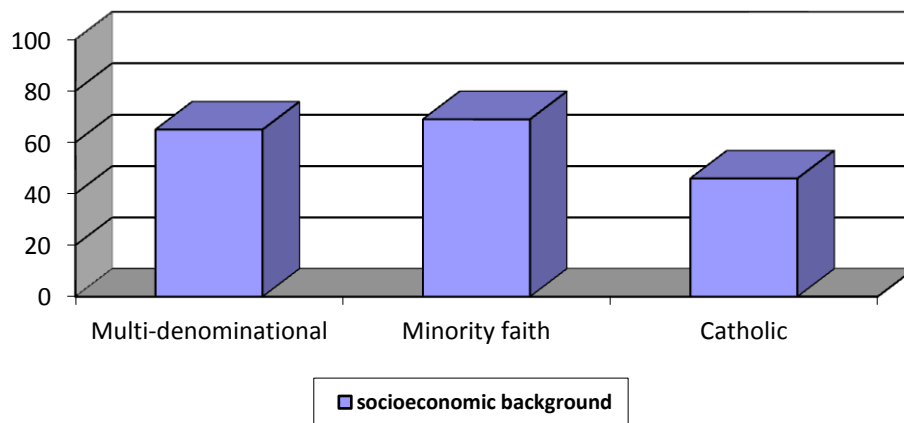
### **4.3 PROFILE OF PUPILS**

International research shows that the profile of students in a school reflects the interaction between school provision, between-school competition, school admissions policies and the choices made by parents (see Chapter 2). This section explores whether, partly as a consequence of choice and admission policies, student profiles vary across the three primary school sectors in Ireland.

#### 4.3.1 Socio-economic and faith background of pupils and families

International research points to socio-economic background as the main source of variation in school choice processes, with middle-class and more highly educated parents making more active choices. This results in a difference between school sectors, and indeed individual schools, in the social profile of their pupils. As shown in Figure 3, both minority faith and multi-denominational schools had higher proportions of children from professional, managerial and technical backgrounds than Catholic schools (69%, 65% and 46% respectively), in keeping with international research on school choice.

**FIGURE 3** Socio-economic background of pupils by school sector (% from professional, managerial or technical groups)



Source: *Growing Up in Ireland (GUI) study*

Multi-denominational and minority faith schools also had higher proportions of children from families in the top income quintile (fifth) than Catholic schools (49%, 33% and 19% respectively). Turning to parental education levels, maternal education levels were higher in multi-denominational schools than in minority faith or Catholic schools; 42 per cent of children in multi-denominational schools had mothers with degree-level qualifications compared with 36 per cent in minority faith schools and 16 per cent in Catholic schools. The analysis also revealed that the proportion of children from lone parent families attending Catholic schools (18%) was higher than for minority faith (9%) or multi-denominational schools (15%). These figures demonstrate that compared to Catholic schools, multi-denominational and minority faith schools are more likely to have pupils from middle-class backgrounds. This is not surprising since middle-class parents are more likely to make active school choices and in most areas children have to travel further to attend these school types. Thus, our findings are consistent with research from England and the US which shows that middle-class

parents are more likely to send their children to schools outside their immediate neighbourhood than working-class parents. The summary of the findings is provided in Table 2.

**TABLE 2 Profile of pupils by school sector**

	Catholic	Minority faith %	Multi-denominational
Children from professional, managerial and technical backgrounds	46	69	65
Children from families in the top income quintile (fifth)	19	33	49
Maternal education level (degree)	16	36	42
Lone parent families	18	9	15

Source: GUI data.

The existence of, and growth in, separate faith schools in a number of countries has led to between-school differentiation in the belief profile of pupils (see Chapter 2). As might be expected, the belief profile of children and their mothers varied significantly by school sector in Ireland. Because of the small numbers involved, we distinguish between those who describe themselves as Catholic, 'other religion' and 'no religion'. The GUI survey showed that around half of children (and their mothers) in multi-denominational schools were Catholic, 19 per cent from 'other' religions and 30 per cent had no formal religious affiliation. The minority faith schools were mostly made up of those of 'other religions' with 30 per cent Catholic intake. While the two sectors had some variety in pupil faith background, Catholic schools were predominantly Catholic (90% of children and 87% of mothers). Among those who had a religious affiliation, levels of frequent (daily or weekly) attendance at religious services were higher for children in Catholic schools (53% compared with 47% minority faith and 42% multi-denominational). However, levels of infrequent attendance (less than monthly or special occasions only) were broadly similar across the three school sectors. When asked to what extent they would describe themselves as a religious or spiritual person, mothers of children attending multi-denominational schools were as likely as Catholic mothers to say 'very much so' or 'extremely'. However, they were also more likely to respond 'not at all' than those in the other two school sectors. Fathers of children attending multi-denominational schools were more likely than those in other schools to describe themselves as 'not at all' religious/spiritual and they were also less likely to report themselves as 'very' or 'extremely' religious. In sum, while there is a relationship between school sector

and the family’s religion/belief system, variation is evident, with Catholic children attending multi-denominational and minority faith schools, and children of minority or no religion attending Catholic schools. The summary of the findings is provided in Table 3 below.

**TABLE 3** Belief profile by school sector

	Catholic	Minority faith	Multi-denominational
Faith background	Catholic schools predominantly Catholic (90% of children and 87% of mothers)	Mostly made up of ‘other’ religions with 30% of Catholic intake	Around half of pupils and their mothers Catholic, 19% from ‘other’ religions and 30% had no formal religious affiliation
Families with religious affiliation: frequent attendance at religious services	53% of children	47% of children	42% of children

Source: GUI data.

#### 4.3.2 Migrant and Traveller pupils

##### *Migrant pupils*

Previous research on ethnic minority (newcomer) pupils<sup>46</sup> in Irish schools (see Smyth, Darmody, McGinnity, Byrne, 2009) revealed that migrant children represent approximately 10 per cent of all primary school pupils. Further analysis demonstrates that while some primary schools had relatively large numbers of ethnic minority pupils at the time of the survey, others had none. The proportion of ethnic minority students across all primary schools is presented in Table 4. The Table shows that 44 per cent of primary schools had no ethnic minority pupils, whereas in 9 per cent of the schools these pupils made up more than 20 per cent of the pupil body.

**TABLE 4** Proportion of migrant pupils in all primary schools (%)

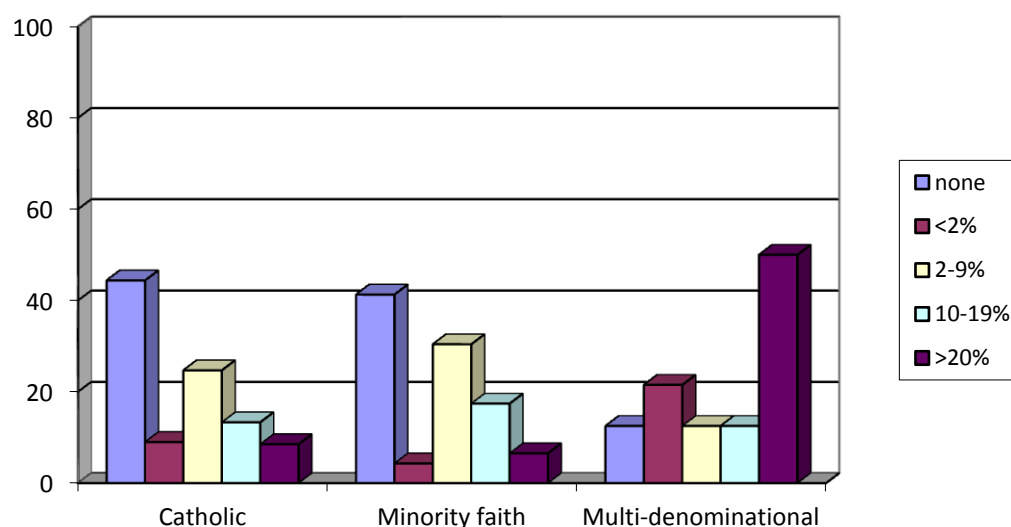
None	43.7
<2%	8.6
2-9%	25.4
10-19%	13.5
>20%	8.9
Total	100.0

Source: Adapting to Diversity

<sup>46</sup> Parents of these pupils were born outside Ireland.

The distribution of ethnic minority pupils across the three types of primary schools is presented in Figure 4. There was a statistically significant association between the proportion of migrant pupils and school type ( $p < .009$ ). Multi-denominational schools were more likely to have a higher proportion of migrant pupils, whereas Catholic and minority faith schools had either lower proportions of such pupils or none at all (44 per cent of Catholic schools and 41 per cent of minority faith schools had no migrant students). A significant association was also found between the proportion of migrant pupils and the DEIS status of the school ( $p < .000$ ). Differences were particularly evident when looking at higher proportions of migrant children - 18 per cent of disadvantaged primary schools had more than 20 per cent ethnic minority students; the corresponding figure for non-disadvantaged schools was 7 per cent. Not surprisingly, the majority of Irish-medium schools (67%) had no ethnic minority students. The proportion of such students in the remainder of Irish-medium schools was relatively low ( $p < .001$ ).

**FIGURE 4** Proportion of migrant pupils in different school types



Source: Adapting to Diversity study.

While there was only one national group present in some schools, a small proportion of schools across the three school types catered for a variety of national groups. Compared to Catholic and minority faith schools, multi-denominational schools were least likely to have representatives of just one national group among the student body.

With regard to nationalities among the migrant pupils, the widest spread was evident in Catholic schools. While some of these schools had just one nationality,



there were others that had a number of different nationalities among their pupil population. There was diversity among the migrant pupils with regard to their profile (asylum seekers, refugees, unaccompanied minors, European Union and non-EU citizens). While all three school types<sup>47</sup> had migrant pupils from EU and non-EU countries among their student population, minority faith schools were least likely to have unaccompanied minors and asylum seeker children among their intake. Multi-denominational schools were more likely to cater for pupils with granted refugee status background and unaccompanied minors.

International research has indicated that ethnic minority families are less likely than white<sup>48</sup> families to send their children to school outside the local area. The *Growing Up in Ireland* study indicates that children attending multi-denominational schools are more likely to come from immigrant backgrounds (that is, have parents who were born outside Ireland) than those in minority faith or Catholic schools (17% compared with 9%).

In order to get a more comprehensive picture of factors influencing school choice across the main school type, a multivariate analysis was conducted (see Table 5).

Analyses so far have looked at the relationship between individual social background factors and the type of school attended. However, many of these factors, such as social class and parental education are closely related, so it is worth looking at the impact of these different factors simultaneously. Table 5 presents a multinomial logistic regression model where the chances are estimated of being in a minority faith or multi-denominational school as opposed to a Catholic school. As might be expected given the spatial provision of different school types, children living in urban areas are significantly more likely to attend minority faith or multi-denominational schools. The coefficients are presented in terms of odds ratios; thus, children in urban areas are 2.2 times more likely to attend a minority faith than a Catholic school, all else being equal. When social class background and parental education are examined simultaneously, it is clear that education has a much stronger effect on school selection than social class. Table 5 shows very little variation by social class once mother's education is taken into account. Selection of minority faith and multi-denominational schools show a very clear structuring by parental education; children whose mothers have a postgraduate qualification are 4.6 times more likely to be in a minority faith school and 19.5 times more likely to be in a multi-denominational school than a

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<sup>47</sup> Note that some primary schools had no migrant pupils.

<sup>48</sup> The author (Burgess 2009b) refers to white British families.

**TABLE 5** Factors influencing selection of minority faith and multi-denominational schools compared to Catholic schools (odds ratios)

	Minority faith schools	Multi-denominational schools
<b>Region:</b>		
Urban (Contrast: rural)	2.156***	6.984***
<b>Social class:</b>		
Professional	1.466	0.804
Managerial	1.257	0.325
<b>Non-manual</b>	<b>0.850</b>	<b>0.559</b>
Semi/unskilled manual	0.253**	0.703
Non-employed (Contrast: Skilled manual)	2.468*	1.076
<b>Mother's education:</b>		
Upper secondary	2.051**	5.185***
Post-secondary	2.931***	7.758***
Primary degree	4.237***	10.747***
Postgraduate degree (Contrast: lower secondary or below)	4.601***	19.490***
Migrant background	0.137***	0.585±
Lone parent family	0.544*	0.491*
<b>Mother's religious denomination:</b>		
None	4.404***	7.423***
Minority faith (Contrast: Catholic)	55.297***	9.047***

Note: \*\*\* p<.001; \*\* p<.01; \* p<.05; ± p<.10.

Catholic school, all other factors being equal. Over and above the effects of social class and education, children from lone parent families are less likely to attend minority faith or multi-denominational schools than those from two-parent families. Furthermore, immigrant children are less likely to attend minority faith schools and somewhat less likely to attend multi-denominational schools than those from Irish families.

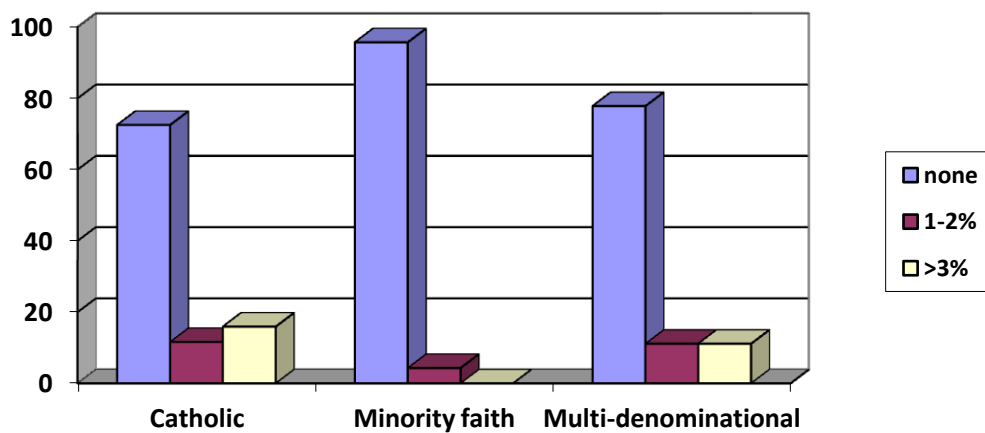
As might be expected, parental beliefs are strong influences on school selection. Children whose mothers define themselves as having no religious denomination are significantly more likely to attend multi-denominational or minority faith schools than they are to attend Catholic schools. Children whose mothers are in a minority faith group are much more likely to attend minority faith schools but are also significantly over-represented in multi-denominational schools. In sum, selection of school sector is strongly influenced by religious/secular belief but is also associated with wider social differentiation. This pattern is entirely consistent with international research which shows that more advantaged parents (in terms of education, class etc.) are more likely to engage in active

school choice. Furthermore, active and early selection of schools is likely to be all the more important for schools which are oversubscribed.

**Traveller pupils**

As a next step, we focussed our analysis on Traveller pupils in all primary schools (see Figure 5). The results showed that the proportion of such pupils in the primary schools was relatively small (74% of all schools did not have any Traveller pupils). Most multi-denominational schools did not have any Traveller pupils. Catholic schools were more likely to have greater numbers of Traveller pupils compared to minority faith schools. A significant association was found between DEIS status and the proportion of Traveller pupils in the school ( $p < .000$ ). Disadvantaged schools were more likely to have a higher proportion (3%+) of Travellers compared to non-DEIS schools (32% and 11% respectively). The numbers of Traveller pupils attending Gaelscoileanna were modest – 91 per cent of these schools reported having no Travellers among their pupil population ( $p < .006$ ).

**FIGURE 5** Proportion of Traveller pupils in the school



Source: Adapting to Diversity data.

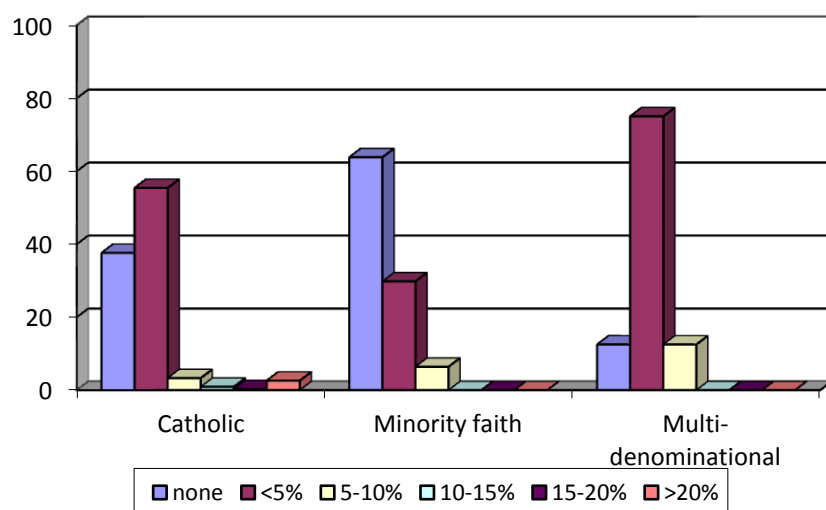
**4.3.3 Pupils with physical disabilities and learning difficulties**

International studies have shown that the number of children with special educational needs (SEN)<sup>49</sup> has increased in recent decades (Banks and McCoy 2011). A recent research study in Ireland by Banks and McCoy (2011) shows that the prevalence rate of SEN pupils in Irish primary schools is 25 per cent. At the

<sup>49</sup> The EPSEN Act defines SEN as: ‘A restriction in the capacity of the person to participate in and benefit from education on account of an enduring physical, sensory, mental health or learning disability, or any other condition which results in a person learning differently from a person without that condition’.

same time, national policies in a number of countries promote inclusive education whereby there is a greater prevalence of SEN pupils in mainstream classrooms. Based on the Adapting to Diversity data, this study explores the prevalence of SEN pupils across the three primary school sectors. Figure 6 presents the proportion of pupils with physical/sensory disabilities across the three school types ( $p < .028$ ).<sup>50</sup> Thirty-nine per cent of all the schools had no students with physical/sensory disabilities. In the schools that had such pupils, the numbers were relatively small – falling mostly into ‘<5%’ category. However, in 3 per cent of Catholic schools the number of students with physical disability fell into the ‘20%+’ category. Seventy-five per cent of multi-denominational schools reported having ‘<5%’ of these students. Forty-five per cent of Irish-medium schools catered for students with a physical disability, while half of these schools had less than five per cent of such pupils.

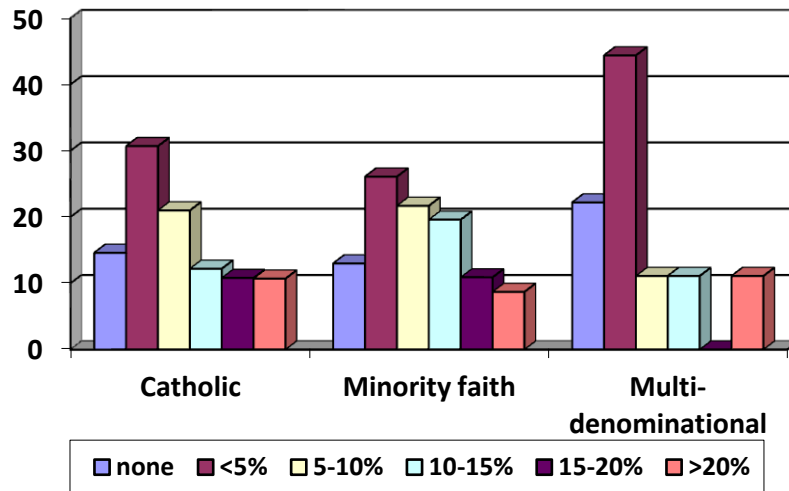
**FIGURE 6** Pupils with physical/sensory disabilities



Source: Adapting to Diversity data.

<sup>50</sup> The analysis does not include special schools. However, some primary schools have special classes.

**FIGURE 7 Pupils with learning difficulties**



Source: Adapting to Diversity data.

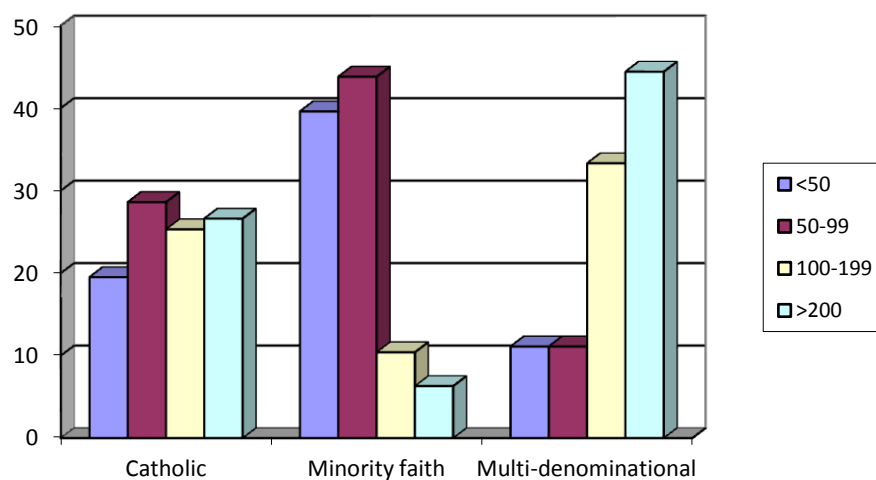
Figure 7 presents the proportion of pupils with learning difficulties in Catholic, minority faith and multi-denominational schools. According to the survey of primary school principals, 15 per cent of all schools had no pupils with learning difficulties. Thirty-six per cent of all schools reported small numbers of such pupils (in the <5% category). Multi-denominational schools were more likely than other schools to have pupils in that category (44%, compared to 31% in Catholic and 26% in minority faith schools). Eleven per cent of Catholic schools reported that over 20 per cent of the pupils in the school had learning difficulties.

#### 4.4 SCHOOL PROFILES

Next, we investigated whether the school profile of multi-denominational schools differs from that of other primary schools in terms of school characteristics, resources, ethos and processes.

##### 4.4.1 General characteristics

School sectors differ in their gender composition: all minority faith and multi-denominational schools were coeducational, while Catholic schools were divided between coeducational (88%), all-boys (8%) and all-girls (5%) schools. Figure 8 presents an overview of school size across the three types of primary school. Catholic schools were most varied in size (spread across the four categories). A higher proportion of minority faith schools were in the first two size categories, whereas multi-denominational schools were more likely to be found in the larger categories.

**FIGURE 8 School size by sector (number of pupils in the school)**

Source: Adapting to Diversity data.

A significant proportion of multi-denominational schools are situated in an urban environment (most of them in Dublin and the Greater Dublin area).<sup>51</sup> Nineteen per cent of Catholic and 16 per cent of minority faith schools were urban schools.

#### 4.4.2 Facilities

There has been an absence of systematic information on the quality of school facilities in Ireland (see Darmody and Smyth, 2009). The *Growing Up in Ireland* study was innovative in asking primary school principals to evaluate the adequacy of school facilities and resources in relation to a number of dimensions, including number of teachers, arts and crafts facilities, condition of the school building, computing facilities, music facilities, playground, sports facilities, toilet facilities, administrative support facilities, number of classrooms, facilities for children with disabilities, library/media facilities and after-school facilities. In assessing school facilities, primary school principals were most likely to characterise after-school facilities, library/media facilities and facilities for children with disabilities as 'poor', a pattern that was broadly consistent across school types.

Closer inspection of the data revealed that Principals in multi-denominational schools reported a much greater use of prefabs as classrooms than those in other

<sup>51</sup> Multi-denominational schools are more likely to be located in urban areas and, as a consequence, may be more likely to have pupils from migrant backgrounds, from parents from higher social class and from households with higher incomes as the last three features are more likely to be found in urban rather than rural areas. Considering this, location differences across schools may affect the results of the analyses.

schools ( $p < .001$ ). There was also some variation in the perceived quality of school facilities between the three sectors. Minority faith schools were more likely to be satisfied with the number of teachers and books available in the school, whereas the Catholic schools were less likely to report their satisfaction ( $p < .01$ ). Multi-denominational schools were more likely to find computing facilities satisfactory compared to minority faith and Catholic schools ( $p < .01$ ). Multi-denominational schools were most dissatisfied with sports facilities but more satisfied with administrative support. These schools were also more polarised than others about the overall condition of school buildings. There was no difference by sector in the use of school facilities by the community outside school hours.

#### 4.4.3 School ethos and curriculum

The ethos of a school or organisation emerges from individual and group interaction and in their interpretation of events. Ethos then is not that which is formally stated or documented but is a process of social interaction; it is not independent from the organisation but inherently bound up with it (Donnelly, 2000).

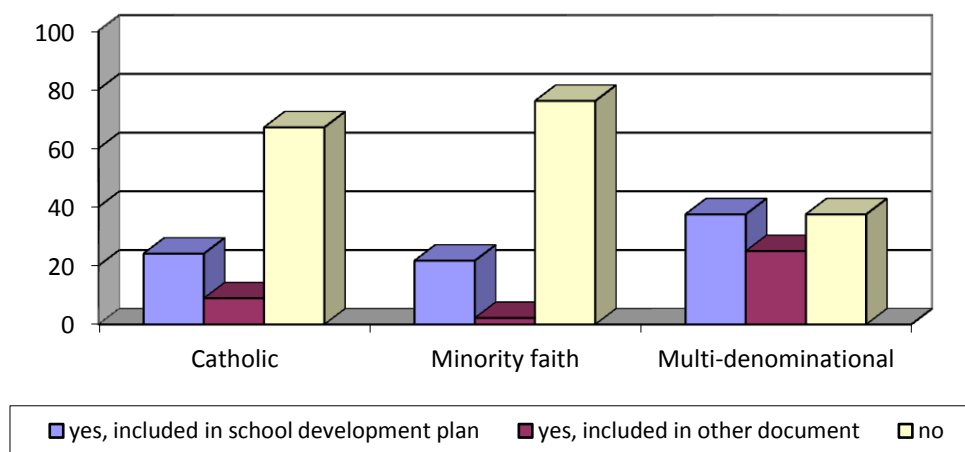
Principals were asked how important each of the following was to the ethos of the school: sports, religion, music, drama, involvement with the community, involvement with parents, social justice, environmental awareness, and Irish language and culture. The analyses of the data revealed that with regard to school ethos, sports were seen as more important in Catholic and multi-denominational schools than in minority faith schools. Not surprisingly, religion was seen as less important in multi-denominational schools. However, the perceived importance of other aspects of ethos did not vary by school sector.

The ethos of a school is also likely to be reflected in the relative emphasis on different aspects of the curriculum. Principals were asked to assess the importance of each of the following as a curricular activity: physical education/sports, music, speech and drama, environmental awareness, awareness of social justice and scientific education. The principals of multi-denominational schools were more likely to report music and speech/drama as 'very important' compared to those in other schools. Principals in multi-denominational and minority faith schools were somewhat more likely to report environmental awareness, social justice and scientific education as 'very important' than those in Catholic schools. As for extracurricular activities, sports were seen as more important in Catholic and multi-denominational schools than minority faith schools. Principals of multi-denominational schools were also more

likely to report music and speech/drama as very important extracurricular activities than those in other schools.

School ethos may be underpinned by policies and procedures regarding different areas of school life. Almost all primary schools have a written discipline policy in place. This policy has been shaped 'to a great extent' by teachers, with parents and pupils involved 'to a great extent' in 29 per cent and 14 per cent of schools respectively. Parents and pupils are somewhat more involved in shaping the discipline policy in multi-denominational than in other schools, but the differences are not marked. Multi-denominational schools were somewhat less likely to have a formal anti-bullying policy and a written policy on bullying but the differences between school types were not marked. As shown in Figure 9, a sizable proportion of all three school types (67%) did not have a written policy on interculturalism or racism in place. Some schools had such a policy as part of their school development plan or in some other document. Multi-denominational schools were more likely, compared to other school types, to have it in place either as a part of a school development plan (38%) or as a part of another document (25%).

**FIGURE 9** Policy on interculturalism and anti-racism



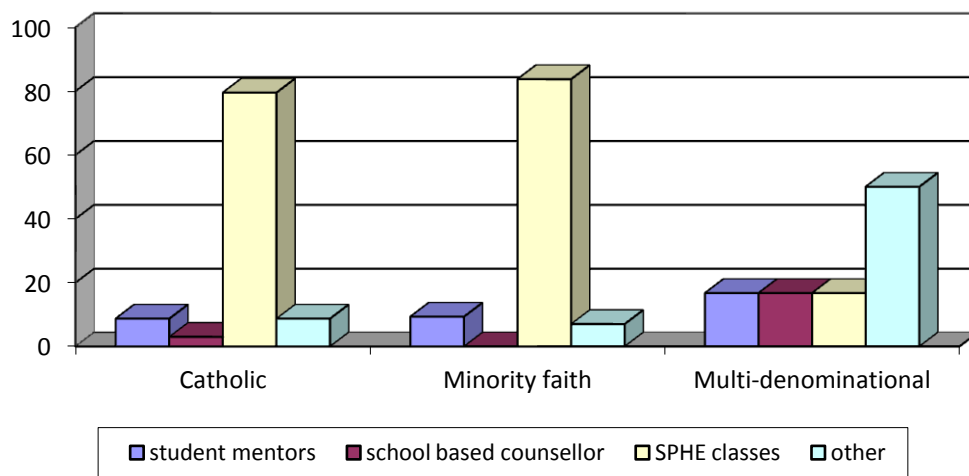
Source: Adapting to Diversity data.

Schools tend to vary in the way in which they provide personal and social support to their pupils. The principals were asked what supports were used for students and what was the most important approach utilised. As Figure 10 indicates, the majority of Catholic and minority faith primary schools named Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) classes as their single most important approach, with the multi-denominational schools citing other approaches taken with students. While schools also used student mentors and school-based counsellors,



many schools in our sample used other approaches. These included pastoral care from teachers, assistance from Special Needs Assistants (SNAs), religious education; but also special programmes using art and music therapy, group play therapy and so on. In addition to student mentors, counsellors and SPHE classes, multi-denominational schools also listed the ethos of the school, immigrant parent support groups and assistance from EAL (English as an Additional Language) teachers as their main social and personal support.

**FIGURE 10 Support for students – single most important approach used in providing social and personal support for the students**



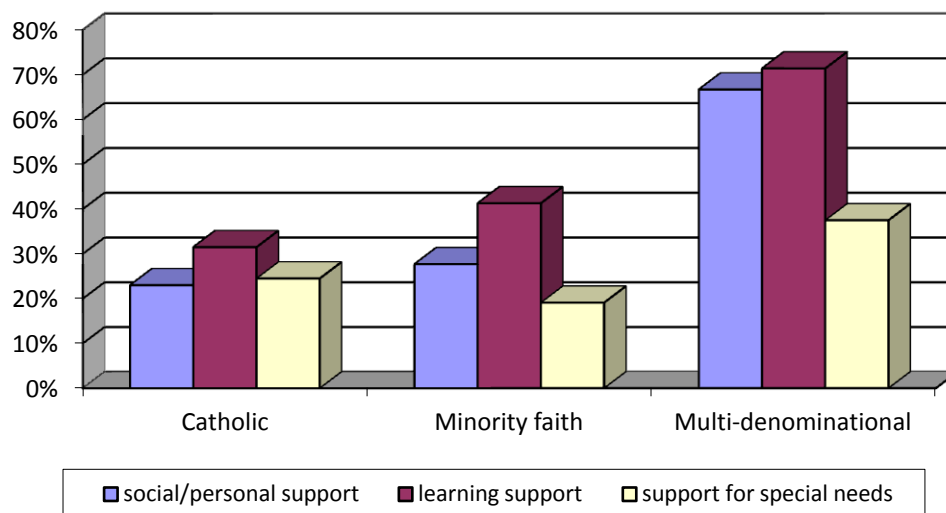
Source: Adapting to Diversity data.

Multi-denominational principals reported higher satisfaction with social and personal support than those in other schools (Figure 11). Dissatisfaction levels seemed to reflect the number of pupils in the school who needed support. Teachers are an important source of support for pupils and how they perceive their jobs has been found to impact student outcomes. The analysis of the GUI data showed that most primary school teachers are female; in fact, over 80 per cent of 9-year-olds are taught by women. Over half of the primary schools had a male principal. Both primary school teachers and principals were largely satisfied with their jobs. However, a sizable minority of teachers and principals reported being stressed by their jobs. Job satisfaction and stress do not vary significantly across school sectors but do vary by individual school characteristics (see Darmody and Smyth, 2011).

From the perspective of school climate, principals of multi-denominational schools were more likely to report the environment in their schools as happier than in other schools compared with principals in other school sectors (76%

versus 45% of Catholic and 47% of minority faith schools). The perceptions of pupils themselves are discussed in section 4.4.6 below.

**FIGURE 11** Satisfaction with support, perception of principals (very satisfied)



Source: Adapting to Diversity data.

#### 4.4.4 Parental involvement

Parents across the three school sectors generally had high aspirations for their children, with only a small minority reporting that they did not expect their child to continue his/her education beyond Junior Certificate level. An overall majority expected their children to continue on to degree level. The mothers of children attending multi-denominational schools had higher educational expectations of their children than those with children in other schools; 95 per cent expected their child to obtain at least degree-level qualifications compared with 85 per cent for minority faith schools and 77 per cent in Catholic schools. This pattern is not surprising given the high educational profile of mothers of children in multi-denominational schools (see above). In addition, across all school sectors a high proportion of parents helped their children with homework.

In general, levels of attendance at formal parent-teacher meetings were high across all school sectors. The extent to which parents approached the teacher informally to discuss their child was higher in minority faith and multi-denominational schools than in Catholic schools.

#### 4.4.5 Children's perspectives

The *Growing Up in Ireland* study allows us to assess the subjective school engagement of 9-year-olds, including whether they like school and their teacher, and whether they look forward to coming to school. The results showed that most liked the school 'always' or 'sometimes' but a small proportion reported 'never' liking the school. Over half of the primary school pupils 'always' liked their teacher, while a small proportion 'never' liked their teacher. Pupils who were positive about the school and teachers came from a variety of backgrounds.

Further analysis showed that attitudes to school did not vary significantly by school sector. Slightly fewer children attending multi-denominational schools 'never liked' school, but the difference was not statistically significant. Similarly, looking forward to coming to school and liking their teacher did not vary by school sector. The majority of pupils across all school sectors report that they are doing well in their schoolwork.

Children were also asked about whether they liked reading, mathematics and Irish. The majority of pupils across school sectors 'always' or 'sometimes' like reading and maths. Attitudes to Irish are somewhat less positive than those to reading and maths (see Williams *et al.*, 2009). Children attending minority faith schools were more likely to report never liking Irish but the patterns for multi-denominational and Catholic schools were similar to each other.

The proportion of children who reported having been bullied (picked on by a child or adult) was similar across school sectors as was the type of bullying experienced.

The *Growing Up in Ireland* data can also be used to explore objective measures of school engagement, namely, school attendance and homework completion. Absenteeism rates (as reported by the mother) do not vary across school sectors. Similarly, coming to school without homework completed (as reported by the teacher) does not vary by school sector.

The analysis of the data enabled us to explore children's activities outside school. The results revealed that participation in sport or physical exercise (as reported by the child) did not vary by school sector. Children in multi-denominational and minority faith schools read for fun somewhat more frequently than those in Catholic schools ( $p < .10$ ) but the difference is not marked. Children attending multi-denominational schools were more likely to be involved in cultural activities

after school (66% compared with 58% for minority faith and 53% for Catholic schools). Children attending minority faith schools were more likely to be involved in a youth club or the scouts/guides than those in Catholic or multi-denominational schools.

In sum, although the profile of children varies by school sector, there are remarkably few differences in children's perspectives across different kinds of school. This may reflect the greater importance of variation in school process and climate across individual schools.

# Chapter 5

## Conclusions and Policy Implications

### 5.1 INTRODUCTION

There is a growing international literature on school sector variation in educational research. Much of this literature indicates that students' experiences at school are shaped by a number of factors - their own social background as well as school organisation and climate. While studies focussing on sectoral differences and pupil experiences in secondary schools are relatively common, less is known about these differences in primary schools. In Ireland, studies on school sectoral and compositional characteristics are particularly sparse, despite growing diversification of school types in this sector.<sup>52</sup> This study addresses the gap in research, by discussing differences between three sectors: multi-denominational schools, minority faith schools and Catholic schools. In doing so, it draws on two nationally representative datasets *Adapting to Diversity* and *Growing Up in Ireland* as well as qualitative data from the *Religious Education in Multicultural Society* (REMC) project. The study contributes to the current debates on school patronage and admission policies by discussing the profile of the three major school sectors at primary level and the profile of students attending these schools.

### 5.2 SCHOOL CHOICE AND PROFILE OF FAMILIES

As discussed in earlier chapters in this report, sectoral differences are often closely associated with the choices parents make for their children when choosing between schools. In order to understand factors that may influence the decision-making processes, the report starts by discussing school choice in Irish primary schools. Despite demographic changes in recent decades, there have been very few studies that look at school choice and the role religion plays in these decisions. In Ireland, schools have historically catered for a relatively homogeneous group of students and parents, and teachers have generally had little experience of dealing with linguistic, ethnic and religious diversity in their schools and classrooms. However, the period since the mid-1990s involved rapid net immigration of non-Irish nationals into Ireland. This has been accompanied by

<sup>52</sup> In addition to Catholic primary schools, one can differentiate between Church of Ireland, Presbyterian, Methodist, Muslim, Jewish, Quaker, inter-denominational and multi-denominational schools. The latter category can be further broken down by different patron bodies, including the new community national schools under the patronage of the VEC.

a gradual shift in the religious profile and the proportion of people with no religion in Irish society. These processes are likely to present challenges to Irish schools catering for the needs of new communities. In addition, some parents may also confront difficulties in accessing schools, particularly if the schools in the local area are over-subscribed and the admission policies favour families with already established links with the school.

In line with international research, the findings of this study show that school choice in Ireland is strongly influenced by family socio-economic background and, in particular, parental education. Middle-class parents are often in a better position in terms of having the resources to seek out the best school for their child – i.e. they make more active school choices. The analysis of the GUI data showed that compared to Catholic schools<sup>53</sup>, multi-denominational and minority faith (mainly Protestant) schools were more likely to have pupils from middle-class backgrounds. However, reasons for choice were varied, demonstrating that religion is not necessarily the dominant or most salient factor in the choice process. In this study, the belief profile of children and their mothers varied significantly by school sector. Over forty per cent of children (and their mothers) in multi-denominational schools were Catholic. The finding is somewhat surprising considering the multi-denominational character of the school. It could be that a number of other factors are more salient in making the choice – perhaps a topic that merits further research.

### 5.3 SCHOOL PROFILE

In order to gain a better understanding of the differences between the three school sectors, the study explored how these varied across a number of dimensions including facilities, resources, curriculum and school ethos. In terms of the former, principals in multi-denominational schools reported a much greater use of prefabs as classrooms than those in other schools. This is likely to reflect the growing number of pupils in these schools as well as the fact that some new schools were initially set up in temporary premises. Further, these schools were more likely to find computing facilities satisfactory compared to minority faith and Catholic schools. Compared to other schools, principals of multi-denominational schools were most dissatisfied with sports facilities but more satisfied with administrative support. In general, the results show that enrolment in multi-denominational schools exceeds their physical capacity and this is likely to place a strain on existing facilities.

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<sup>53</sup> It is important to note here that the category 'Catholic schools' includes a variety of schools in terms of their socio-economic composition.

Average levels of attendance at parent-teacher meetings were high across all school sectors. However, the extent to which parents approached the teacher informally to discuss their child was highest in minority faith schools but was also higher in multi-denominational than in Catholic schools.

Across all three primary school sectors teachers were predominantly female while over half of the schools had a male principal. Both primary school teachers and principals were generally satisfied with their jobs. However, many reported being stressed by their jobs. Job satisfaction and stress did not vary by school sectors, but did vary by school characteristics (for further discussion on this topic see Darmody and Smyth 2011).

School ethos is likely to impact on the experiences of students in the school. In addition, we expected the elements of school ethos to vary somewhat across the three types of primary schools. This study found that principals in multi-denominational and minority faith schools were somewhat more likely to report environmental awareness, social justice and scientific education as very important. Not surprisingly, principals in multi-denominational schools were less likely to consider religion as an important part of the school ethos.

Based on teacher and principal perceptions, the study also explored how students in the three school sectors fare academically. The analysis showed that levels of literacy difficulties were lower in multi-denominational schools than in Catholic schools but slightly higher than in minority faith schools. It is difficult to explain these findings; perhaps some of the difference between the sectors stems from variation in language proficiency. In addition, children attending multi-denominational schools were somewhat less likely to be rated as below average in reading or imagination/creativity; and were more likely to be rated as above average in oral communications. While it is reasonable to suggest that these findings may be linked to the student profile (see above) and perhaps to the teaching methods used, the topic would merit further research. In particular, a study exploring teaching methods used in different types of primary schools would shed more light on the matter. Schools generally vary in terms of the amount of homework given. In this study we found that children attending Catholic schools were somewhat more likely to report that they were doing well in homework compared to the other school sectors.

Overall, most children across the three sectors liked their school and their teacher and reported doing well in their schoolwork. Pupils who were positive about the school and teachers came from a variety of backgrounds. These

findings show that while the profile of children varies by school sector (multi-denominational, minority faith, Catholic), relatively few differences were found in terms of children's perspectives. This may reflect the greater importance of variation in school process and climate across individual schools.

#### 5.4 IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY DEVELOPMENT

This study raises important issues for policy around school choice in the Irish context. In recent years, many countries have introduced policies designed to increase parental choice of school. International research has shown that such policies generally result in increased differentiation between schools in the socio-economic profile of their students since middle-class families are likely to be more proactive in choosing schools, and have greater access to information and other resources than working-class families (Ball and Vincent, 1998; Reay and Ball, 1998; OECD, 2012). Similar patterns are evident in this study with students attending multi-denominational and minority faith schools found to be more likely to come from middle-class backgrounds and have more highly educated parents. This reflects two interrelated processes. Firstly, while active school choice is a common feature of the Irish system, middle-class parents are more likely to exercise such choice and send their children to schools outside the local area. Secondly, because of the small number of non-Catholic primary schools, multi-denominational and minority faith schools are more likely than Catholic schools to be oversubscribed, hence limiting the choices available to the families. Admissions policies may tend to favour groups with more access to information, for example, those who understand the requirement to put their child on the school waiting list early, or those with prior links to the school, thus increasing the potential for social differentiation (Smyth *et al.*, 2009). In addition, not all families are in a position to re-locate for better access to the school of their choice. It should be noted that these processes are not confined to non-Catholic schools since many Catholic schools are oversubscribed and there is considerable differentiation among Catholic schools in student intake (DES, 2007).

The impact of school admissions policies and the level of provision for minority groups has been the subject of much policy debate in recent years. In June 2011, the Department of Education and Skills (DES, 2011) published a discussion document as the basis for developing a new regulatory framework on school enrolment. A key objective of this framework is to provide a statutory basis for ensuring that school admissions policies are applied fairly to all applicants. This document formed the basis for consultation with stakeholders but, at the time of writing, a new framework has not yet been published. The landscape of primary school provision is also changing. The VEC sector has become a new provider of primary education through the community national school model. Demographic



trends mean that new primary schools will be required to cater for a growing number of children in the years to come (DES, 2012). How the governance of these schools will be decided has been the subject of much debate. In April 2011, the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector was established to provide advice to the Minister, based on consultation with stakeholders, on a number of issues, including assessing demand for diverse school provision, managing the transfer of governance, and how to address diversity in areas without a large number of schools. The report of the Forum's Advisory Group (Coolahan *et al.*, 2012) provides the government and stakeholders with useful information on planning towards future patronage arrangements and outlines the principal issues underpinning diversity in Irish schools.

Looking at how best to provide different types of primary schools raises a number of crucial questions centring on whether catering for diversity requires the provision of different types of schools or whether diversity should be seen as an issue for all schools. Furthermore, there are on-going tensions between providing full parental choice of school and maximising equity between schools (OECD, 2012). Different European countries have adopted different models of schooling in responding to these issues; none of these models offer 'one best way' and each of these 'solutions' has been the subject of contestation (Smyth, Darmody, Riddell *et al.*, 2010). A detailed treatment of these issues is outside the parameters of the current research but the study clearly shows the crucial role of evidence in framing and addressing these questions.



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