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Abstract

Catholic schools in the Republic of Ireland, historically the principal education provider in that country, are coming under increasing pressure. This article outlines five recent developments which put pressure on primary Catholic education, in particular Religious Education in Catholic schools. Some of these are state driven, such as new curricular proposals and policy changes. Other pressures include changing popular attitudes and the need for school divestment. Cumulatively these developments pose challenges but also opportunities for the Catholic sector. The concluding section of the article offers a brief discussion of those challenges and opportunities.

Key Words:

Catholic primary schools, curriculum review, Religious Education, Republic of Ireland

Introduction:

Raidió Teilifís Éireann (RTÉ), the national public broadcaster in Ireland, recently ran a piece on its website entitled ‘*Parents need to make informed choices of school patronage*’. It states
There are problems . . . there’s the issue of Catholic Church control. More than 90% of state funded primary schools here have a Catholic ethos. This makes Ireland unique among developed countries. It means that Catholic beliefs play a central role in the formation of the vast majority of Irish citizens. The church authorities decide who gets to be a teacher, or a principal. Children are indoctrinated in the Catholic faith (O’Kelly 2019).

The imbalance in school patronage is an issue recognised by both the Irish State and the Catholic Church. However, O’Kelly’s deduction regarding Church authority over staffing decisions is disputed by the legal entity that is the school Board of Management (Government of Ireland, 1998, Part IV); her claim of indoctrination is contraindicated by the reality of

Religious Education today.ⁱ However, the piece is indicative of a mood in some quarters of Irish society regarding Catholic education in general and Religious Education at primary level in particular. Headlines such as: ‘What’s next?: Breaking religious influence over education with a Citizens Assembly model’ (Ó Ríordáin 2018) and ‘The Irish Times view on the religious control of education: time for more radical change’ (The Irish Times View 2018) communicate a desire for change with regard to Catholic education.

This article outlines five recent developments in the Republic of Ireland (henceforth Ireland) which put pressure on primary Catholic education, in particular Religious Education in Catholic schools; some of these are state driven, others are the result of popular attitudinal and demographic change. Cumulatively they pose challenges but also opportunities for the Catholic sector. The concluding section of the article offers a brief discussion of those challenges and opportunities.

1) Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics

The school patronage landscape at primary level is problematic; approximately 89% of primary schools in Ireland have a Catholic patron. Both the Catholic Church and State agree that this historical actuality no longer serves the need for parental choice or the diversity of Irish society. It is a model that needs change. To that end in 2012, the *Forum for Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector* (henceforth the Forum) was established. One significant recommendation of the Forum report was the widespread divestment of Catholic schools (Coolahan *et al.* 2012). While recent times have seen the introduction of new forms of patronage such as *Educate Together*ⁱⁱ and the state run *Community National Schools*, a host of difficulties dogged the process, not least the marked reluctance to divest on the part of individual schools. The result is that the reality of divestment has been minimal.ⁱⁱⁱ

The Forum also advised that a state curriculum on religious beliefs and ethics should be introduced for children in denominational schools who do not wish to participate in Religious Education. Thus, in 2015, the *Irish National Council for Curriculum and Assessment* (NCCA),^{iv} proposed a curriculum in *Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics* (henceforth ERB & Ethics). However, the NCCA intended this as something that *all* children

would be required to study, regardless of school or patron; it would be more ‘objective’ and ‘neutral’ than denominational religious education, and would foster ‘democratic citizenship and mutual respect’ (NCCA 2015 p. 9). Somehow, without consultation, the Forum proposal had morphed into a state curriculum to be taught in all schools, including those with a religious ethos and Religious Education programme. A two year public consultation on the possible introduction of ERB & Ethics with teachers, parents and children followed. It highlighted a number of concerns such as:

- The pressure on the timetable: where would the new curriculum fit, how would time be found for it in an already overcrowded timetable?
- How would it correspond with the (legally protected) ethos of a school and a school’s Religious Education programme?^v
- The false separation between religions and ethics (as the name ERB & Ethics implies), as if religions have little to do with ethics. Further, what sort and source of ethics would be operative in the curriculum? (NCCA 2015).

In the absence of clear or convincing answers to such questions, the introduction of the subject ERB and Ethics stalled.

2) Review of the curriculum (1999): Religious Education

The current primary school curriculum dates from 1999. Presently, the NCCA is reviewing that curriculum in order ‘to ensure that the curriculum can continue to provide children with relevant and engaging experiences’ (NCCA 2019a p. 2). To date, proposals for change deal only with two curricular aspects: Structure and Time.

The current situation is that Religious Education is one of seven curricular subjects (NCCA 1999 p. 40), taught for 2.5 hours every week (p. 70). While the content for all 11 other subjects is set by the state, Religious Education is the responsibility of the school patron (henceforth patron). As the patron of the majority of primary schools in the state, the Catholic community takes this responsibility seriously. Since 2015 it has been incrementally introducing a contemporary new Religious Education programme, *Grow in Love*, to replace the *Alive-0* programme operational since 1999.

However, the *Structure and Time* proposals remove Religious Education altogether from the curriculum. The NCCA offers no explanation for this removal nor any research to justify this change.

<p style="text-align: center;">Minimum state curriculum time (60% of school time)</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Including language, mathematics, social personal and health education, social environmental and scientific education, arts education and physical education</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Flexible time (40% of school time)</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Including discretionary curriculum time, patron's programme, recreation, assemblies and roll call</p>

Figure 1 (from NCCA 2018 p. 19).

Figure 1 indicates the proposed new curricular arrangement for primary schools throughout the country. While Religious Education has been removed, something called the 'Patron's Programme' has been inserted under the new division of 'Flexible Time'. It seems that the Patron's Programme refers to a discretionary subject to satisfy the legal requirement that 'a reasonable amount of time is set aside in each school day for subjects relating to or arising from the characteristic spirit of the school' (*Education Act 1998 30 (2) (d)*). Initially this appears benign: while Religious Education as a subject will be removed, Catholic schools can continue to teach its own Religious Education programme (*Grow in Love*) as an expression of the Patron's Programme. However, while the practice in some Catholic schools may remain the same, the implications for Religious Education in Catholic schools are potentially grave when we consider a) the importance of the integrated curriculum and b) the attempted imposition of ERB & Ethics.

- a) At the moment, the primary school curriculum (1999) is an integrated one, where the different subjects interact with one another. For instance, it is possible to learn literacy, geography and history from studying Religious Education. But the new curricular proposals gather all subjects together in one integrative section (see Figure 1), with the exception of Religious Education. The Patron's Programme appears as a discrete subject, cut off from interaction with other subjects. Uncoupling the Patron's Programme from the rest of the curriculum undermines the role of Religious Education in an integrated curriculum and life of a Catholic school.

- b) As a discretionary subject, the patron is not obliged to use this time to teach Religious Education, in any form; it can decide to use this time as it sees fit. With such a move, the state has absolved itself from the responsibility for the religious literacy of its citizens. This is at odds with recognised good practice across Europe where the vast majority of countries accept the necessity of Religious Education in schools (Schreiner 2013). Over the last two decades, in light of increasing social, cultural and religious tensions in many European countries, the Council of Europe has increasingly looked to Religious Education as a means of promoting intercultural understanding and respect for diverse beliefs as well as competences such as religious literacy and understanding. Research findings also show that young people value the place of Religious Education and want a safe space to learn and talk about their own and others' religions, beliefs and truth claims in schools (Smith *et al.* 2013; NCCA, 2017).

The removal of religious literacy from primary school education is also at odds with the state's acknowledgement that 'it is widely accepted that knowledge of religions and beliefs is an important part of a quality education and that it can foster democratic citizenship and mutual respect' (NCCA 2015 p 9). Yet it proposes, without any explanation or research basis, to remove the provision for Religious Education from the revised primary curriculum. Indeed, this proposal potentially removes a subject that can realise many of the aims of ERB & Ethics.

The rationale for ERB & Ethics acknowledges the importance of religious knowledge in enhancing religious freedom and promoting an understanding of diversity. It goes on to state 'it has been highlighted by a number of scholars, and in light of the resurgence of religious conflict, that the need to learn 'from' religion is a key aspect of Religious Education' (NCCA 2015 p 9). So why now remove Religious Education as a subject from the forthcoming curriculum? In the absence of explanation or rationale, this is difficult to understand: has the state decided that religious literacy is no longer necessary or even valuable, or is this a first step in a 'back door' approach towards the introduction of ERB & Ethics? In other words, in a number of years when Religious Education has been considerably undermined, and Irish primary schools are at odds with the recognised international good practice of providing formal religious education,

will the state then seek to re-insert ERB & Ethics as a compulsory subject on the primary curriculum?

3) Review of the curriculum: anthropology of the person

The current primary school curriculum ‘takes cognisance of the affective, aesthetic, spiritual, moral and religious dimensions of the child’s experience and development. For most people in Ireland, the totality of the human condition cannot be understood or explained merely in terms of physical and social experience’ (NCCA 1999 p. 27). While much has changed in Ireland since this curriculum was published, it is important to note that almost all members of the population still consider themselves to be religious or spiritual or both. In the most recent census, 85 percent of people self-identify as Christian, 1.3 percent as Muslim (CSO 2016). That census revealed that 9.8 percent of the population in Ireland identify as having no religion (CSO 2016). However, we must be careful not to equate that figure with atheism, which currently stands at 0.15 percent.^{vi} The category of ‘no religion’ does not necessarily imply lack of belief in God or lack of spirituality. In fact, an RTE poll (2016) found that while 14 percent of the population put themselves in the ‘no religion’ category, only 1 percent identified as agnostic and 4 percent as atheist. 9 percent of people in this category considered themselves spiritual. So, despite all the changes in Irish society, there is still a very large percentage of the population that identifies with a religion denomination and/or considers themselves spiritual.

The current curriculum reflects this understanding in its view of the child. It states:

‘In seeking to develop the full potential of the individual, the curriculum takes into account the child’s affective, aesthetic, spiritual, moral and religious needs...The spiritual dimension is a fundamental aspect of individual experience, and its religious and cultural expression is an inextricable part of Irish culture and history...Religious education specifically enables the child to develop spiritual and moral values and to come to a knowledge of God’ (NCCA 1999 p. 58).

This type of understanding is absent from the language and anthropology in the recent state documents regarding the new curriculum (NCCA 2018). These documents make no mention of the spiritual, moral or religious dimension of children. Indeed, they lack any stated anthropology of the child. This is at odds with other curricular programmes published by the NCCA. For instance, the *Aistear*^{vii} curriculum states, under the theme Well-being (Aim 3), ‘Children will be creative and spiritual, they will develop and nurture their sense of wonder

and awe and understand that others may have beliefs and values different to their own.’ (NCCA 2009 p 17). The *Junior Cycle Religious Education Specification* (NCCA 2019) also articulates an holistic identity of the person and acknowledges the role of Religious Education in holistic development: ‘Religious Education promotes the holistic development of the person. It facilitates the intellectual, social, emotional, spiritual and moral development of students’ (p. 6). This anthropology, which allows for the spiritual life of the young child and young adult, is absent from the emerging documentation for the new primary school curriculum. Again, there is no explanation for this omission.

3) The ‘baptism barrier’ and policy changes to admissions to schools

For the past number of years, there has been much debate about the ‘baptism barrier’ in Catholic primary schools in Ireland. This refers to the legal position that denominational schools could, where oversubscribed, prioritise admission of children of their own faith. This became a national issue in 2017 with newspaper front page headlines such as ‘School Baptism barrier’ is unfair on parents, says Bruton: Minister announces plans to remove religious criteria in Catholic school admissions’ (Clarke & O’Brien, 2017), and ‘Now school baptism barrier to be scrapped’ (Donnelly, 2017). It is important to note that while the impression was created that this was a nationwide issue, in reality it applied to a handful of schools in urban Dublin. The vast majority of Catholic schools did not (and do not) require a baptismal certificate to admit a pupil. The Catholic Primary School Management Association (CPSMA) confirmed this at the time, stating that ‘Only 1.2pc of those turned down a place in a Dublin school had no baptism certificate’ (CPSMA, 2017, p.2). They pointed out that of the 384 Catholic primary schools in Dublin, 369 accepted children without reference to a baptismal certificate. The 17 schools which asked for a baptismal certificate were located in areas where the demand for places far outstripped availability. As a result, 96 children (of over 500,000 applicants to Catholic primary schools nationally) did not get a place in a Catholic school.

The reality is that this is a resource rather than a religious issue: there are simply not enough primary school places in some large urban areas. Despite this, in 2018 the government legislated for a new *Education (Admissions to Schools) Act* (Government of Ireland 2018). Consequently, Catholic schools can no longer prioritise enrolment of children of its religious ethos in oversubscribed schools. Of course this move did not address the substantive issue - it

did not create any more places for pupils. There are still children in these urban areas on school waiting lists.

Cumulatively, the push for universal ERB & Ethics, the removal of Religious Education and the absence of an holistic anthropology of the child in the new curriculum proposals, and the recent Admissions to Schools Bill, demonstrate quite a lot of state driven pressure on Catholic school ethos and Religious Education in Catholic schools in particular. But there are also demographic and societal pressures, and it is to these we now turn.

4) Changing popular attitudes and demographics

Changes in religious belief and practice among people in Ireland give rise to concerns about the supply of teachers equipped for and interested in Catholic education. For instance, beliefs and practises of preservice teachers indicate that many are ambiguous about the Catholic Church and the role it in can play in society and in their lives. A survey among first year preservice teachers (also known as Initial Teacher Education (ITE) students) found that:

94 percent identify as Roman Catholic

84 percent believe in God^{viii}

30.5 percent believe in a personal God

50 percent pray at least once a week

54 percent go to mass at least once a month

70 percent get comfort from religion

55 percent attend a religious service at least once a month

When asked if they thought that the Catholic Church gives adequate answers to

- the moral problems and needs of the individual, 74 percent said no;
- the problems of family life, 79 percent said no;
- the social problems facing our country, 87 percent said no (O'Connell *et al.* 2018 p. 80).

These data reveal that many student teachers believe in God: God is important in their lives, they participate in liturgy and pray quite often. Many self-identify as religious and get comfort and strength from religion. However, while the research appears to show a general openness to God and some engagement with the Catholic religious tradition, it indicates that the vast majority of preservice teachers do not think the Catholic Church gives adequate answers to the problems and needs of the country, the individual, or family life.

It is important to remember that these figures arise from a quantitative piece of research which is by nature broad in its claims. However, they do appear to indicate a lack of confidence on the part of preservice teachers in what the Catholic Church can offer in matters of personal and public concern. They certainly give pause for thought when we remember that 89% of primary schools are under Catholic patronage. Current preservice teachers will very likely find employment in Catholic schools, whether or not they understand or care for that religious tradition, because of the predominance of that form of patronage. When this reality is put into the mix with the recommendations from the Forum, the process of divestment of Catholic schools takes on a certain urgency. While there are a range of difficulties involved in the process of divestment, the prolonged delay is eroding the credibility of Catholic providers.

Blessings in Disguise: An Opportunity for the Catholic Community

Given these changes and differences in approach, an opportunity arises for the Catholic community in Ireland to re-visit its commitment to education and in particular, Religious Education.

Historically, the Irish state relied on the Catholic Church to prepare teachers for its schools. The great ‘teacher training colleges’ of the 19th century which became the cornerstone of the Irish education system, were founded and to a large extent funded by Catholic religious orders. This system worked well because Church and state shared a similar vision of education. For instance, much of the anthropology of the child revealed in the principles and aims of the 1999 curriculum correspond to the Catholic anthropology of the person. This meant that there was no great distinction between the values underpinning the curriculum and the Catholic mission and vision of education. However, over the last three decades, the pendulum has increasingly

swung towards Church reliance on state. The colleges of education still form teachers for all primary schools, but they are now funded largely by the state and subject to government rules and regulations. With the apparent parting of philosophies, perhaps it is time for the Catholic community to clearly commit to its schools, for instance by providing support for Catholic Religious Education in sustained and life-giving ways, by taking seriously the governance of its schools, and by engaging meaningfully with stakeholders around the ethos of Catholic education.

a) Support for Religious Education in Catholic schools

If the Catholic community wants to involve itself in the provision of education into the future, it cannot rely exclusively on the state to in-service teachers and resource school culture. For instance, whether deemed Religious Education or the Patron's Programme, it is incumbent on the patron of Catholic schools to build on initial teacher education so that teachers and schools can offer the *Grow in Love* programme to a high standard. This requires ongoing, high-quality Continual Professional Development (CPD). A preservice teacher's introduction to teaching any subject is not sufficient to carry and sustain them throughout their professional lives. CPD of Religious Education in Catholic schools can occur at parish, diocese and/or national level, and by means of online/face-to-face/blended learning. However, regardless of the approach, the teaching and learning of Religious Education requires systematic evaluation.

Research carried out in one Irish diocese shows that only 17% of schools were meeting the curricular requirement for 5 periods per week (of 30 minutes each) of Religious Education (Curran 2019 p. 76). In other words, 83% of Catholic schools in this diocese teach Religious Education less than the required 2.5 hours per week, while Religious Education is still a mandatory subject on the curriculum. Without support and evaluation, it will be interesting to see the effect on that statistic if a revised curriculum less supportive of RE is introduced.

The pedagogy and appeal of *Grow in Love* and its warm reception among teachers and students demonstrate the potential for high quality Religious Education. Catholic families in Catholic schools have a right to expect good Religious Education. In a Catholic school, the extent or quality of Religious Education cannot be at the discretion of an individual teacher or leader. Whereas the Catholic school, like all schools, is subject to government rules and regulations

regarding many educational issues, the patronage model allows for rights and responsibilities around ethos. Religious Education falls into this category.

The teaching and learning of Religious Education in a school is a matter for the patron (usually the bishop of the local diocese), delegated to the Board of Management (*Education Act 1998*). As things stand, the patron still has the right and responsibility to ensure that its own programme is taught, and taught well. The Catholic community has been to the forefront in the design of high quality RE programmes such as *Grow in Love*; it is time now to ensure their implementation. This will involve a greater role for the Board of Management and the Diocesan Advisor (on behalf of the local bishop): the Board of Management of a school is responsible for matters of teaching and learning; Diocesan Advisors have an episcopal role in the support of Religious Education. It cannot be the case that the extent or quality of Religious Education in a Catholic school is decided by any other body than the patron. If Catholic Religious Education is not something that a particular school community values, it may indicate that divestment should be a realistic option.

b) Support for Catholic School Ethos

Finally, there is an opportunity for the Catholic community to re-imagine the ethos of its schools, and articulate the anthropology and the philosophy underpinning that ethos with all stakeholders, including parents, teachers, staff and pupils. There is now a clear distinction between the ethos of the Catholic school and the stated aims of the new curriculum, particularly with regard to the anthropology of the child. Catholic schools have a particular way of making sense of the world and vision of education; this needs to be made explicit and supported to help that vision into reality.

Conclusion

The cumulative developments outlined in this article pose challenges for the Catholic primary school sector, but also opportunities. If the Catholic community decides to continue as a provider of education it will need to

- Re-articulate Catholic educational ethos in ways that are persuasive, appropriate, and engaging, while systematically checking false interpretations and misrepresentations (such as those cited in the introduction);
- Support teachers and leaders of Catholic schools with regard to the Catholic identity of their school, especially around the teaching and learning of Religious Education in Catholic schools;
- Commit in a real way to the process of divestment.

Without this commitment there is a real risk that Catholic schools will drift from their characteristic spirit to the point where they are Catholic only in name.

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ⁱ The aim of Religious Education is ‘to help children mature in relation to their spiritual, moral and religious lives, through their encounter with, exploration and celebration of the Catholic faith’ (Irish Episcopal Conference 2015, p.31). A partnership between home, school and parish, Catholic Religious Education today in no way satisfies the definition of indoctrination: ‘the process of teaching a person or group to accept a set of beliefs uncritically’ (Lexico, 2019 <https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/indoctrination>); ‘to imbue with a usually partisan or sectarian opinion, point of view, or principle’ (Merriam-Webster, 2019 <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/indoctrinate>).

ⁱⁱ Educate Together is a patron body without religious affiliation.

ⁱⁱⁱ Of the 2,800 Catholic primary schools in the state, only 11 have been divested. In 2019 the Minister for Education stated: ‘In this regard, from 2013 to 2018, 11 multi-denominational schools have opened under the patronage divesting process and a twelfth school has been announced to be established under this process for September 2019’, 30th January 2019 available: <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2019-01-30/114/> [accessed 14th January 2020]

^{iv} The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) is the statutory body of the state charged with curriculum development, implementation and assessment.

^v In Ireland, school ethos or ‘characteristic spirit’ is enshrined in the Education Act, 1998.

^{vi} This figure is derived from the amount of people who identify as atheists in Ireland which stands at 7,477 and the national population of 4,761,865, giving a percentage of 0.157 – figures obtained in correspondence with the Central Statistics Office, 2019.

^{vii} *Aistear* is the curriculum framework for children from birth to six years.

^{viii} Interesting to note that while 94 percent identify as Catholic, only 84 percent say they believe in God.