Chapter 15
Religious Education in Catholic Schools: Troubling Times or Routine Ructions?

Fiona Dineen

Abstract Does Religious Education have a future? It could be argued that in the contemporary Irish context, Religious Education in Catholic schools faces a most precarious future. Globally, debating the nature and purpose of Religious Education has received significant attention, with a key debate being on its educational value. Proposals for the redrafting of the Primary School Curriculum has sharpened the focus on Religious Education in a State designed and funded curriculum. Religious Education, up until recently, ‘has been understood in Ireland, generally, as a presumed, necessary and helpful part of the curriculum at both primary and second-level schools’ by Byrne (in Religious education in catholic schools: perspectives from Ireland and the UK, Peter Lang, Oxford, 2018). In the contemporary climate, however, it occupies a much contested space. This chapter explores some of the subsequent emerging challenges and implications for Religious Education in Irish Catholic schools at primary level and possible pathways for navigating future directions.

Keywords Religious education · Curriculum · Teacher identity · Catholic schools

Introduction: Setting the Scene

In the past decade, Ireland has experienced an intense debate about the suitability of the structure of the primary education sector to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse, multi-faith society. The primary system is currently denominational and diverse, with schools under Catholic patronage occupying the largest sector (88.9%). It should be acknowledged that the system evolved from the historical development of the country, and reflects the unique Church/State relations that previously existed. It is also important to note that Ireland is still largely a Christian country, with the majority of the population identifying as Catholic in the most recent census.
The challenges facing Catholic education globally are well documented, as evidenced in the increased interest in scholarship and research in the field. Ireland is not immune to these challenges, with an ongoing questioning of the role and value of faith schools in a secular society. Notably, there is an intensified focus on the subject area of Religious Education in these schools due to high number of Catholic schools at primary level. It could be argued that it is this unique structural and patronage context that makes the critique about Catholic schooling in Ireland different to the experiences of other countries.

The ongoing debate is fuelled by a number of recent landmark educational developments, such as the Report from the *Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector* (2012) and the *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework* (2020), which signal significant implications for Religious Education in Catholic primary schools. This chapter will explore these developments in relation to Religious Education and the State, the educator, and the Church.

**Religious Education and the State**

One of the most significant milestones for Catholic schooling in Ireland was the Report from the *Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector* (2012). This landmark Report initially looked at the process of divesting so that there could be greater diversity and choice with regard to the patronage of primary schools. Although not in its initial terms of reference, it also made a number of recommendations that could potentially impact on the ethos or characteristic spirit and Religious Education in these schools. The process of the *Forum*, and subsequent recommendations, was broadly welcomed by all education stakeholders. An area that proved to be contentious, however, was the proposal to introduce the subject of *Education about Religions and Beliefs* (ERB) and *Ethics* on the curriculum of all schools, in addition to the subject area of Religious Education. Perhaps one of the reasons why this proposed new subject ERB and Ethics met with contention, was the uncertainty that surrounded its purposes, namely who had oversight of this subject, who was it for, and how it related to the Patron’s Religious Education programme.

A State body, the *National Council for Curriculum and Assessment* (NCCA), would have responsibility for designing ERB and Ethics, its apparent purpose was to provide a neutral subject for students opting out of a Patron’s Religious Education programme. There appeared to be a lack of clarity when questions were raised about the implications for Catholic schools potentially offering two subject pathways in Religious Education. Some advocates for Catholic education who, at the time, proposed that ERB and Ethics was a ‘Trojan Horse’ (Connolly 2014, p. 206) for imploding the curriculum with an implicit secularist agenda and designed to eventually ‘remove sacramental preparation and confessional Religious Education’, may well believe that their prophesy was justified when the subject was included as mandatory for all in the *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework* (NCCA 2020).
Some would contend that the inclusion of ERB and Ethics is a progressive step forward and required to meet the needs of a changing Ireland. Indeed, the NCCA (2020) in the opening rationale of the Draft Primary Curriculum Framework states that the ‘schools and curriculum are a critical site for responding to national priorities or needs and addressing societal problems’ (p. 2). This suggests that the introduction of this subject is a matter of national priority to address a societal issue. The document goes on say ‘there are demands to include new aspects of learning in the curriculum such as Education and Religions and Beliefs and Ethics’. While in some sense it is positive that the State encourages a space for ERB and Ethics on the national curriculum, questions must be raised with regard to the implications of this development for the Patron’s Religious Education programme, how ERB and Ethics will manifest itself on the curriculum and its relationship with current Religious Education programmes.

In responding to these questions, it would suggest some troubling times ahead for Religious Education in its current embodiment in Catholic schools. Firstly, ERB and Ethics is a distinct entity on the new curriculum, it is proposed to sit in the areas of Wellbeing and Social and Environmental Education in core curriculum time, all developed, supported and inspected by the State. Secondly, Religious Education as a subject area has a proposed reduction in time allocation, a renaming to be referred to as the Patron’s programme, a cover all term for the different types of Religious Education programmes (for example, ethical, multi-faith) offered by the various patron bodies, and placed in ‘flexible curriculum time’. From a brief examination of the 2020 curriculum proposals, it could be argued that Religious Education is being somewhat relegated—facing considerable impact to its time, title and positioning within the curriculum.

Should these changes to Religious Education be a cause for concern? Given that the educational arena is always a contested and evolving space, with a myriad of agendas competing for inclusion, perhaps it is no surprise that changes to time allocations and subject titles occur, it may seem like routine ructions, with certain subjects always having to fight their corner for survival. As such, some curricula evolvements can appear subtle and even superficial.

In this instance, however, when one situates the changes to Religious Education in the context of the development of ERB and Ethics, the rationale for the broader curriculum framework, and other changes in educational policy, it is apparent that it is more than a subtle or superficial change. From the perspective of Catholic schools, it could be argued that it is what is ‘missing’ from the Draft Primary Curriculum Framework that is a significant cause for concern. There is little said about the view of the child with regard to their holistic and spiritual development, and this raises questions about the understanding of the child implicit in the proposed curriculum. Furthermore, there is possibly a missed opportunity in not having any engagement and dialogue between the areas of Religious Education and ERB and Ethics, and this raises questions surrounding the philosophy and practicalities of implementing both subjects in Catholic schools. Indeed, a consultation process raised many of these contextual issues notably the rights of patron bodies, questions re the impact on ethos, concerns about time pressures and curriculum overload (Byrne 2018, p. 40).
It would appear that these voiced concerns were not considered in the Draft Primary Curriculum Framework.

It is important to be cognisant of the broader cultural context in which schools operate in Ireland, particularly how this context impacts on educational policy and curriculum design. There is also a need to recognise the reality of how the cultural change can impact on the understanding of education. As Murray cautions

> During a dramatic cultural transformation such as ours, the understanding of education changes almost imperceptibly, but very profoundly, as it seeks to align itself with the changed cultural outlook. The educational transformation is especially deep as the changes ignore what is central to education. If education were really understood as the preparation of people for life, it would stand to reason that education would be founded on what is means to be a person and on seeking to understand the goal and purpose of human life. (2019, p. 85)

A core issue being raised in the proposed curriculum is the question of what is the understanding of education, who is responsible for setting the agenda for education and the roles and responsibilities of the various stakeholders involved in education, particularly the future redefined relationship between Church and State.

The past relationship between Church and State has frequently been critiqued. Some would argue, with regard to educational policy, that the State ‘preferred to delegate educational responsibility to the main Christian Churches, limiting the state to a “subsidiary”, and often effectively subordinate role’ (Fischer 2011, p. 140). As such, if the State is to embrace the demand of pluralism and diversity in contemporary society, the argument follows that the preferred model of schooling would be a single common school system with no reference to a particular religious ethos. This view, as Cooling (2010, p. 18) highlights, suggests that ‘religious belief is a private matter that should not impinge on the objective, educational task of promoting rationality’ and therefore marginalises the place of religion in education. This proposal raises the question about the significant impact if the State had sole responsibility to educate and whether the Constitution should continue to read, as it currently does, that the State provides for education?

Engaging further with this element of the debate is beyond the scope of this chapter, however, it highlights the need for alertness with regard to the politicising of education. Watson (2009), for example, outlines the impact that positivist and utilitarian agendas have had on Western education. Furthermore, it creates an awareness of the arduous task in trying to reconcile tensions that exist in relation to place of religion in education, and how singular approaches to education to address diversity may not be without some shortcomings.

Reflecting on the proposed changes point to it being serious in creating uncertainty for the future of Religious Education, while uncovering a deeper complexity of issues at the heart of this curricular reform. Proposing two distinct pathways for Religious Education perhaps misses an opportunity for developing a rich, dialogical approach that could have challenged the Church to address the issue of diversity in a more robust way in its programme. It could be argued that classroom experiences of Religious Education to date have led to a narrow perspective on what the subject entails and how it addresses the needs of contemporary society. Sullivan, however, illuminates the potential of Religious Education, asserting.
Religious Education (RE) provides a rich and complex space for learning, one that is significant, necessary and *sui generis*. RE offers a space like no other: for encounter, explanation, and empathy; for expression, interpretation, and imagination; for interrogation, questioning, and reflection. It protects a space that equips students to interrogate, negotiate, and dialogue with conflicting interpretations within a particular faith tradition. It facilitates encounter between faith traditions. (2017, p. 7)

This is an ambitious vision for Religious Education, and one that could and should be engaged and developed further in classroom practice. Furthermore, considering the full potential of Religious Education may enable a revised pathway for ERB and Ethics in a redeveloped curriculum.

Interestingly, in the broader context, the phrase ‘post-secular’ has been suggested for reframing existing debates about religion in education. It could be argued that in Ireland, while there is acknowledgement of changing religious diversity and plurality, it has not yet arrived at a post-secular understanding of religion in education, ‘where new religious movements, new traditional religions, and contemporary secular sensibilities mix’ (Bowie et al. 2012, p. 140).

It may be concluded that the proposed curriculum changes will significantly impact Religious Education in Catholic schools. This impact is both implicit and explicit, notably with regard to the underlying philosophy and understanding of education. In many respects, in the Irish context, Religious Education at primary level is only emerging on an inevitable journey of evolution. Investigating the development of Religious Education in other countries charts a more robust engagement with this contested area, for example, a recent report *Religious Literacy: A way forward for Religious Education?* (Biesta et al. 2019) illustrates the myriad of complexities that exist when unravelling the implications of different positions and understandings in relation to the nature and purpose of education, religion and Religious Education. Perhaps there should be further reflection on these issues prior to creating a situation in the Irish context that loads Religious Education with too many competing and unsuccessful imperatives.

**Religious Education and the Educator**

While changes to Religious Education are certainly on the horizon, the importance of the role of the educator in implementing these changes cannot be underestimated. Little research exists in relation to the perspectives of teachers regarding their involvement in Religious Education at primary level. Yet, teachers face on a daily basis the task of negotiating the issues and challenges that confront Religious Education. Coll highlights the impact of the ‘doublethink’ that religious educators experience in the contemporary landscape:

> Few would deny that religious educators in Western Europe find themselves working in a most challenging context, buffeted simultaneously by contradictory currents which encourage a type of doublethink on the relevance and importance of religion in contemporary society. On the one hand, the pervasive liberal view that human life is more free and better off
without a transcendental vision is loudly championed in the public square…On the other hand, religious educators are aware, too, that the changing demographics…has a growing presence of generations of migrants and their families who, on the contrary, tend to prioritise faith and its commitments.’ (Coll 2019 p. 248)

This context creates a myriad of issues around Religious Education, with teachers receiving mixed messages about the place and value of religion. It raises questions about how teachers will negotiate the challenges arising from the proposed delivery of two Religious Education programmes in the classroom. Furthermore, the issue is compounded by the fact that, to date, there has been an absence of a systematic approach to the Continuous Professional Development (CPD) of teachers in this area. Indeed, this is not a shortcoming of the State, but of the Church, for not taking responsibility to adequately resource this CPD.

Sullivan explores how Religious Education in Catholic schools ‘operates at the crossroads of Church, home and educational communities’. This requires the teacher to exercise a balancing act of bridge-building, ‘mediating between persons and traditions, between classrooms and faith cultures, between the school and the Church’. He provocatively asserts that despite the rhetoric of Catholic education being central to the mission of the Church, the ministry of teaching has been somewhat insufficiently recognised to date. Again, this raises questions around roles, responsibilities and accountability. If teachers constantly face the challenge of the ‘contradictory currents’ and ‘doublethink’ that exists in relation to Religious Education, and do so without sufficient support and professional development, there are likely to become ‘despondent, disappointed, desperately tired and burnt out—perhaps even cynical and bitter’ (Sullivan 2018, p. 30).

In the Irish context, there is an urgent need to review the models of support for those engaged in Religious Education in Catholic schools, and critically appraise its suitability for both the contemporary and future contexts. It is not enough to lament the situation, there needs to be accountability and responsibility for initialising this review and resourcing, in so far as possible, the emerging issues. Greater consideration must be taken of how the hope, energy and resilience of educators is sustained in these times, particularly if Religious Education in Catholic schools is to remain an option in the future.

The importance of supporting the educator in Religious Education can be delineated from the findings of some recent studies. The Does Religious Education Work? Project (Conroy, Lundie et al. 2011–2017) provides a helpful analysis of the complexity of the myriad of issues facing teachers with regards to Religious Education and in shaping their professional identity. Findings were evidenced (Baumfield et al. 2012) at a Delphi seminar for senior figures in Religious Education demonstrated that there was much uncertainty ‘as to the modus vivendi and modus operandi of Religious Education’. Kuusisto and Gearon (2017) explored the impact of teaching in a pedagogically and politically contested space, and the subsequent tensions, uncertainty and tentativeness that emerge for teachers in relation to their professional identity. Interestingly, this uncertainty was also experienced by teachers in Higher Education settings.
Addressing some of the challenges and uncertainty created by Religious Education for the identity of the teacher, Conroy proposes that some of the issues lie in the nature of the profession of teaching itself, quoting Carr (2003) who suggests that teaching is at best a ‘para profession’ arguing that it falls between ‘a number of definitions and lacks clarity of what one needs to know’ (Conroy 2016, p. 165). With regard to Religious Education, these ambiguities are compounded as ‘religion itself is considered a liminal activity’. Therefore, the …nested identity of RE renders yet more complicated professional identity, subjecting it to the myriad of claims of religious/believing communities and local demography in addition to government and legislative considerations. Consciously or unconsciously, teachers are then caught up in the conflicted thinking that governs the subject. In addition to being subjected to the perceptions and language that bathes the role of the teacher in the tincture of an economic–managerial discourse, they are also subject to the shaping discourse of religious practice itself.’ (Conroy 2016, p. 168)

The findings suggest that the challenges and conflicts faced by teachers, coupled with resourcing issues and the lack of subject esteem in which Religious Education is held, has led many teachers to turn to philosophy and Ethics to reinvigorate their ‘professional standing’ (IBID, p. 174). This study again highlights the acute need for ongoing support to teachers to assist them in charting an increasing complex landscape for Religious Education.

There is scope for more research with regard to the teacher and Religious Education in the Irish context. A number of small scale studies have been conducted to date, and the findings echo similar sentiments to the aforementioned studies, namely that there is considerable anxiety and confidence lacking for some teachers who engage in Religious Education. There is also a tentativeness around the subject due to concerns regarding parental attitudes (Dineen and Lundie 2017).

There is an immediacy in the need to look forward and be cognisant of how the future context and understandings of Religious Education are going to compact and compound the challenges for the teacher, and indeed school leadership. The learning from studies to date suggest that the more imperatives that are placed upon Religious Education, in its many approaches and understandings, the more exponential the growth of uncertainty and confusion for the teacher. Furthermore, as Conroy asserts the issue of teacher professional identity is complex, and this complexity is compounded in the area of Religious Education. In the Irish context, however, this issue is accentuated given the cultural transformation and spectrum of teacher profiles that exist in Catholic primary school at a time of immense transitions (Dineen 2018). It raises questions bigger than solely providing support for ongoing CPD, this is just one piece of the picture. Those with responsibility for Religious Education and Catholic schooling need to consider more fundamentally the ‘why’ of their involvement in education and how questions of ‘value’ are confidently communicated to educators.
Religious Education and the Church: Does It Matter?

In many respects, the discussion about Religious Education, the impact of curricular reform, and the role of the teacher begs the further question of does it matter and to whom does it matter? One could, of course, find an eloquent and affirmative answer to this in the aspirational rhetoric about Catholic education, extrapolated from Church documents and position statements. Nevertheless, if one views the question from the perspective of the educator, where does one see concrete expression given to the value of Religious Education at a local level in the school community and by those in leadership?

In recent decades, Ireland saw a number of positive developments for Religious Education in Catholic schools include the launch of *Share the Good News: A National Directory for Catechesis in Ireland* (2010), the *Catholic Preschool and Primary Religious Education Curriculum* (2015) and *Grow in Love* (2015), a Religious Education programme to resource the new curriculum. While these developments were welcome, warmly received, and to be commended in redefining and reenergising the role of Religious Education in an evolving educational landscape, are there further ways that the momentum inspired by the vision of these documents could be kept on track? The following are some possible proposals to reinvigorate Religious Education and the broader educational endeavour of Catholic schooling in Ireland at this time.

Firstly, it may be helpful to proactively redraw the landscape of primary level school provision. Many agree, both inside and outside Church perspectives, that it would serve all parties well should there be a smaller number of Catholic schools at primary level. While providing greater school choice, it would also enable Catholic schools to consider their ethos and mission in a more authentic manner. This is not suggesting that Catholic schools become closed and less dialogical, rather the current system is not conducive, for some schools, to appropriately reflect on their ethos or characteristic spirit in a meaningful manner, or indeed at all. The divesting process, as recommended by the Forum Report, has not significantly changed provision at primary level. Perhaps it is time for more concrete action to be taken by the Church around this issue. The need for a plurality of patronages is acknowledged and encouraged by the Church (Congregation for Catholic Education 1977). Moving forward on the divesting issue is not an easy task, however, a proactive engagement in the process may be a more fruitful endeavour for Catholic schooling in the longer term.

Secondly, there is a need to reflect critically on Catholic education as a lifelong enterprise of the Church and identify the stages that offer signs of hope and those that are neglected or stagnating. Serious consideration of how these areas might be addressed through embracing the vision of *Share the Good News* would perhaps renew an appreciation of the many formal and informal approaches to Catholic education. It could be argued that Catholic education in Ireland is mostly conceived as Catholic schooling. This could be seen as a ‘double-edged sword’ as schools are laden with many expectations when it comes to children’s religious formation.
Furthermore, it has led to other avenues of Catholic education being underdeveloped. This is a considerable stumbling block now that the model of schooling is under strain and alternative approaches are lacking.

Another key issue is that sacramental preparation is situated within the Religious Education programme for primary schools, thus the pastoral reality of the Church has a significant impact in this regard. Given the uncertainty facing Religious Education in Catholic schools, and the potential changes in the provision of these schools, urgently necessitates the exploration of alternative models of Religious Education and sacramental preparation. In this context, a ‘lifelong’ approach to Catholic education is critical. Byrne (2018), however, suggests that there is some evidence to be hopeful that a more ‘coherent reflection on behalf of the Church, in seeking to establish a unified pastoral approach, encouraging its members to continue to educate themselves in their faith’ (p. 48) is leading to greater appreciation of the lifelong nature of Catholic education.

Thirdly, it may be timely to review and restructure the support services offered to Catholic schools. The focus of the supports to date has largely been on operational matters, particularly managerial and legal issues. This is absolutely necessary and should continue. One could argue, however, that the same level of support has been somewhat lacking with respect to understanding the school ethos/characteristic spirit and the area of Religious Education. Perhaps this imbalance is a historical legacy as Tuohy (2006) observes that the Church developed a philosophy of schooling as opposed to a philosophy of education. Indeed, this is a point that is not just an issue for schools with a religious ethos. It appears to resonate across other patronage structures. In a recent study to establish staff understanding of the characteristic spirit in publicly managed schools in Ireland, it emerged that there was uncertainty, a lack of understanding and a questioning of relevance and applicability of ‘characteristic spirit’ in the sector. Liddy et al. assert that it is ‘indicative of the broader critique of Irish education as focused on operational and functional aspects, where what gets discussed is ‘what we do’ rather than ‘why we are doing something’ or ‘why certain forms of knowledge are selected over others’ (2019, p. 113).

Furthermore, it reflects the ‘reluctance within Ireland to discuss the philosophical purpose and value of schooling’ (IBID, p. 114). This is a critical point in the contemporary context. Some of the key issues for Religious Education in the Draft Primary Curriculum Framework are raised in the underlying, implicit philosophy. A robust discussion on its purpose and understanding of education would serve to benefit education generally, and clarify some of the implications for educators in Catholic schools. Adequate supports should be provided to schools to assist them in navigating this new landscape, particularly with regard to mediating the mission and ethos of the school in a space occupied by conflicting values.

The challenges outlined earlier, for example, teacher confidence, anxiety and uncertainty require a different type of strategic support, along with the bigger issue of communicating an understanding of Catholic education to school communities. This reframing of approaches will require leadership that is creative and courageous,
however, there is little point in discussing the future of Religious Education in its absence. Some Irish dioceses have shown initiative in how this task might be engaged with. It would be helpful to report their journeys in adopting different approaches to support schools and educators in changing times.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, it is evident that Religious Education in Catholic schools in Ireland faces an uncertain future. There remains a significant interest in Catholic education, yet there is also a strong political agenda to restructure denominational education. Some of the proposals meet the needs of a changing society, however, there also appears, in policy developments, an unrelenting motivation to disestablish and somewhat eradicate Religious Education in Catholic schools. Some who promote this approach argue that it is justified and borne out of frustration with the failure to expedite the divestment process. For others, it is explicitly about championing a non-denominational State system of primary level education.

What is essential in this context, is the need for an open and robust dialogue about the philosophy that inspires the Primary Curriculum in general, and the place of Religious Education in particular. A deeper reflection on the relationship between these areas in the context of the characteristic spirit of the school, and religion in the public sphere is also required. Careful consideration of findings from experiences in other countries where Religious Education is laden with many competing imperatives would be prudent.

Given that it is the educator that mediates the challenges posed by the contemporary context, it is critical that they are supported and encouraged in their role. There is an opportunity in this uncertainty for a review of current approaches to Catholic education. The challenges could be providential in prompting the Church to be creative and courageous in redrawing the landscape and restructuring its support to schools, in a way that meaningfully communicates why it matters. This, of course, is premised on their being a real commitment and understanding of the value of education and the educator, and being open to change and engaging differently. It may well be that, despite the persistent challenges, such a reframing and adaptation of current approaches will sustain Catholic education as a vibrant option in the future.

Perhaps there is some hope to be garnered from the Covid-19 crisis that began in 2020. It has been an opportunity for pause and, for many, brought to the fore questions of meaning and values. Interestingly, some initial reports highlight that during the pandemic period there was an increase in prayer and online religious practice across the island of Ireland (Ganiel 2020). The changes in practice prompted by the crisis and the resulting engagement, for example, around sacramental preparation, may be a stimulus for the Church to approach some areas differently in the future, particularly Catholic schooling. It may also prompt a deeper reflection on the vision for education in Irish society. Religious Education, and indeed the existence of faith schools, will always be contested. It is the response that matters. These troubling times necessitate a
response characterised by hope, heart, understanding, commitment and confidence. A reframing and renewal of approaches to chart a future pathway for Catholic schooling in Ireland.

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Dr. Fiona Dineen is a Lecturer in Religious Education at Mary Immaculate College. Prior to taking up this position, Fiona was Diocesan Advisor for Religious Education with the Diocese of Limerick and also taught for a number of years in a DEIS primary school setting.